



Staunch the breach

India and Pakistan need to drop hard line stances on the Indus Waters Treaty

In its fourth notice to Pakistan since January 2023, India has escalated its demand for the renegotiation of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), now calling off all meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) until Pakistan agrees to sit at the table for talks. India's demand last year followed a logjam in the entire process, once held up internationally as a model template for water-sharing agreements. Even in the new millennium, the tenets of the treaty held firm, and India was able to win two major disputes by adhering to the processes laid out, including the Baglihar Dam project in 2007, and another dispute over allegations that India was interfering with Pakistan's Neelum project in 2013. The issue over how to proceed on dispute resolution for the Kishenganga and Ratle projects has snowballed since 2016, when Pakistan escalated the disputes – having a neutral expert look at them and demanding a Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). In a moment of weakness, that it may come to regret, the World Bank – it is a co-signatory and guarantor of the IWT – decided to allow two parallel processes of the dispute mechanism to run at the same time. To make matters worse, Pakistan turned its back on the neutral expert's proceedings, while India has boycotted the PCA hearings at The Hague. Pakistan has been cold to India's notices on renegotiating the treaty and the decision by the Modi government to stop all PIC meetings has put the future of the process in peril. Unlike in past decades, when the IWT was considered off-limits for partisan politics, leaders on both sides are now not above using fiery rhetoric. Mr. Modi's statement after the 2016 Uri attack, that "blood and water" cannot flow together, is perhaps the most egregious example.

It is no coincidence that the spiral mirrors the unravelling of the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship in the same period. There is no political engagement or trade and the 2021 LoC ceasefire agreement is in danger after growing terror attacks and deaths of Indian Army personnel. It may be possible to re-open the treaty talks, but concluding any agreement will be that much more difficult. All eyes are now on New Delhi's response to Pakistan's invitation for the SCO Heads of Government meeting on October 15-16. Such an opening could present an opportunity for talks on the way forward. No doubt, new-age issues such as climate change and the need for renewable energy and hydropower options on the Indus necessitate a re-opening of the 64-year-old Treaty. How that is done, along with resolving current disputes, will decide whether the two countries can save the treaty, once referred to as the "one bright spot" in a "very depressing world picture" by U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Pivot to watch

The U.S. Fed's rate reduction could spell relief for developing economies

The U.S. Federal Reserve on Wednesday cut interest rates for the first time in more than four years, lowering its benchmark interest rate by half a percentage point, in a policy pivot that is bound to have far reaching implications. Elaborating on the rationale for the cut after having raised the federal funds rate to its highest level in about two decades and held it there for more than a year, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said, "... with an appropriate recalibration of our policy stance, strength in the labour market can be maintained in a context of moderate growth and inflation moving sustainably down to 2%". Policymakers of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) also signalled by a 17 to 2 majority that they expect at least another quarter point reduction in 2024. The Fed, which has a dual mandate of ensuring maximum employment even as it seeks to keep inflation at 2% over the longer run, had been raising rates since early 2022 when a COVID-19 pandemic-driven surge in prices had forced it to focus largely on taming inflation. Given that the U.S. central bank's unrelenting rate increases and subsequent decision to hold the rate at an elevated level had rippled through the global economy, particularly as it led to the dollar strengthening against most currencies of emerging market economies (EMEs), the latest pivot will bring relief. As the Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das has noted, "a strong U.S. dollar increases debt service burdens and inflationary pressures for EMEs".

India's Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran welcomed the rate move but stressed that the Fed's rate reduction would 'on the margins have a limited impact' given that investor interest in the country's economy had already been fairly significant over the last several years. However, like a recent blog post by two IMF economists posits, "The onset of a Fed easing cycle may support... a broader revival of capital flows to emerging market and developing economies." India too is very likely to see an increase in foreign portfolio investor inflows, especially into its debt markets. The relief though is certain to be far more palpable for other emerging and developing economies in Africa and Latin America, where the high costs of servicing overseas borrowings had severely impaired those countries' ability to invest in vital public infrastructure and services. And while Mr. Powell repeatedly emphasised that the world's largest economy was overall "strong", the uncertainties clouding the global economic outlook, including the volatile conflicts in Europe and West Asia mean that the Fed's pivot also runs the risk of being read as a cautionary signal of troubled times ahead.

Donald Trump's decision not to go ahead with a second debate with Kamala Harris, coming as it does on the heels of his failure to stay on script in the first – and the resultant widespread consensus, even among Republicans, that he had lost the debate with the feisty Democrat – prompts me to recall the long tradition of American Presidential debates I have viewed, that were said to have impacted the final result.

When JFK charmed America

It all began with the first televised debate in 1960 between Republican Vice-President Richard M. Nixon and the youthful Democratic challenger from Massachusetts, Senator John F. Kennedy. As many Americans heard the debates between them on radio (until then the favoured medium for political broadcasts), I was amazed to learn that when polled, a majority of those who listened on radio, thought the experienced and polished Nixon had won, whereas an equally large majority of those who saw the debates on TV thought he had lost. I saw recordings of the debates myself a decade-and-a-half later, as a graduate student in the United States, and could see why. On TV, the somewhat glib and brash-sounding (on radio) Kennedy appeared handsome, confident and smart on screen; he looked straight at the camera and seemed to appeal directly to the audience. Nixon, on the other hand, despite having served two terms as Vice-President under Dwight Eisenhower, was less well coached: he did not wear make-up or shave, and had a pronounced "five o'clock shadow" that gave him a sweaty, dark and glowering appearance against his tanned and fresh-faced young rival. He also looked at the moderator, not the camera, and this sideways angle made him seem shifty and furtive, especially in contrast with the open, relaxed and friendly Kennedy. In the event, Nixon lost the debate – and the election.

I was in the U.S. as a student in 1976, and watched live the election debates between the "unelected president" Gerald Ford, who had succeeded President Nixon when he resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal, and Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter. Ford was a wooden speaker at the best of times, but he had defeated the charismatic Ronald Reagan in the Republican primaries as a "safer pair of hands" to lead the nation during the fraught and tense days at the height of the Cold War. Ironically it was a gaffe he made about the Cold War that did him in. During the debate, Ford said "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration". His opponents spent the aftermath of the debate pointing out that the Soviet Union had troops deployed across Eastern Europe, whose States were all under the Soviet jackboot as members of the Warsaw Pact. When Ford finally explained



Shashi Tharoor

a four-term Member of Parliament (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram, who served nearly three decades at the United Nations, where he rose to the position of Under Secretary-General. He has also been a Minister of State for External Affairs in the Government of India and is the bestselling author, among others, of 'Pax Indica: India in the World of the 21st century', and, most recently, 'A Wonderland of Words'

The long tradition of American Presidential debates has meant make or break for Presidents and presidential aspirants

himself, his defence – that he meant only that the Soviets were not "dominating" the spirits of the East European people – came across as lame. Ford's debate fiasco led the public to conclude there was no great risk in voting for the untried and untested Carter if the "safer" Ford was so ignorant of the geopolitical facts of his job. Carter won.

Reagan turned the tables in 1980, of course, but in 1984, the by-then 73-year-old President Reagan was up against a far more youthful challenger, former vice-president Walter Mondale, a sprightly 17 years his junior. But the gifted debater that he was, Reagan turned his weakness into an asset. When the dreaded question of his age came up – no President in history had been as old as 77, the age he would be in the final year of his second term – Reagan responded with the broad smile that always accompanied his trademark wit. "I will not make age an issue of this campaign," Reagan answered the barbed question. "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." Even Mondale laughed. Reagan won.

Both of Barack Obama's challengers in 2008 and 2012, John McCain and Mitt Romney, had served in the military and placed their record of nationalism and tough-guy service up against the comparably wet-behind-the-ears orator. Romney, whose father had made an unsuccessful run for the presidency four decades earlier, attempted to make the military an issue, calling for increased defence spending and pointing out that the U.S. Navy had fewer ships than it did in 1916. Obama, always quick on his feet, retorted cuttingly: "Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military has changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go under water, nuclear submarines." Romney, taken aback by Obama's witty comeback, never recovered.

The Trump-Hillary debate

The 2016 debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was deemed particularly nasty, even vicious. Trump left the podium and advanced menacingly towards Hillary while she was speaking, seemingly casting a shadow on the woman then considered likely to become the first U.S. woman President. Gender was undoubtedly a key issue in the election, pitting as it did a woman candidate against a man who was widely portrayed as a serial womaniser, and boasted on video that his celebrity status allowed him to do anything to women.

Despite his own unsavoury past, the Republican candidate tried to turn the tables on his female opponent by attacking her husband, former President Bill Clinton, accusing him of being "so abusive to women". This below-the-belt blow hit Hillary in a weak spot from which she

was never quite able to retaliate.

"It's just awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country," was the best Hillary Clinton was able to muster. Trump retorted: "Because you'd be in jail." His references to "crooked Hillary" stuck in the minds of enough voters to throw a close election to him. Hillary, of course, was never convicted of any wrongdoing, whereas just this year, Trump himself was.

Biden bows out

In 2020, President Trump went after the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, frequently interrupting the latter's debate speeches until an exasperated Biden snapped: "Will you shut up, man?" Biden won a bitterly-contested race against the incumbent, whom in one debate he called a "clown". But in 2024, the man Biden had dismissed as "Putin's puppy", had his revenge on his 81-year-old opponent in what was seen as the most decisive debate of the current Presidential election. As AFP reported, Biden "repeatedly lost his train of thought, stared blankly and spoke incoherently and with a raspy voice at times". The debate conclusively proved to the electorate, including a majority of Biden supporters, that their man was too old, forgetful and weak to win re-election at 81 and serve four years beyond that age. Biden's dismal debate performance proved decisive – not to enable a Trump victory but to prompt enough supporters and donors to pull the plug, obliging Biden to eventually drop out of the race. This enabled his much younger running-mate, 59-year-old Kamala Harris, to take over and to turn in the kind of effective debate performance that prompted Trump to say "no more".

But will her debate victory prove as decisive as some of the others I have recalled? It is too early to tell. Many point out that when voters go to the polls in less than two months, the election will come down to the preferences and prejudices of a small number of voters in six battleground "swing states" (the others are largely deemed to be safely in the Democratic or Republican columns already). Whether debate performance will change the minds of a handful of undecided voters is anybody's guess. Has the debate shown Americans a rambling, easily-baited, myth-peddling and blustering Donald Trump? Maybe, but most Americans who support him know their man was like that anyway, and still believe he represents their hopes and resentments better than his rivals. By avoiding another debate, Trump is refusing to underscore this perception of his nature, and trying to win the election on his issues. It will be fascinating to see if he does – or whether, by winning their only debate, Harris wins the presidency after all, defeating the man who just eight years ago, ended another woman's dreams of becoming America's first female President.

The stakes in Sri Lanka's ninth Presidential election

Sri Lanka's ninth Presidential election, which is slated for September 21, is being held under strange circumstances for more than one reason.

The country is going to the polls two years after the country witnessed a tumultuous political revolt preceded by an acute economic crisis. Even in 1953, the rising cost of living, drove the then Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake to step down, after the Left's massive hartal. But his successor, John Kotelawala, assumed office under much less painful conditions than what Ranil Wickremesinghe faced in July 2022 when Mr. Wickremesinghe became President.

This election also marks a churning that has taken place in the political arena. The United National Party (UNP), one of the established and traditional parties alongside the now-marginalised Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is not in the race, even though its leader, Mr. Wickremesinghe is in the fray as an independent, hoping to draw support from a broader political constituency. While the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) dislodged the SLFP as a principal player in the 2018 local authorities' elections, the UNP's decline was apparent in the 2020 parliamentary elections when the party could obtain only one out of 225 seats, this too in an indirect way, i.e., the National List. Just as the SLPP has walked away with a substantial portion of the SLFP's vote base, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), led by Sajith Premadasa, has done it for the UNP.

Apart from Mr. Wickremesinghe and Mr. Premadasa, there is one more key contender in the fray – Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the home-grown Lefitist party, Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP).

One of the curious elements of the election is that the SLPP, after the 2022 popular uprising, is being viewed as a marginal player. It remains a subject of debate on who the major beneficiary



T. Ramakrishnan

of the SLPP's votebase eroding substantially. There is a perception that the JVP has reaped the political dividend out of the uprising.

The Tamil factor

There is every likelihood, this time, of the minorities, especially Tamils (those in the north and the east, and in the hill country) not voting en bloc for any one of the principal candidates. This is essentially because of divisions among Tamil parties in rallying behind a particular candidate. Both Mr. Wickremesinghe and Mr. Premadasa are banking on the support of certain Tamil parties. It is for the first time in the lanka Tamil Arasu Katchi's (TAK) history that party member, P. Ariyananthiran, has entered the presidential fray, even though prominent Tamil figures had contested the elections earlier. But, Mr. Ariyananthiran's presence, as a "common" and independent Tamil candidate, does not seem to have the full support of his party.

Under the circumstances, it is to be seen whether Mr. Premadasa will repeat what he did in 2019 by bagging 70% of votes polled in the six electoral districts, where ethnic minorities are dominant. (Last time, when as the UNP's nominee, he secured about 42% of votes across the country.) In fact, in the 2015 presidential election, the victory of Maithripala Sirisena against the formidable and incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was attributed, among others, to the huge support that he got in the Tamil-speaking areas.

One of the striking features of the 2019 presidential election was that Gotabaya Rajapaksa of the SLPP had demonstrated that success was possible without much support from the Tamils and Muslims. Yet, this time, no important candidate has chosen to ignore them. Namal Rajapaksa, Mahinda Rajapaksa's son and SLPP candidate, is talking of transforming the Jaffna

The country will vote today in the backdrop of the major churning that has happened in its political arena

peninsula into a "thriving technology and business hub" like the Silicon Valley. All this is due to the realisation that securing more than 50% of the vote is a huge challenge.

Candidate profiles

Mr. Wickremesinghe, 75, knows well that he cannot get a better chance to retain the post which he got under extraordinary circumstances – this point is being used to criticise him for not having become the President the "legitimate way". Though no one is arguing that all economic woes have become a thing of the past, the Sri Lanka's economy is showing signs of stability, thanks to a host of factors including the initial support provided by India and the implementation of an economic recovery programme supported by the International Monetary Fund. Mr. Wickremesinghe deserves credit for achieving what he has done, as both Mr. Premadasa and Mr. Dissanayake turned down the offer made by Gotabaya Rajapaksa to form an interim government in early 2022 amid the economic crisis before Mr. Wickremesinghe became Prime Minister. But, the problem for him is that he does not have the support of a principal political force any longer.

Mr. Sajith, though bereft of the charisma of Mahinda Rajapaksa or the stature of Mr. Wickremesinghe, has, been able to keep his flock together for the last five years, a feat that even the more charming Gamini Dissanayake could not do in the early 1990s after leaving the UNP. Dissanayake eventually returned to his parent party. As for the JVP's chief, it will be a huge jump if he is able to net 25%-30% as neither he nor his formation crossed even the 4% mark in the previous presidential and general elections. It is to be seen whether the 'element of strangeness' will be evident in the result too.

ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shock and awe

Israel, which is caught in a web of circumstances, is a nation founded amid extremely unfriendly neighbours all around. Thus, it had to develop a very resourceful and innovative intelligence network from day one to defend itself round the clock. Mossad, its premier "eyes and ears" has excelled

itself on very many occasions. The pager explosions are not just about its hacking prowess. Its network has penetrated so deep that it could gain access to supply routes and manipulate devices.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

It is shocking that the rules do not apply to Israel. It is

frightening to think of the weaponisation of technologies. Such campaigns expose the weakness of the United Nations to enforce peace.

G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Reality in Kashmir

Recent statements by the Prime Minister, on Jammu and Kashmir's role in

bolstering Indian democracy, deserve scrutiny. While improvements in local governance and encouraging democratic participation are commendable, challenges persist. May citizens still face issues such as limited access to basic services and have security concerns. Genuine democratic

progress requires addressing these fundamental challenges, ensuring that all voices are heard, and fostering an inclusive environment for peace and development.

Priya Gupta,
Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh

At Chepauk

It was indeed a remarkable century from India's

all-rounder R. Ashwin in the first cricket Test against Bangladesh at Chepauk ('Sport Page', September 20). Ashwin, in the company of Ravindra Jadeja, bailed out India by launching into his strokes right from the word go. The spin all-rounders did a good rescue act too.

S. Sankaranarayanan,
Chennai



An apparel shop called Sadhana Textiles was burnt, allegedly by a mob, after violence broke out during a Ganesh Chaturthi procession at Nagamangala in Mandya district of Karnataka, on September 11. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

In Mandya district, green turns saffron

Once the hotbed of farmers' and Dalit movements, the Vokkaliga caste-dominated Mandya district in southern Karnataka is beginning to see the impact of a consistent Hindutva push. The recent communal violence in Nagamangala during the immersion of Ganesh is symptomatic of this trend. **Sharath S. Srivatsa** reports on the contested political landscape

Yusuf Khan looked distraught as he recalled the night of September 11. Khan, who is in his 30s, said that he and his brother had flung themselves across the entrance of Sadhana Textiles to prevent more than 100 masked men from causing damage. "But the mob simply shoved us aside. They removed petrol from my two-wheeler parked outside to set the shop on fire. We tried to douse the flames using water from our house and the overhead tank, but the fire raged on," he said.

The apparel shop was located on the ground floor and Khan's family lived on the second floor of the building, located in Nagamangala town in the political hotbed of Mandya district in southern Karnataka. Khan's family owns the building.

The violence broke out during the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi. A procession was on its way to immerse the idol of Ganesh and deviated from the scheduled path "by a bit", said the police. The procession allegedly went close to the Ya Allah Masjid in Nagamangala, halted, blasted music, shouted slogans, and burst firecrackers. This led to a confrontation and violence, they added.

The mob allegedly attacked over 20 business enterprises that night. The government, which is looking to compensate losses suffered by these establishments, has listed Khan's tenant for compensation. But the damage to the building and his family is still to be estimated, Khan said.

"My tenants (who are Hindu) are upset and our family is staring at a bleak future," Khan said, while his brothers moved household items to a temporary home a few metres away on the narrow lane off the Nagamangala-Bellur Highway.

Since then, political leaders have kept the embers alive by constantly trading charges. Janata Dal (Secular) leader and Union Minister for Heavy Industries and Steel H.D. Kumaraswamy, who represents Mandya in the Lok Sabha, claimed that petrol bombs had been used in the violence. The Leader of the Opposition, R. Ashok, and Union Minister Shobha Karendlaje, who belong to the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), alleged that the Popular Front of India, which was proscribed by the Indian government in 2022, was involved in the violence. They demanded a probe by the National Investigation Agency.

The police dismissed these claims and booked cases against the two BJP leaders for derogatory comments on social media. Meanwhile, Agriculture Minister and local MLA N. Cheluvarayaswamy, who belongs to the Congress, which is the ruling party in Karnataka, appealed to leaders from "outside the constituency" not to politicise the issue.

Rising intolerance in Mandya

Academics, activists, and analysts view this incident as yet another indicator of the rising intolerance and growing influence of Hindutva groups in Mandya, where the Vokkaligas, an agrarian, land-owning caste, are politically influential.



I have many friends attending the *shakha*. We will be made more aware of what is happening around us.

G. KUMAR
Businessman

From the 1970s, Mandya was one of the strongest bases of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), a movement that fought for better agriculture practices, subsidies, and farmers' welfare. Many villages barred the entry of politicians during the movement in the '70s and '80s. The leader of the KRRS, K.S. Puttannaiah, was elected an MLA from this district in 1994. His son, Darshan Puttannaiah, now represents the Melukote Assembly constituency in Mandya.

In the 1990s, as the conflict between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the sharing of Cauvery river water intensified, Mandya became a fulcrum for protests by not just farmers, but also pro-Kannada organisations.

After the 30-year period between the 1970s and 1990s, "the influence of ideology-based Dalit and farmers' movements, which were a force to reckon with, waned," explained Dalit leader Guruprasad Keregodu, 65, from Mandya district. "These groups become faction-ridden. Their organisational set-up weakened. The political leadership of the Congress lacked the ideological strength and commitment to hold them together. It was against this background that we saw the growth of right-wing politics."

The BJP came to power at the Centre in 2014. From 2019, when the party assumed power in Karnataka too, BJP and Sangh Parivar outfits have made several overt attempts to polarise the district. Most significantly, they have been vilifying Tipu Sultan, the 18th century Mysore ruler who died fighting the British in Srirangapatna in Mandya. The BJP has been alleging that Tipu was "anti-Hindu" and demanding that lessons on him be dropped from history textbooks.

In 2022, as the row over the ban on hijab raged in Karnataka, a hijab-clad college student, Muskan Khan, from Mandya was heckled by a group of saffron-shawl-clad boys. The video of this incident caught international attention.

As Assembly elections drew close in 2023, BJP leaders claimed that it was not the British but two Vokkaliga chieftains, Uri Gowda and Nanje Gowda, who had killed Tipu. The party erected an arch in the names of these chieftains to wel-



The police control protestors at Keregodu in Mandya district after the Hanuma Dwaja was removed. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Today, we have to behave and act like BJP workers to convince voters even though the BJP does not have a base in places like Nagamangala. Communal feelings have seeped into people's minds.

Congress councillor in Nagamangala

come Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the district. These were promptly removed when the Vokkaligas protested.

This year, when a flag bearing Hanuman's portrait was removed from a 108-ft-tall flag post at Keregodu, near Mandya town, it led to a confrontation between the Congress government and the Opposition parties – the BJP and the JD(S). The situation threatened to turn into a communal flash point. The flag was eventually replaced with the national flag.

The situation has come to such a point that a Congress councillor in Nagamangala said, "Today, we have to behave and act like BJP workers to convince voters even though the BJP does not have a base in places like Nagamangala. Communal feelings have seeped into people's mind and into electoral politics."

The police, however, had begun to take serious note of the growing right-wing influence in Mandya district years before these developments. In 2018, they arrested Naveen Kumar K.T, the first accused in the killing of journalist Gauri Lankesh, from Mandya.

Footprints in Vokkaliga heartland

Vokkaligas have traditionally consolidated behind the JD(S). Keregodu argued that there is a "general dislike" among the people of the community for Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. "Siddaramaiah hails from the Kuruba community. Now, the JD(S) is in an alliance with the BJP. Hence, many have turned towards the BJP," he said.

The BJP has never formed the government in Karnataka on its own strength and has had to rely on engineered defections. It has been attempting to expand its base in the Vokkaliga-dominated Old Mysore region, where Mandya is a key district. Apart from the one Assembly seat it won in Mandya, and that too in a bypoll in 2019, the party is yet to make major inroads into the Vokkaliga heartland in terms of seats.

The BJP did manage to increase its vote share – from 5.9% in 2018 to 13.8% in the 2023 Assembly elections in Mandya district – though it did not win a single seat. While it lost a significant chunk of the vote share in coastal Karnataka, Kittur Karnataka, and central Karnataka, where it has a strong base, the BJP managed to make up for the losses in the Old Mysore region, where its vote share went up by 3 percentage points. BJP sources said the party and its ideological fountainhead, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), believe that unless the BJP finds space in Vokkaliga politics, it will be difficult for the national party to cross the simple majority mark on its own.

According to historian Talakadu Chikkarange Gowda, one of the reasons for the BJP's growth is the high level of unemployment among the youth. "They are being misguided on religious lines. There are hardly any employment opportunities," he said. "Either you stay in the village to do sundry jobs on fields or migrate to Bengaluru or Mysuru for employment."

Gowda said that Mandya was always progressive and quickly adapted to liberal views. Through the '70s to the '90s, the district boasted of a large number of followers of the celebrated poet, Kuvempu, known for his liberal views. These followers called themselves Vishwa Manavas (universal human beings).

"They were Left, Dalit, and farmers leaders.

The political leadership was well-read and qualified. In contrast, the current leaders are businessmen-politicians disconnected from the grassroots," Gowda explained. He also pointed out while the present Mandya BJP leaders do not have an RSS background, as most of them have migrated from either the Congress or the JD(S), the RSS *shakhas* (theological schools) seem to be slowly increasing.

Impact of the JD(S) alliance

In 2023, the JD(S) lost four Assembly seats in Mandya as the BJP increased its vote share. Before the election, Kumaraswamy had taken on the BJP to blunt the Uri Gowda-Nanje Gowda narrative. He had also criticised the party for the hijab controversy. However, his party fared poorly in the elections. The JD(S) believes that Muslims "abandoned" it in favour of the Congress, which "forced" it to align with the BJP for its political survival. When the Keregodu flag row erupted, Kumaraswamy sported a saffron shawl instead of the party's green, which left many stunned. While the JD(S) is being seen as a beneficiary of this alliance in the near future, there is fear in the party that the BJP will slowly erode the regional party's dominance in Vokkaliga politics and eventually in other parts of the State too.

Over the years, celebrations of Hanuma Jayanthi, Sri Ram Navami, and Ganesha Utsava have increased in Mandya both in scale and numbers, said leaders across the political spectrum. All parties donate funds to religious events. "The mob mobilisation for the Ganesh immersion is a show of strength and an intimidation tactic," acknowledged a Mandya-based BJP leader.

"We don't remember people wearing mala for Hanuma Jayanthi at Srirangapatna or Vokkaliga homes celebrating Varamahalakshmi festival. The BJP does not have the strength to leverage this at present, but there is hope that all this will help us increase our base later," he said. "Muharram processions have increased in scale too. Local dynamics have changed."

In K.R. Pete town in the district, Kumar G., who runs a business, demanded to know what was wrong in attending a *shakha*. "We will be made more aware of what is happening around us. There is nothing wrong in asserting our rights. Why should there be appeasement of Muslims always? I have many friends attending the *shakha*," he said. RSS *shakhas* could be earlier seen only in Mandya town, but now they are growing in rural pockets too, he added.

"The green *thorana* and banana stem were the symbolic hallmarks of our festival in rural areas. Now we have saffron bunting and flags. To have a huge number of flexes for festivals has become common. Simple bhajans at Ram Mandirs during Ram Navami or Hanuman Jayanthi have given way to bigger celebrations funded by politicians. Some of our progressive movement friends have also shifted to the BJP," said Keregodu.

Cheluvarayaswamy, however, refused to concede this. "Yes, they are making efforts to communalise Mandya. But their efforts will be futile. I don't think the Sangh Parivar has increased or will increase its footprint. The BJP has increased its vote share because of the individual popularity of its candidates," he contended.

Amidst the unceasing political slugfest over the Nagamangala violence, the town has limped back to normalcy. Leaders from both communities have asked the district administration to form a coordination committee to ensure that festivals are conducted peacefully. At a peace meeting held in the aftermath of the violence on September 15, leaders from both communities recalled the bonhomie that existed between them in the past. They hoped that they would return to those "good times".

sharath.srivatsa@thehindu.co.in

the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY - SEPTEMBER 21, 2024

Fed cuts loose

US rate cut positive for financial markets, flows

The US Federal Reserve, which had been proceeding cautiously in rolling back the 525 basis points increase in Federal Funds rate done between March 2022 and July 2023, has begun the rate cutting cycle with a bang. It delivered a large 50 basis points cut in the federal funds rate in its recent meeting, bringing down the range of its target fund rate to 4.75 to 5 per cent. Financial markets have been particularly overjoyed by the projections of Federal Reserve Board Members and Federal Reserve Presidents, which indicate another 50 basis points cut by the end of this calendar year, followed by 100 basis points cut in 2025.



Easing credit market conditions in the US will increase the funds available to global investors. With central banks of other advanced economies such as Bank of England, European Central Bank, Sweden and Switzerland already having begun cutting rates, the Fed has been slightly behind the curve. The larger than expected rate cut therefore appears intended at catching up with its peers. Macro data has been supportive of the Fed's decision. With the PCE (Personal Consumption Expenditures) inflation in US moving down to 2.2 per cent in August, and the core PCE moving lower to 2.7 per cent, the US Fed had the room to embark on the rate-cutting cycle. The easing of tight conditions in the labour market with lower job additions in the last three months and slower increase in wage growth appears to have given the Fed further comfort that inflation will be under check. The rate cut is expected to help consumption, which has stayed stable and further boost the nascent revival in capital investments.

Equity markets across US, Europe and Asia have notched up strong gains since the Fed announcement. While the reaction of Indian stocks was muted on Thursday, it has recorded strong gains the next day. Gold hit record highs and sovereign bond yields of emerging markets have hardened. This positive reaction is on account of the significance of the borrowing cost in US for global fund flows. With investors from the US accounting for more than half the global investible funds, declining interest rates will increase their corpus, which will flow across regions and major asset classes. The weakness in the dollar after the rate cut also portends that funds will move out of US treasury securities into riskier assets such as emerging market equities and bonds.

Domestic sovereign bond yields have been softening since last October; therefore, their reaction to the Fed announcement was quite tepid. But the Fed rate cut has increased the spread between the yields of the US and Indian government bonds, which will help attract more foreign portfolio flows into debt. Availability of cheaper credit will boost FDI and NRI remittances, which augurs well for the rupee. The RBI, however, is unlikely to toe the line of the central banks of advanced economies, given lingering concerns over inflation. India's macro-prudential indicators are robust enough for monetary policy to be focused on domestic issues.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



NILANJAN GHOSH

The 2019 Mihir Shah-led Committee, constituted to draft the National Water Policy, submitted their report almost four years ago. The draft Policy document seems to have been gathering dust in the closets ever since.

The policy kept under wraps is not good news, as that results in the nation being deprived of a more updated and state-of-the-art thinking that is the need of the hour. A shift towards new thinking becomes imperative given the future challenges, India's vision of *Viksit Bharat*, and the associated India Water Vision 2047.

For the last few years, India has been witnessing a quiet war between contrasting paradigms of water governance. This war is between the colonial engineering paradigm rooted in the structural interventions over water bodies to augment supply and a more comprehensive and holistic water governance paradigm that is socially and ecologically informed.

This holistic paradigm, known as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), should not be interpreted as the one delineated by the Global Water Partnership, but as a set of guidelines drawing the broad contours of the new governance paradigm, and based on an integrated transdisciplinary knowledge base that talks of a systems approach to water.

IWRM therefore encompasses the various natural and social sciences including decision sciences, with the popular water-energy-food nexus approach being subsumed.

The movement from traditional supply-augmentation plans to innovative modes of water demand management represents the global trend over the past four decades. EU and the US recognised the detrimental effects of extensive dam construction and structural interventions, which caused irreversible damage to their river basin ecosystem.

DECOMMISSIONING DAMS

The adoption of the Water Framework Directive by the European Union (EU) in 2000 led to the decommissioning of approximately 500 dams in France, Sweden, Finland, Spain, and the UK, in their attempts to restore natural hydrological flow regimes. The US, the major proponent of dams between the 1920s and the 1960s, decommissioned over 1,000 such structures in recent decades, aiming to rejuvenate basin ecosystems.

Alternative approaches to managing water are also implemented worldwide through market developments in Chile and Australia to enable farmers to enhance water productivity and contribute to sustainable water management. In 2019, water derivatives



A fresh look at water policy

NEW PARADIGM NEEDED. India's water technocracy has been opposed to emerging models of sustainable management globally

trading commenced in California to mitigate water risks.

Indian water technocracy, however, vehemently opposed this global call for change to this emerging new paradigm. The last decade, however, witnessed specific initiatives to guide the nation toward comprehensive water governance.

In 2016, two Bills were formulated: the Draft National Water Framework Bill 2016 and the Model Bill for the Conservation, Protection, Regulation, and Management of Groundwater 2016.

Another 2016 report titled, 'A 21st Century Institutional Architecture for India's Water Reforms', which recommended the dissolution of the CWC and CGWB to form a National Water Commission, was severely criticised by the hydro-technocracy.

The National Water Policy 2020 is the latest document, which as per newspaper articles and interviews by Mihir Shah, seems the latest addition to the call for change.

NEW WATER POLICY

Problems in India have often arisen due to its over reliance on the colonial engineering paradigm. The inter-State Cauvery conflicts, Bihar's flooding allegedly caused by the Farakka barrage in West Bengal, unsustainable hydropower on the Himalayas, and the feared ecological fallout from river interlinking projects bear ample testimony of such problems created by structuralist interventions over water systems without thinking about the consequences.

An integrated systems approach to water governance is the need of the hour, as emphasised by a recent paper published by the Observer Research Foundation. These are:

(i) Water should be understood as a dynamic component integral to the eco-hydrological cycle, rather than as a stock of resources to be exploited according to human needs and convenience.

(ii) Water holds intrinsic value across its various uses, including ecological functions, which must be recognised through the valuation of ecosystem services linked to its flow regimes.

(iii) Consequently, water should be viewed as an economic asset within a broader ecological-economic framework, necessitating the establishment of appropriate institutional mechanisms to recognise this value. Social considerations must also ensure that affordability, accessibility and equity are not compromised.

(iv) The river basin should be construed as the fundamental unit of governance.

Water should be understood as a dynamic component integral to the eco-hydrological cycle, rather than as a stock of resources to be exploited for human needs

(v) Increasing water supply is not essential for sustained economic growth or food security. Instead, the focus should shift towards adopting water-saving methods.

(vi) A comprehensive assessment of water development projects is necessary, considering the integrity of the hydrological cycle.

(vii) A transparent and interdisciplinary knowledge base entailing engineering and other natural sciences, along with economics and other social sciences, is crucial.

(viii) Droughts and floods are not extreme events, but integral components of the global eco-hydrological cycle.

(ix) Gender considerations are critical, as emphasised in the *Dublin Statement*, which recognises that "women play a central role in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water".

These points are indicative and mark the broad contours of the state-of-the-art emerging paradigm, but will need to be modified with further knowledge accrual and the needs of the time.

The draft needs to be brought to the surface to understand whether these pointers are embraced, and then discussed and debated.

We cannot afford to be late, as the biggest future challenge of India lies in ensuring water security for human and environmental security.

The writer is a Director at the Observer Research Foundation

The poll needle is slowly moving towards Harris

Of the seven battleground states, Pennsylvania seems to be the most crucial one to win

Sridhar Krishnaswami

It is the time of an election cycle when numbers would seem to be going out of style. For every time a candidate is seen to be marginally ahead, the opposition brings back the advantage on specific issues.

A post debate poll from Quinnipiac University shows Vice-President Kamala Harris with a slight advantage over former President Donald Trump in the battleground states of Michigan and Pennsylvania, but with third party candidates included; but no clear winner in Wisconsin. A latest AP-NORC survey is showing that voters are viewing Harris slightly more favourably than they did in July, after President Joe Biden dropped out of the race.

The second assassination attempt on Trump in his golf course has had its unexpected moments. The calls of concern from President Biden and Democratic contender Harris appears to have calmed the environment with the former President characterizing the brief conversations "very nice".

But that has not stopped the Trump-Vance team from laying the blame for the violence on Harris and

Democrats for saying that the former President is a "threat to democracy". And the world's richest man, Elon Musk, had to throw in his outrageous two cents worth — something to the effect as to why Biden and Harris have not been targeted, a message that was quickly removed from social media.

The latest Quinnipiac survey only reinforced what other polls have said in the recent past: that Trump fares better on economy and immigration; but Harris is trusted on abortion.

The seven battleground states — Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Georgia, Nevada and North Carolina — are critical for the candidates as the margins of win and loss have been quite small. In fact this time around Pennsylvania with 19 electoral college votes is seen to be "THE" state to win in the road to the White House. In 2020 President Joe Biden won here by 1.2 percentage points.

The needle may be moving in favour of Harris at a slow pace, at the national and swing states with the two campaigns looking at bonus pickups along the way — Harris looking at North Carolina and even Iowa; and Trump hoping for Arizona and Nevada. That being the



KAMALA HARRIS. Inching ahead REUTERS

case, Republicans and Democrats are looking to lock in or grab that sliver of votes and endorsements that come their way.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters may have formally decided to sit out the 2024 elections but it is believed a majority of its members are with Trump. The Teamsters' National Black Caucus is backing Harris.

And at a time when Trump's standing with women leaves much to be desired, his well wishers are dumbfounded to see what is coming out from so-called supporters and surrogates. Just when Senator Vance's "childless cat ladies" remarks seem to be fading away, it took

the Republican Governor of Arkansas, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, to drop another bomb: that women without biological children will be less humane, drawing a round of disgust from women, step mothers and seen as a sign of political desperation. "... my kids keep me humble. Unfortunately Kamala Harris doesn't have anything keeping her humble", Sanders said.

In 1992, James Carville, the political strategist for Bill Clinton coined the famous phrase "It's the Economy, Stupid". And in 2024 the Harris campaign is realizing that the slogan pegged to the economy has not changed.

Whether it is at the pumps or grocery stores, prices are said to have fallen; so have mortgage rates. And it is pointed out that household incomes have risen faster than prices for the first time since the pandemic; and inflation is down to "normal" levels.

So how does Trump fare better than Harris on the economy? Part of the answer should be in the messenger still finding better ways to fine-tune the message but not having the luxury of time on her hands.

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

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Vivad se Viswas Scheme

Apropos 'Direct tax Vivad se Viswas Scheme 2024 to be operational from Oct 1' (September 20), while this scheme aims to reduce income tax litigation by allowing taxpayers to settle pending appeals, writs, and petitions before various appellate authorities, one fervently hopes that the I-T Department accordingly rises to the occasion by 'trusting' the tax payers/expressing mutual trust and helps the affected stakeholders. Though the scheme is laudable, its implementation will be key to its success. The Finance Ministry must

monitor the I-T dept to ensure that the Centre's 'pro-tax' payers' action plan does not remain on paper alone.

SK Gupta
New Delhi

Consult the Opposition

Though the Union Cabinet has approved the 'One Nation, One Election' proposal, challenges remain for the BJP-led NDA government to bring it fruition. The ruling BJP may strongly pitch in simultaneous polls on the grounds that it would provide governments more time to focus on governance,

diminish voter fatigue, encourage greater participation of voters, and help save billions of rupees spent on multiple elections. However, it could hardly afford to ignore the legitimate concerns of opposition parties about the adverse impact of simultaneous polls on the country's federal structure, besides undermining democratic diversity. Sustained dialogue with the opposition to address their legitimate concerns about the proposal is the need of the hour.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan (Tamil Nadu)

Corporate support

This is with reference to "Why women's savings don't translate into credit", (September 20). Women entrepreneurs face multiple challenges including unequal access to finance and collateral, lack of training, poor access to mentorship and networks, and inimical treatment from banks. Despite the growth of micro-finance, there is little knowledge about policies which help women become better risk-takers in business.

Corporates can support women entrepreneurs returning to work following a business failure. High quality mentorship can make women entrepreneurs confident. To help women overcome these challenges, the government and private partners have supported women by imparting skills, extending lines of credit, providing incubation facilities, and offering marketing and branding opportunities.

P Sundara Pandian
Virudhunagar (TN)

The IMF must end its destructive surcharges

JOSEPH E STIGLITZ, KEVIN P GALLAGHER, MARTÍN GUZMÁN, & MARILOU UY

A group of 22 financially distressed countries, including Pakistan and Ukraine, has become the largest source of net revenue to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in recent years, with payments exceeding the Fund's operating costs. The institution entrusted with providing the global public good of a well-functioning international financial system is, in effect, asking countries that are hardly able to pay their own bills to pick up the tab for the rest of the world.

This unseemly state of affairs is the result of the IMF's surcharge policy, which levies additional fees on countries that exceed thresholds for the amount or length of their borrowing from the Fund. Imposing fines on countries like war-torn Ukraine or Pakistan, a lower-middle-

income country where flooding two years ago submerged one-third of its territory, seems antithetical to the IMF's mission: Maintaining stability in the global financial system.

Surcharges neither ensure repayment nor protect IMF finances. Their main effect is to increase the burden of debt payments precisely when countries can least afford it, contravening the very rationale of the Fund, which was created to provide counter-cyclical financing. Worse, surcharges have become much more onerous for indebted countries in recent years, and thus much harder to justify. In 2020, ten countries were paying these fees to the IMF; by 2023, with the Covid-19 shock, the Ukraine war, and rising interest rates, that number had risen to 22. And, importantly, the IMF's basic rate increased from under 1 per cent to close to 5 per cent, raising the total lending rate for those paying sur-

charges to as much as 7.8 per cent. No wonder these countries are finding it difficult to emerge from debt distress. It is time to end the surcharges.

Supporters of the surcharges argue that the additional fees discourage debtors from borrowing excessively from the IMF. But this moral-hazard argument ignores that loans require approval from the Fund's Executive Board, which could reject frivolous requests, and it overlooks the fact that surcharges make countries more dependent on the IMF, not less. The IMF is a preferred creditor, meaning that countries must repay the Fund before other creditors. Piling surcharges on top of what countries already owe requires them to put more scarce foreign currency toward repaying the IMF, limiting their ability to accumulate foreign-exchange reserves and regain access to international capital markets.

Even beyond the particularities of the

IMF's preferred-creditor status, surcharges are inherently pro-cyclical. External factors such as rising interest rates, commodity price shocks, overvalued currencies, and extreme weather events often lead countries to borrow large sums from the Fund. Similarly, the ability to access international credit markets and repay the IMF "earlier" depends largely on global financial conditions, also an external factor. In an adverse international environment, increasing the burden on countries suffering debt crises is counterproductive to the goal of restoring stable growth trajectories.

Defenders of the surcharges also argue that they are needed to build up the IMF's financial buffers. But leaving aside the obvious point that imposing the burden of creating these buffers on distressed countries is at odds with the Fund's mission of protecting financial stability, this logic no longer holds, if it ever did.

This year, the IMF is set to reach its medium-term target for precautionary balances. Once that target has been met, surcharges would be taking money from heavily indebted middle-income countries to run the IMF — reducing the burden placed on rich countries. Asking these countries to finance the global public goods that the Fund provides is wrong, especially at a time when countries should be ramping up investment to meet the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and their nationally determined contributions under the Paris climate agreement.

The IMF's recently launched review of its surcharge policy provides an opportunity to fix a broken system. The simplest and most effective option would be to eliminate surcharges altogether. If this proves politically impossible, reforms could include capping total interest charges. The IMF would therefore impose fewer excessive burdens on indebted countries, especially in tight monetary conditions, and surcharges would decrease as the

Fund's basic interest rate rises.

Other technical adjustments would help reduce the burden of surcharges. For example, the IMF could raise the thresholds for imposing surcharges, and align them with the current "exceptional access" limits, beyond which a country's situation is considered extraordinary enough to allow lending outside the standard IMF framework. Even if surcharges used to make sense as a policy, they certainly don't now. The IMF's finances are robust; the finances of countries like Pakistan and Ukraine are not. Forcing countries to pay onerous surcharges only adds to their burden. That is no way to protect the world economy or fund the institution in charge of global financial stability.

Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate in economics. Gallagher is professor of global development policy at Boston University. Guzmán is a former minister of economy of Argentina. Marilou Uy is a non-resident senior fellow at the Boston University Global Development Policy Center. ©Project Syndicate, 2024



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Costly drugs? Try DIY



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The drug Sofosbuvir is used to treat Hepatitis C, which is caused by a virus that kills 250,000 people every year. It is sold as "Sovaldi" by Gilead Sciences in the US. Many Hepatitis C treatments last up to a year, with cure rates of 70 per cent.

In contrast, a 12-week course of 84 Sovaldi pills (one pill/day) has 90 per cent cure rates. But prescription Sovaldi costs \$1000/pill, so a 12-week course costs \$84,000. However, the drug is also available at just \$75 for 84 pills.

Welcome to Do-It-Yourself (DIY) drugs production. The "market leader" is the anarchist-collective, Four Thieves Vinegar Collective (FTVC). FTVC offers detailed instructions on how to set up a home chemical lab, with equipment assembled from commonly available parts ordered online. It also offers the download of a machine-learning program, Chemhacktica. This setup can be used with off-the-shelf chemicals to make many prescription drugs at home.

Like the Internet itself, Chemhacktica is an adaptation of an MIT-Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency research project called ASKOS. It uses machine learning to map pathways for molecule synthesis. The program crunches possible chemical reactions to figure out least-cost, easiest path to making a given molecule. It suggests potential pre-

cursor chemicals, and searches the Net to see what is easily available.

FTVC has developed a "MicroLab", an open-source controlled lab reactor (CLR) made from components easily available online. It's a DIY version of the CLRs used in labs. FTVC offers schematics, manuals and downloadable software for the MicroLab, along with circuit boards that it has developed. The MicroLab loads the chemicals for a reaction, controls temperature, adds chemicals, times actions, and more. FTVC also offers an "Apothecarium", a recipe book for certain drugs.

Multiple drugs can be synthesised in small quantities at a fraction of the cost of the commercial version. In some cases, the drug may be in short supply, or simply unavailable. The FTVC also offers DIY Epipens.

In another project, FTVC persuades heroin dealers to add a drug that inhibits HIV infection to heroin retailed on the street. This is a win-win: Drug dealers are happy customers are not dying, while there are fewer HIV infections from shared needles.

FTVC's science is rock-solid. In the TV show, *Breaking Bad*, a chemistry teacher sets up a DIY lab to make methamphetamine. The FTVC's R&D is similarly done by qualified chemists, who reverse-engineer prescription drugs.

FTVC calls this project, "The Right to Repair the body". The focus is figuring out DIY processes to duplicate expensive drugs cheaply for personal use, with off-the-shelf ingredients and equipment. Unlike pharma companies, FTVC doesn't care about the legal nitty-gritty of duplicating drugs. Nor is it interested in scale. The collective offers the intellectual know-how for free.

One reason drugs cost more than their physical ingredients is that pharma companies need to recover investments. There's a

massive cost associated with creating a new drug, taking it through R&D, trials, and patenting, before producing at commercial scale. Patents and the premium available on patented drugs incentivise such innovation.

But the patent system is open to abuse and can create sub-optimal outcomes. Drug R&D focuses on diseases and conditions rich persons are prone to. Viagra and Ozempic are more profitable than anti-malarials. No major pharma company invests in researching for new antibiotics, leading to a situation where antibiotic-resistant bacteria are taking over the world.

Pharmaceutical companies also charge what they believe the market will bear, and for critical drugs, that often results in a substantial premium. As Sovaldi (and other cases) illustrate, the difference between production costs and price tags is striking, although nations with universal government health care (the European Union) and medical insurance (in India, or the US), do pick up some of these tabs.

DIY "pirated" drugs are a big legal grey area and issues with quality controls may have terrible consequences. But FTVC's firm grasp of the science and its detailed recipes mitigate some concerns. DIY may offer a life-saving option when and where (like morning after abortion drugs in some US states) prescription drugs are unavailable.

Illegal DIY drugs also bring market forces into play. Most people will go to a pharmacy rather than slog through the hassle of setting up a CLR to DIY with uncertain quality. But the very possibility of DIY puts a ceiling on the prices. If the differential between the cost of home-production and the prescription price is large, people have the DIY option.

Lessons in democratic patience

The Sri Lankan transition was smoothly managed. Check Bangladesh for contrast. They forced their incumbent into exile, and installed a mostly unelectable govt of non-political people

On the day Sri Lankans vote to elect their new President in a close election, it is useful to remind ourselves of how maturely and calmly they've managed the transition after the climactic events just over a couple of years ago. They are choosing from three familiar faces in their mainstream politics, and there is no instability.

Herein lies a very important lesson: Nations and societies will sometimes have upheavals. Many will self-destruct as a result or go into a rinse-repeat cycle of change and instability. Those who survive — and probably also emerge stronger — will need that one greatly under-appreciated attribute: Democratic patience. What is it, and how does it work?

Sri Lanka first. In July 2022, the world looked in awe at the pictures of protestors ransacking the presidential palace, collecting souvenirs, swimming in its pool and making reels. The government was swept aside. What didn't result, however, was a vacuum in which random protesters, student leaders, NGOs, or busybody dual-passport holders could move in.

Contrast this with Bangladesh. They forced their incumbent into exile. An unelected and unelectable government of NGOs, students, technocrats, and closet Islamists moved in. They're now calling in native academics from overseas to write a new Constitution. They've given magistracy powers to all commissioned officers, thereby formally bringing the army into governance. Call it Pakistan Lite.

Both neighbours had similar upheavals. How did one manage the transition smoothly, while the other never even tried? Add Nepal to the mix. A mass movement and an armed Maoist insurgency ended the monarchy. In democracy's 16 years since, the country has seen eight Prime Ministers share 16 short terms. But they are steadfastly working on making their democracy better. They are blessed with democratic patience.

Democracy is messy. Generals, dictators, Ayatollahs, and Nobel laureates look and sound so different, virtuous and smooth. The countries that fall for the temptation of their apolitical promise are the ones that haven't yet matured to endure the mess, heat and dust, and low points inevitable in a democracy. If you haven't got that patience, you look for shortcuts. See Bangladesh.

The Sri Lankan transition was smooth, with familiar political faces brought in, among them the current incumbent and candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, 75, the last of their long marchers. Sri Lankans didn't trade democracy with an import,

either from some neighbours or global foundations loaded with the breathtaking belief that they can democratise poor, unsophisticated Third World countries. That's why whether Mr Wickremesinghe wins or loses, it will only strengthen our argument.

In describing his politics and position, he has said he took over when a political vacuum loomed. Now, it was up to the people to choose their new President, and he would accept it. He became a junior minister at 28, has been Prime Minister and President multiple times. The protesters in 2022 wanted change. If Mr Wickremesinghe represents anything, it is continuity. He was accepted as a credible choice because of his democratic familiarity. He stabilised the ship and has submitted himself to an election on the due date.

Back to the question: Why do some nations manage these upheavals successfully and others go to pieces? We could go back more than two decades and begin with what were grandly called the "Colour Revolutions" in the former Soviet or Soviet sphere territories: Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Yugoslavia, even Ukraine.

"Colour Revolutions" because protesters often wore shirts in a particular colour denoting the uprising in each country. This was succeeded by the Arab Spring and its Tahrir Square. Each ended disastrously, either bringing in a fresh dictatorship, or a break-up of the country (Yugoslavia).

Google New Delhi + 2011 + Ramila Maidan + Tahrir Square. See what it throws up. Then lean back, take a deep breath and reflect on how we tossed the same poisoned chalice. Google will tell you that there were enough smart people calling the Anna Movement "India's Tahrir Square". It looked like everybody wanted change, a new system, and though it wasn't said as such, a new Constitution. Why, because *mera neta chor hai* (my politician is a thief).

The war cry was, "We must change the system." Ultimately, all that changed was the government through elections. India was saved from a Tahrir Square calamity. The fuel of that movement was impatience with our political status quo, democracy that put in power "anpadh aur gamwaar" (illiterate country bumpkins)—a description used by liberal actor Om Puri on Anna Hazare's stage. This politics had to go and smart, educated people, Nobel laureates, Magsaysay Award winners, must take over. Enough is enough.

The middle class and the upper crust were both



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

The GOAT sitcom

EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

It is a three-decade-old incident, but Jennifer Aniston recounts it with the enthusiasm of a three-year-old. Seated on the couch opposite talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, the actor fondly recollects an impromptu trip she and the rest of the cast of *Friends* took to Las Vegas in 1994, days before the show aired on the NBC network.

In the words of Aniston, the show's director, Jimmy Burrows, got them in a huddle and handed each a couple of hundred dollars, and said: "Now go into the casino and gamble because this is the last time you will be able to walk into a casino anonymously."

"Sure enough, that was the last time we were able to do that," she said with a chuckle.

On September 22, *Friends* — the sitcom that followed Aniston and five others living in New York and hanging out in a coffee shop — will turn 30. Over the course of 236 episodes, the show would turn into a monumental cultural touchpoint, with its cast turning into superstars, their fame matched only by some of the Hollywood A-listers. The show's jokes and catchphrases became an integral part of everyday parlance.

At its peak, the show was simultaneously aired across 60 countries, with each episode watched by 22 million viewers. Even today, Warner Brothers continues to laugh their way to the bank selling *Friends* merchandise.

Its popularity and pop culture

references notwithstanding, *Friends* is labelled by many as the "Best sitcom." But was it really the best?

There are several worthy contenders. Topping the list is *The Sopranos*, a visually stunning series that chronicles the journey of an Italian-American mafia head based in New Jersey.

The American edition of *The Office* headlined by the brilliant Steve Carell is another terrific watch.

Carell, as the over-the-top, playful yet despicable character Michael Scott, carried the show on his shoulders.

Nevertheless, conversations on sitcoms cannot happen without mentioning *Seinfeld*. Like *Friends*, *Seinfeld* was also set in Manhattan. But it focused on the minutiae of everyday life of Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld), his best friend George Costanza (Jason Alexander), Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and neighbour Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards).

Co-written by Jerry and Larry David, *Seinfeld*, billed as "A show about nothing" was first aired five years before the pilot episode of *Friends*.

Unlike *Friends*, which puts undue emphasis on sentiments, *Seinfeld* finds its strength from observational humour. A bulk of the 180 episodes depicted day-to-day occurrences that people could relate to, even though they were at times wildly exaggerated.

For instance, waiting for your table at a Chinese restaurant, struggling to find your car at the parking lot, or lying about your job to impress a girl, *Seinfeld* managed to

strike a chord with audiences. Unlike most sitcoms of the 1990s, *Seinfeld* was bolder because of the humorous manner it dealt with topics that are considered taboo and unthinkable even for today's television.

The fact that even the fastidious, legendary director Stanley Kubrick was a big fan of *Seinfeld* illustrates the show's unmatched swag.

Another reason for the show's popularity was the performances of the four lead characters. They were outright cynics, lacking moral compass.

"*Seinfeld*'s impact resonated beyond comedy. Its serene belief that characters did not have to be likable as long as they were interesting foreshadowed a change in television drama that wouldn't settle until the late 1990s, when HBO turned a show about violent gangsters (*The Sopranos*) into an award-winning hit," Culture writer Matt Zoller wrote in *The Vulture*.

Even in terms of storytelling, this show broke new ground. The incredibly talented team of writers perfected the art of dovetailing multiple storylines in the final scene of each episode, culminating in a thrilling finish.

It was similar to watching a high-octane run chase in a T20 game. In that sense, *Seinfeld* rewrote the template of sitcoms during its nine-year run-time from 1989 to 1998.

The show's final episode was watched by 76 million viewers, making it the fourth-most watched television series finale.

Friends may still be a sentimental favourite but *Seinfeld* was a different beast. Timeless and utterly re-watchable, it was way ahead of the curve, and a harbinger of a raft of sitcoms like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Natural intelligence trumps AI



BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

I recently participated in the "Middle Eastern North African International Security Conference on Artificial Intelligence". Did you exclaim, "Whoa, you?" I had warned the organisers of my deficiency as a techie. However, they sought my perspective as a user and business leader. We had a deal.

Reflective conversation with the erudite S Ramadorai, copious readings, and reliance on natural intelligence helped me to prepare for this plenary session. Fellow panelists were serious techies like former Google-X chief business officer Mo Gawdat and Ali Zubayd, director general of cyber security, Saudi Arabia. Mo Gawdat had transformed from being an "archetypal techie" to a "happiness expert". This gave me added comfort. If truth be told, technology is political as well as social. Just as war cannot be left to generals, artificial intelligence (AI) cannot be left to techies. As the Ethiopians say, fish discover water last!

It is futile to resist change because technological progress is autonomous; nobody oversees developments. Indeed, only natural intelligence — humanism, conscience, and compassion of leaders — can provide oversight. The high-decibel prediction of cataclysmic change is part of hype-marketing. There is no reason to be overwhelmed by the evangelists, futurologists, and astrologers with their terminology and forecasts of impending singularity.

Like previous generations, my generation survived, arguably even prospered, through initialisations and portmanteau words like EDP, IT, IP, Y2K, dotcom, IoT, EV, and ESG. Surely, we got something right by adapting relentlessly to new ideas and vocabulary as we grew older. I do, however, emphasise the need for leaders to seriously understand the user case for rapidly developing technologies. While AI must and will gain human mindshare, natural intelligence should not diminish — there lies the secret sauce. As Rabinranath Tagore wrote in a different, though pertinent, context: *Seemaar Majhe Aseem Tumi, Baaajao Aapon Sur* (within bounds you are limitless, play on).

Next week will be remembered as the 44th anniversary of averting the destruction of the planet. Stanislav Petrov, a Moscow techie, had developed the foolproof Soviet OKO, an early warning system. On September 24, 1983, he noticed blips on his screen — five

American ballistic missiles were on their way to Russia. Instinct told him it was false. He reported the signals to his superiors but, mercifully, added that they seemed false. Twenty-thousand nuclear weapons on both sides meant a million times more destructive power than Hiroshima plus Nagasaki.

Stanislav's natural intelligence and human judgement caused him to doubt the veracity of the signals. In later years, after records were made public, he was feted. He would hiss in Russian, "*Chush*, I was just doing my job." He had listened to his inner voice. "I did not want to be remembered for starting the third world war," he said. It appears that the sun's reflection from clouds on the mirrors of the Soviet satellites caused the unexpected malfunction. Robert Oppenheimer's Bhagavad Gita *I am Death* moment was averted by the triumph of natural intelligence over technology!

This is a sobering story in the face of speculation about the imminent triumph of AI over natural intelligence. Here is the *brahma mantra* for mankind. So long as the world has leaders with judgement — humane, compassionate, and no-nonsense in their thinking — natural intelligence will prevail.

Indian philosophy recognises four ascending stages of the human mind as *thinking, ego, intellect, and consciousness*. We spend most of our waking hours in the two lower states of "thinking" and "ego". Occasionally, we

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The writer's latest book is JAMSETJI TATA: Powerful Learnings for Corporate Success, co-authored with Harish Bhat. gopal@themindworks.me



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

What next in West Bengal?

Mamata Banerjee will need to recalibrate her politics to win back civil society which has turned against her after the Kolkata rape-murder

The decision of junior doctors on strike in West Bengal to suspend their strike and provide essential services from Saturday will come as a relief to large sections of the population that depend on public hospitals. The striking doctors decided in favour of the partial resumption of services after the state chief secretary issued a set of directives to ensure the safety and security of health care workers and the efficient functioning of the public health care system on Thursday.

The protests started on August 9, after the body of a postgraduate student, allegedly raped and murdered, was found in a seminar hall of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. The incident, which triggered a national outrage comparable to the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case, exposed the frailties of the state administration with the Supreme Court severely censuring the state government over the shoddy police investigation. It is important that the issues flagged by the protests, especially on women's safety, workplace safety, and more humane work hours and conditions, are not ignored as the striking doctors return to work.

The mobilisations, though mostly limited to Kolkata and facilitated by the Opposition parties, also mark a churn in West Bengal, where civil society seems to have turned against Mamata Banerjee. Civil society has been a singular factor in facilitating the narrative that projected Banerjee as an anti-establishment figure and instrument of change in West Bengal politics. It helped her end the 34-year rule of the CPM-led Left Front rule, which was marked by the rise of a party-state that privileged cadres over citizens in public affairs and the distribution of state welfare and public resources. Civil society stood with her as she built the Trinamool Congress as an alternative to the CPM and claimed a vanguard role in resisting the Left government's belated attempts at reviving industry and private investment in the state without factoring in local considerations. In office since 2011, Banerjee has turned out to be a crafty politician with smart social alliances, welfare policies directed at women, even appeals to a regional and linguistic identity to outwit the BJP, which in recent years has emerged as a powerful actor in state politics.

The recent protests suggest that her pact with civil society may be fraying, at least in West Bengal's urban pockets, where disillusionment with her failure in ushering in change is discernible. Corruption charges against her colleagues, and intimidation by TMC leaders and workers threaten to diminish her popularity. Incidents such as the alleged landgrab in Sandeshkhali and the rape and murder case have raised questions about the TMC government's record on law and order, especially in ensuring the safety of women. These developments have the potential to dent the large support she has cultivated among women by presenting herself as one among them and through her gender-defined welfare programmes.

It is a given that politics in West Bengal will not be the same after the protests. The signs are that the TMC has been forced on to the back foot. The choice before Banerjee is to revamp the administration, focus more on governance, and transform the toxic political culture of the state that continues to lean exclusively on physical violence to control and dominate public affairs. She will need to go back to the drawing board and deliver the *poribortan* (change) she had promised while in opposition.

In Sri Lanka, a close three-way battle for office

Promises of system change and economic stability define the first presidential polls since the upheaval of 2019

Sri Lanka is no stranger to tumult. Yet even by the island's standards, the years since 2019 have been a whirl. Through the course of the Easter Attacks, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's disastrous presidency, the harrowing shortages of 2022, colossal protests that overthrew that president that same year, and the onerous conditions imposed by an International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme since, a long series of crises have shaken the nation's politics.

In the presidential election today, Sri Lanka is set to choose between three major challengers. For the first time since 2005, a Rajapaksa is not among the candidates expected to seriously vie for the nation's highest political office, that family's political stock having crashed in the 2022 protests. In fact, it is their former voter base that has been among this election's most coveted prizes.

Chief among the beneficiaries of the Rajapaksa nosedive, is the National People's Power (NPP), led by presidential candidate Anura Kumara Dissanayake. Although NPP is ostensibly a leftist alliance whose primary constituent is the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the NPP has shuffled towards the centre in the past decade. The NPP/JVP (the terms are used interchangeably, even by supporters) has attempted to cast itself in a softer light than previous iterations of the party. In 1988/89, the JVP orchestrated its most recent violent uprising; in the aughts it supported major bombing campaigns of the mostly Tamil, North Sri Lanka.

Although Dissanayake's vote share had only been 3% in the 2019 election, the NPP had, even then, enjoyed soft support in Sinhalese-majority electorates for its members' full-throated condemnations of financial misappropriation. Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2022, it has

positioned itself as the alliance best placed to fight corruption. Middle and lower middle class southerners have been most-receptive to this message. It is among these voters, particularly outside the urban centres, that Dissanayake, 55, has gained most ground.

Calls for "system change" led largely by youth through the 2022 protests, also explain the NPP's rapid rise. "End the 74-year curse," was among the demonstrations' loudest demands with Sri Lanka's two traditional parties (the United National Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, plus offshoots such as the Rajapaksa party) accused of fleecing the nation in turns since Independence. The NPP/JVP, having never led a government, represent a clean break.

For other voters, however, this inexperience disqualifies them. In addition to those still scarred by the violence the JVP unleashed in previous decades, many are opposed to the NPP for their perceived fiscal naivety at a moment in which Sri Lanka scrambles to emerge from the most treacherous economic swamp it has been mired in. For many such voters, current president Ranil Wickremesinghe offers the only safe route to continued macroeconomic stability.

Wickremesinghe's perceived command of global financial forces, diplomatic ties, and his decades-long brand as an internationalist statesman, has won him the support of the wealthiest urban voters, the likes of whom had been enamoured of JR Jayewardene, Wickremesinghe's uncle and the first executive president of Sri Lanka. Tamils in the North and East have also long viewed Wickremesinghe as a benevolent politician in comparison to other Sinhalese.

However, in an election in which corruption faces a harsher examination than ever, Wickremesinghe leads a government in which a minister (later removed from his post) was charged with a brazen pharmaceutical scandal. In recent months, the Sri Lankan government was also accused of entering a corrupt agreement with Dubai-based visa administration company VFS Global. There have been other alleged breaches of public trust. A wind-power contract granted to India's Adani group has come under serious



Andrew Fidel Fernando

Trump vs Harris battle is more than an election

There have been 59 presidential elections in the United States (US) since 1789, when George Washington became the first commander-in-chief of the new nation. For nearly the next 220 years, presidential contenders shared one key characteristic — they were all White males, despite representing different political ideologies and parties, until Barack Obama was elected in 2008 as America's first Black president. The Illinois senator's election as the 44th president opened the door for other demographic groups, once relegated to the sidelines, to aspire to the presidency. Former first lady, senator, and secretary of State Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful campaign in 2016 was another pivotal moment, as it marked the first time a woman was nominated as the torchbearer of a major party.

Even if Donald Trump once again prevents the election of the first female president, this contest is already one for the history books. Never before have two presidential nominees with such vastly different backgrounds faced off as the two main candidates vying to become president. The Democrat candidate, vice president Kamala Harris, like Obama, is biracial — the daughter of immigrant parents, Indian-born biomedical scientist Shyamala Gopalan, and Jamaican-American economist Donald Harris. Gopalan, a single mother, raised Harris and her

sister Maya. While a student, Harris worked at McDonald's. Her upbringing was not different from millions of hard-working Americans. Harris attended Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington, DC, known as a hub of the civil rights movement. She went on to earn a law degree from Hastings College of the Law at the University of California. Trump, on the other hand, was born into wealth. His father, Fred Trump, was a well-to-do Queens real estate developer. Donald was raised in a privileged environment, attending private schools and earned a degree from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business before joining his father's business.

Harris rose to prominence through a focus on and a commitment to public service. Trump inherited a business empire from his multimillionaire father. He later became a media star on his TV show, *The Apprentice*.

Harris's entire career, which began as a public defender, was in public service. She was a trailblazer, serving as the district attorney of San Francisco, the attorney general of California, a US senator from California, and a vice president — the first woman of South Asian and African-American descent to hold each of those positions. Trump's first job in public service was as the president of the US. (He was the sixth businessman to serve as president.)



Frank F Islam

On the Arctic, India must think beyond just energy

The Indian monsoon is connected with the Arctic through an atmospheric river. Recent research has shown that loss of Arctic sea-ice causes extreme weather events in India through the phenomenon of teleconnections. Arctic ice serves as a colossal carbon sink and holds an estimated 1.5 trillion metric tonnes of organic carbon, critical for climate stabilisation. As the Arctic warms at four times the global average, sea ice recedes and permafrost thaws, threatening to release vast amounts of potent greenhouse gases. This could trigger a dangerous, irreversible feedback loop for climate impacts.



Zerín Osho

Despite India's long-standing and critical engagements in the Arctic, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), many of whose members have territories in the Arctic, has ignored India's role in the protection of this region. NATO's *Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment* report released in July, highlights the profound impact of the accelerating climate crisis on the security of the allies and the need for NATO to adapt to the resulting technological and logistical challenges for military operations in the region. India's omission risks NATO's climate and security interests, especially given India's strategic role and Arctic aspirations.

On the other hand, Russia, a large part of whose geography lies in the Arctic, has expectations of India collaborating in the region on its resources and infrastructure. This aligns with Russia's strategy to balance its dependence on China, with whom it

has intensified military presence and commercial activities in the region. Controlling a majority of the Arctic Ocean coastline, Russia is leveraging this to enhance its global influence, posing a threat to NATO interests, and heightening geopolitical competition. India's long-standing alliance with Russia is complex, and the Arctic adds another layer of intricacy. While India's energy interests are clear, it carries significant risks for long-term climate and economic security. China's increasing Arctic presence further complicates geopolitical balancing and challenges efforts to conserve the Arctic.

For India, loss of Arctic sea-ice impacts the monsoons that are critical for its agriculture. Protecting Arctic sea-ice is thus essential for India's goal of becoming an economic superpower. India, therefore, must leverage its scientific research abilities, per its Arctic Policy to strengthen its research and development efforts in the region. Increased investment in scientific research and diplomatic initiatives are crucial to highlight the Arctic's importance as a global common. India should use its position in global forums to advocate for Arctic protection and promote sustainable practices.

The United States (US) and India share a

vested interest in safeguarding the Arctic. For India, stringent regulation of commercial and military activities in the Arctic is crucial to avoid further destabilising the monsoon. Similarly, the US seeks to prevent exacerbating climate damage while strategically countering Russia by limiting its influence in the Arctic. Arctic cooperation offers mutual benefits for both nations, provided a science-based approach centered on climate protection shapes their bilateral strategy. Collaborating with the US on climate and scientific research in the Arctic can help balance these interests. India's historical ties to the Arctic, coupled with its growing economic and geopolitical clout, provide a strong foundation for such efforts.

India's ability to navigate historical divides and align positions among the Global South holds the potential to forge a united approach in safeguarding the crucial Arctic ecosystem. India must help pivot away from further exploitation of the Arctic, which will disproportionately impact the Global South.

Zerín Osho is director of the India programme at the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development. The views expressed are personal



In the presidential election today, Sri Lanka is set to choose between three major challengers AFP

scrutiny with a government regulator recently blocking approval while fundamental rights objections have been filed in court. The Central Bank Bond scam of 2015 is also linked to Wickremesinghe's associates — he was prime minister at the time.

While Dissanayake is essentially the anti-establishment candidate, and Wickremesinghe is among the architects of that establishment, Sajith Premadasa represents the middle path for many. Himself the son of a former president, Premadasa has presented a welfarist vision, though one embedded within the existing political and economic structure. Sri Lanka's opposition leader through the last parliamentary cycle, and a defeated presidential candidate in 2019, Premadasa has strung together a broad coalition of MPs. Many who had belonged to Wickremesinghe's United National Party had already been his allies. To their number he has added others who had served in Gotabaya's cabinet, as well as politicians representing minority communities. While criticised for his lack of charisma, Premadasa has emphasised the qualifications of his team, particularly in the realm of economics. These are primarily corporate figures, though many in his inner circle had also gained governance experience during the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "Yahapalana" government that ran between 2015 and 2019.

The Rajapaksa, meanwhile, will also field a candidate, with Mahinda's son Namal set to appear on the ballot. Though not expected to win a significant percentage of votes, his candidacy is indication that the Rajapaksa has designs on returning in greater force in years to come.

On the matter of an IMF programme, Dissa-

nayake, Premadasa, and Wickremesinghe uniformly accept that only the IMF can chart Sri Lanka's path out of immediate economic danger, though a second default on the nation's huge debts still looms. Wickremesinghe would leave his current agreement with the IMF more or less untouched, Premadasa says he would adjust it to ease the burden on the poorest, and Dissanayake has called for more rigorous changes while insisting the IMF's requirements would nevertheless be honoured.

Likewise, the candidates offer similar visions on foreign policy. With Sri Lanka in such dire economic straits it must court broadly for relief. The JVP was once virulently anti-Indian. However, earlier this year, Dissanayake met with India's external affairs minister S Jaishankar, at India's invitation. Dissanayake has also attempted to allay fears of the international community that the NPP represents a radical departure from the status quo.

In the final weeks of the campaign, Dissanayake appeared to have a narrow lead. But as may be expected in a three-way race, it is possible that no candidate will secure more than 50% of the vote. Sri Lanka's electoral system does allow for this: If there is no clear winner, all but the two frontrunners are eliminated, and the second or third preferences of voters who favoured eliminated candidates are added to the leaders' tallies. A president so chosen will take oaths with the weakest mandate of any elected executive president in the country's history. More political instability may be on the horizon.

Andrew Fidel Fernando is an award-winning author and journalist based in Colombo. The views expressed are personal

THE WORLD WILL SOON KNOW WHETHER KAMALA HARRIS WILL MAKE A HISTORIC ENTRY INTO THE PRESIDENCY. BUT ONE THING IS CLEAR: HER CANDIDACY IS SYMBOLIC OF A CHANGING AMERICA AND THE FACE-OFF AGAINST TRUMP IS ALREADY A SIGNIFICANT CHAPTER IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

Their vastly different upbringing is reflected in the politics of Harris and Trump. The Democrat is much more sensitised to racial and immigrant issues and subscribed to progressive politics early on.

Harris is a product of the civil rights movement. Both of her parents were activists. Her interactions with young Black leaders and activists at Howard also shaped her politics. Trump's relationship with the civil rights movement is more complex and controversial. Throughout his career as a businessman and politician, he has faced scrutiny for his stance on civil rights and racial issues. As a young real estate developer in the 1970s, his family's business was sued by the US justice department for discriminatory practices in renting apartments to African Americans. In addition, Trump's rhetoric and policies as president fuelled racial tensions by taking actions such as rolling back protections for minority communities and defending controversial civil war monuments which were seen by many as direct assaults on civil rights gains. The personalities of the two candidates are

also vastly different.

Trump has been labelled a self-centred narcissist, who, as the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks pointed out, is the product of the 1970s and 1980s at the "tail end of the culture of narcissism" — an "era of the unchained self — self-esteem, self-expression, self-promotion." Harris is a quintessential public servant, for whom politics is about the people and unity. She projects her candidacy as an antidote to the politics of division and separation that Trump represents.

At this key moment, when the idea of a first woman president and the first Indian American president is in the realm of reality, it is worth remembering some of the key figures who made the Harris candidacy possible — the people of colour who tried to break the glass ceiling, despite knowing that they had little chance to get anywhere near the Oval Office.

The groundbreakers in this regard were: New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, a Democrat who ran for her party's nomination in 1972, the first African American and the first woman to run for the nomination of a major party. African-American civil rights leader Jesse Jackson Jr, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination twice in the 1980s, and the second time around won primaries in several states.

The world will soon know whether Kamala Harris will make a historic entry into the presidency. But one thing is clear: Her candidacy is symbolic of a changing America and the face-off against Trump is already a significant chapter in US history.

Frank F Islam is an entrepreneur, civic leader, and thought leader based in Washington DC. The views expressed are personal

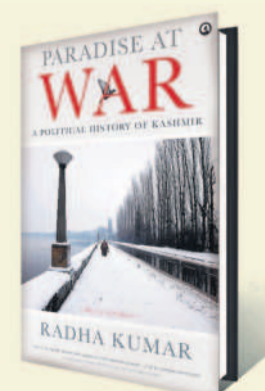
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

UNRAVELLING COMPLEX POLITICS IN J&K

The first assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir after a decade, coming after six years of lost statehood and abrogation of Article 370, offer an occasion to reflect on its specific political context. Apart from the current issues around which parties have rallied in different ways, there are challenges from its not-so-distant history that define its present.

Against this backdrop, we recommend *Paradise at War: A Political History of Kashmir* by academic Radha Kumar, which offers a deeply insightful examination of the turbulent history of Kashmir. Kumar provides a nuanced analysis of the historical tensions, from Partition to the rise of militancy and the ongoing disputes over autonomy and statehood. The book presents the complex layers of political manoeuvring, local aspirations, and the role of external actors in shaping Kashmir's trajectory. As the polls prompt discussions about the future of J&K, *Paradise at War* offers readers a thorough understanding of the political forces at play and the struggles that continue to shape the region's identity.



Paradise at War: Radha Kumar Year: 2018



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

REJECT

Elections must be held whenever governments lose public trust. One nation one election undermines will of we, the people

WHAT THE UNION cabinet would clear the plan for One Nation One Election (ONOE), having accepted the Ram Nath Kovind committee report's unanimous recommendation, was foretold. Looking back, it has been on the cards ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi advocated ONOE in his I-Day speech from the ramparts of Red Fort this August 15. But the ring of grim inevitability gathered by this contentious proposal that presumes to rearrange the country's electoral and federal systems goes back further — to the constitution of the Kovind Committee in September 2023. Its composition and terms of reference were so skewed that, with due respect to the former President, it was a rubber stamp in the thin garb of a committee discussing electoral reforms in the world's most populous democracy. Its eight members had either openly expressed their support for simultaneous polls or were seen to be broadly in tune with the government and its favoured projects. The stated mandate of the committee was to find ways to implement a proposal certified as being in "national interest", not to ask why. Despite the serious implications of ONOE for the federal system, and in spite of it raising concerns about the national dominating the local, no regional party leader, no chief minister, was taken on board. At that time, therefore, when the then Congress leader in Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, refused the invitation to be part of the committee, it seemed to be an abdication of responsibility to place the Opposition's concerns on the table. But, at the same time, Chowdhury was right to call it out as a "total eyewash" and to point out that its very terms of reference guaranteed its conclusion.

Now that the committee has done what it set out to do — arguing from the conclusion back to the premise — and the Cabinet has put its stamp on it, the Opposition, in a stronger position after the general election verdict, must not miss the opportunity that is still available to it. The ONOE proposal requires a special majority in Parliament and, in its second phase, also the ratification of state legislatures. This proposal must not be allowed to go through. Because it makes the will of the people and their representatives subservient to a fixed calendar imposed in the name of cutting costs and increasing administrative convenience, specious arguments that don't stand any rigorous test of evidence. The project reeks of a straitjacket approach that sees elections as an interruption in "good governance", not as what they really are — an expression of people's will that is full-bodied and dynamic and that must be recognised and respected as such for there to be responsive governance.

In a democracy as diverse as India, the sooner the ONOE is given up for dead, the better. It goes against the founding vision of this nation — of a parliamentary and federal system, not one that is presidential and unitary. In a federal structure, each state has unique contestations within and with the Centre; the Lok Sabha is the citizen's voice at the Centre. To frame these complexities in terms of cost-cutting and convenience is doing disservice to the Constitution's spirit. Quite simply, elections must be held whenever and wherever governments lose the trust of the people as embodied and expressed by their representatives. That's a constitutional guarantee without any qualifications. Imposing a calendar and defining limits for the House, undermines the will of we, the people.

A WIDENING WAR

Exploding devices attack in Lebanon blurs line between extremists' methods and state action

IT CAN BE difficult when it comes to nation-states to draw hard lines between pre-emptive action and provocation, deterrence and retribution. This is especially so in countries with fraught histories and hostile neighbours. Yet, even with the long rope granted to Israel under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the October 7 attacks by Hamas, there is little justification for its actions subsequently, which are becoming increasingly indiscriminate and harmful to the country as well as for regional security. The most recent example is the "exploding devices" attack in Lebanon. It is nearly impossible to predict who will be present when a pager or walkie-talkie explodes and it is likely that many of the over 3,000 people injured were not Hezbollah fighters.

So far, Israel has neither confirmed nor denied accusations that it was behind the attack. However, reports suggest that Israel's intelligence agencies had been infiltrating the pager network used by Hezbollah — they used the dated technology to avoid surveillance — for months. The sweeping nature of the violence — this was not a pointed surgical strike aimed at a military target — is more in keeping with extremist non-state actors. Israel, which has been a victim of terrorism, must know that it risks becoming like its proclaimed enemy. The pagers were reportedly manufactured by a Taiwanese company with ties to a Hungarian supplier. Many ICT products, between their hardware and software, are part of global supply chains. That these were compromised and weaponised, as seems to be the case with the Lebanon attack, on a large scale should alert security agencies across the world.

Even Israel's staunch ally, the US, has expressed concern at the death and suffering in Gaza. A case of genocide has been admitted against it at the International Court of Justice. The government has been facing mass protests by Israelis who believe that it has failed both in terms of securing their interests and getting back the hostages. Rather than coming to the negotiating table and ensuring that there is a ceasefire, it is continuing with its aggression both in Gaza and against Iran-backed outfits like the Hezbollah and Houthis in Yemen. Shortly before the pager attacks and battles on the country's northern border with Lebanon, the country's defence minister, Yoav Gallant, said: "We are entering a new phase of the war". The dangers of the conflict escalating to broader theatres are more present than ever.

NO SMALL BEER

A lesser pint might mean better health but do British drinkers need a fun police?

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN a pint and three-fourths of a pint, as any committed pub-goer in the UK will affirm, is no small beer. Which is why the idea of reducing the most popular British serving size for ales, as suggested by a Cambridge University study, has drawn sharp responses. For the scientists behind the study, the benefits of a smaller serving of beer are clear: Less alcohol consumed means less harm done to the body, leading to better public health outcomes in a country that has 546 words for drunkenness. But for those who look forward to getting stewed at their friendly local at the end of a long day, the idea undermines a hallowed tradition that goes all the way back to 1698 when the imperial pint was set at 568 ml.

The minority that supports this proposal believes that portion control would not be noticeable when it comes to alcohol. This is because, the Cambridge University study points out, most people think in terms of the number of servings rather than their size — a psychological quirk of the average consumer that lies at the heart of the strategy of shrinkflation, whereby companies shrink their products while steadily raising prices.

Should people be tricked into better drinking habits? While the goal of improving the health of the populace is laudable, the issue of mandating serving sizes is cloudier. Health Secretary Wes Streeting has stated that the government has no intention of being the "fun police" — and there's no reason why they should be, given all the other avenues, including educational content and public health campaigns, through which the state can do its duty by citizens. In a time of rising prices and sea levels, the average Joe and Jane have enough on their minds. The last thing they need is a government-sized fly in their beer.



PARVATI SHARMA

Identity of a writer

That women dominate Booker Prize shortlist is good news. But questions of power asymmetry remain

SOME WEEKS AGO, I was invited to judge a college essay competition, in which my co-juror and I turned out to be friends from our own undergraduate days. This was a happy coincidence; as was the fact that the essays from which we chose our winners were all by women. An all-female pool of writers and an all-female jury was a nice thing, no doubt, but neither of us would claim it was radical. We were also, after all, graduates of an elite college, judging students of an elite university: Our disruption of the norm was limited.

It was with similarly mixed emotions that I read the news of the women-dominated Booker Prize shortlist. Yes, five of the six shortlisted authors are women, but only one of the six is Black — the lone man. Breathless headlines declare that this is the highest number of women shortlisted in the Booker's 55-year history, but a cursory glance at the prize's website reveals that women — and certainly White women — have been well represented from the award's inception. Two White women were shortlisted that year, in 1969: Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. Of them, Murdoch would be shortlisted six times in all, win the prize once, and have the trophy itself named after her, posthumously, in 2023. The Lost Man Booker Prize, announced between 1969 and 1970 to fix a logistical error that passed over a year's worth of nominations, had four White women authors in a shortlist of six; and the very next year, Bernice Rubens, a White woman, won the award.

By contrast, a Black author, Chinua Achebe, first made it to the shortlist in 1987 — 18 years after the Booker was born. An essay on the prize's website, attributed to Ben Okri, though it reads like a defensive press release contesting the notion that Black writers are underrepresented in the Booker, claims that Achebe's shortlisting was "fitting because Achebe was already an icon of Black literature with the publication of *Things Fall*

Apart in 1958". In other words, Achebe had been celebrated for nearly 30 years before the Booker thought fit to recognise him. The first Black winner was Okri himself, in 1991; and the first Black woman to win the prize was Bernardine Evaristo, in 2019, a full half century after the prize was instituted.

Even then, as followers of Booker controversies will remember, Evaristo had to share her prize with Margaret Atwood. It's worth noting that this was Atwood's sixth shortlisting and that *The Testaments*, for which she won the award, cannot hold a guttering candle to Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. I write this as a lifelong fan of Atwood's work, as someone who waited with bated breath for *The Testaments* to come out, having read and re-read its precursor, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), countless times. But this sequel was less a book, more a marketing ploy — clumsily written, poorly plotted, entirely forgettable — while there are moments and characters from Evaristo's book that are still alive in my mind.

Such asymmetry is not peculiar to the Booker alone. Women with caste and class privilege are better represented in Indian (certainly Indian English) writing and publishing than women or men without either. But given its oversized, global influence, the Booker might have been a little more reflexive while patting itself on the back for shortlisting five women of varied origins (they may well come from five countries, but American, Australian, British, Canadian and Dutch citizenship is not the bouquet of diversity the Booker imagines it to be).

The chair of this year's jury, Edmund de Waal, has said that the shortlisted books explore the "fault lines of our times... conflicts of identity, race and sexuality". I haven't read the books but they all sound fantastic, and I'm sure I'll enjoy them. This is not, therefore, to denigrate the talent of the shortlisted

women authors; it is only to question the easy celebration of the mere fact of their shortlisting. Isn't one of the most glaring fault lines of our times the privileged and weaponised vulnerability of White women? We saw it clearly during the Olympics and the hounding of Imane Khelif for being a better boxer than her White opponent. We have seen it play out, day in day out for a year, in the lasting outrage over Hamas violence and the indifference to violence, sexual and otherwise, inflicted on Palestinian women (and men) by Israel.

Women, as a category, are vulnerable, of course. Privileged or otherwise, women are vulnerable to abuse, and to being overlooked, talked-over, patronised; to being systematically excluded from positions of political, social and cultural power. But here's the rub: Power, unlike intellectual nuance, does tend to operate in black and white. Across the world, it aligns along axes that are all too clear-cut — gender, yes, but also race, religion, language, wealth. Thus, power will side with men possessed of great fortunes and *ipso facto* threatened by gold-digging wives as easily as it will favour wealthy women eternally oppressed by their cooks and cleaners.

How then does a writer answer the tricky question of identity? Which identity does she assume, the one of greatest vulnerability or most privilege? Am I female in the global south or *savarna* in south Delhi? I used to say that the only kind of label I'd like as a writer is "great", and I thought this was quite witty of me, but wanting to be canonised is a very conservative ambition, after all. Writers, of all genders, might serve our deeply unequal world better by asking why greatness is so often reserved for the few with the power to allocate it to themselves.

Sharma is the author of *Akbar of Hindustan and Jahangir*



ROHAN J ALVA

FOR LIBERTY, BY LAW

Recent SC decisions granting bail uphold constitutional letter and spirit

IT MAY HAVE been cold outside, but on December 6, 1948, tempers in the Constituent Assembly ran high. The Assembly was poised to discuss the future of inarguably one of the most critical entitlements offered by the Constitution — the right to life and personal liberty guaranteed by Article 21. In an erudite and scintillating speech, K M Munshi presented a programmatic argument on why due process protection has to be given for a person's life and liberty. These rights could not become the plaything of laws. In a clash between due process rights and ordinary legislation, the Constitution could not be silent. Irrespective of the rationale behind any law, this fundamental right ought not to be silenced. Munshi was not alone. He received widespread support from the likes of K T Shah, Bakshi Tek Chand and Purnima Banerji. Their vision and all that they fought for appear to be coming true.

In July, a division bench of the Supreme Court (SC), comprised of Justice JB Pardiwala and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, examined whether a person would be entitled to bail even under strict laws like the UAPA if the trial proceeded at a snail's pace. In other words, do constitutional courts have supreme discretion to grant bail irrespective of the nature of the law involved? In an analysis that demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of due process rights under the Constitution, the SC invoked Article 21 and the right to life and personal liberty to declare that when a trial has been prolonged, the accused person cannot be kept behind bars forevermore, notwithstanding the seriousness of the charge. In other words, no law can sanction permanent

custody behind bars. As the SC observed, the right to life and liberty, "is overarching and sacrosanct." "A constitutional court," the Court said, "cannot be restrained from granting bail to an accused on account of restrictive statutory provisions in a penal statute if it finds that the right of the accused under Article 21 of the Constitution of India has been infringed." Stated simply, onerous restrictions contained in the penal laws cannot constrain the powers of a constitutional court to protect due process rights.

This trend in judicial thought was reaffirmed by the SC once again last month when a bench of Justices B R Gavai and Justice K V Viswanathan speaking in the context of bail under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, observed that since the right to life and personal liberty is a "higher constitutional right, statutory provisions should align themselves to the said higher constitutional edict." The most illuminating part of this decision is the emphasis on ensuring the protection of due process rights, and the statement that statutes cannot prevail over fundamental rights, especially the right to life and liberty.

In pursuit of protecting fundamental rights, the Court reasoned, onerous provision on bail in the PMLA can never be taken to mean that, "deprivation is the norm and liberty is the exception."

There was a time in Indian constitutional jurisprudence when one of the most time-honoured principles was that bail is the rule and jail is the exception. It was the most logical outcome of the idea of preserving personal liberty. Legendary justices such as Krishna Iyer strove hard to make this the de-

fault rule. The endeavour was that when a person is taken into custody, they must ordinarily be released on bail unless compelling circumstances to the contrary are shown. The tide against this principle seemingly turned, particularly after the enactment of laws that create such a high threshold for seeking bail that it sometimes becomes virtually impossible to surmount. The PMLA and UAPA are examples of such. Yet, as these recent decisions demonstrate, courts can maintain their fidelity to the Constitution while also providing a working framework for laws which deal with special situations. Nonetheless, and at long last, it now appears that juristic thought is moving towards re-creating the pro-bail approach.

The robust protection of personal liberty and the creation of a constitutional architecture that ensures this is something the members of the Constituent Assembly repeatedly asserted. They may have suffered a temporary setback, for Article 21 makes no mention of due process rights. But they prevailed in the long run. In no uncertain terms, these decisions vindicate the vision that the founding mothers and fathers had for India. For them, the triumph of due process rights lay at the heart of fundamental freedoms. In the 75th anniversary year of the adoption of the Indian Constitution by the Assembly, this particular vision has received its most emphatic reassurance.

The writer is a lawyer and author of *Liberty After Freedom: A History of Article 21, Due Process and the Constitution of India and A Constitution to Keep: Sedition and Free Speech in Modern India*



SEPTEMBER 21, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

NTR WINS MAJORITY

ANDHRA PRADESH CHIEF Minister N T Rama Rao won a vote of confidence in the state Assembly which earlier elected N Venkataratnam of the ruling Telugu Desam as Speaker with a big margin. Rama Rao, who was reinstalled as Chief Minister, got 161 votes in favour and none against the motion in the 293-member House.

AN INEFFECTIVE FORUM

INDIA MADE IT clear to the Commonwealth Finance Ministers conference in Toronto that the development committee of the World

Bank was not an appropriate forum to discuss issues relating to the reform of the world's monetary and financial systems. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee said that neither the structure nor the past record of the development committee inspires any confidence.

CONGRESS LOYALISTS

FM KHAN, MP, who was expelled from the Congress (I), claimed that over 200 party MPs and thousands of partymen subscribed to his view that loyalists were being ignored by the party leadership. Khan, however, appeared to be keeping his options open when he said he was still hopeful of meeting the

party president, Mrs Indira Gandhi. He also wrote a letter to her asserting that he was a disciplined soldier of the party.

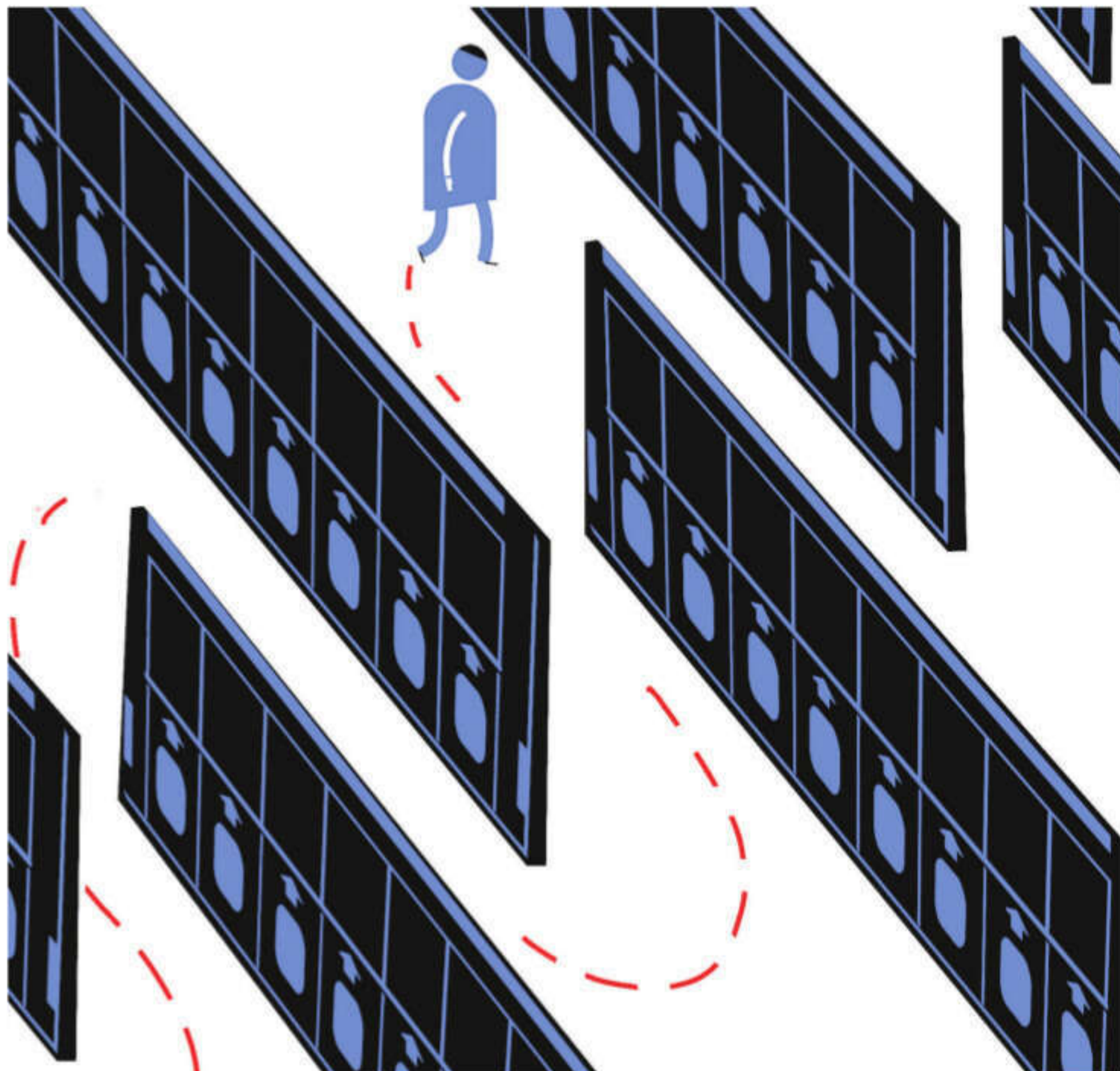
BEIRUT MISSION BLAST

A SUICIDE BOMBER in a van loaded with explosives sped through barriers and past guards at the US embassy annexe northeast of Beirut, setting off his bomb in front of the building's entrance. Police said the blast killed 23 people, including two Americans, and wounded up to 60 including the US and British ambassadors. Emergency officials at the blast scene in Aukar said two Americans were killed and 21 Americans were among the wounded.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Governance, above all

One Nation One Election will mark a return to the time before partisan politics disturbed the rhythm of electioneering



C.R. Sasikumar



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

DEMOCRATIC POLITICS BEGAN its journey in Athens as a negative voting system in which eligible voters, mostly landowners, were asked to "elect" citizens to be expelled from the Greek city-state, or punished. Socrates was one of the victims when the citizens voted to award the death penalty to him. Competitive electoral politics took root several centuries later, in Europe of the Enlightenment era. The first major country outside Europe to adopt the representative form of democracy was the USA. Through the 17th to the 20th centuries, continuous reforms helped democracies evolve into better forms of governance. Great Britain became a full representative democracy only in 1928 when women finally secured voting rights. In the US, African Americans secured their voting rights only in 1965 through the promulgation of the Voting Rights Act.

India was a late entrant into this system when it opted for the democratic form of government after Independence. But it set several significant benchmarks for the democratic world. Unlike in the UK and the USA, India adopted universal adult suffrage at the very outset of its democratic journey in 1950. In the last 75 years, it has proved not only to be the largest but also the most progressive and successful democracy. It became the first country to introduce Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in 2004, and also the first to introduce the idea of None Of The Above (NOTA). Seamless elections for a billion electors using a million polling stations and involving the services of over a lakh security forces and more than 10 million other officials are Indian electoral realities that have flabbergasted even advanced democracies.

India is embarking on another major electoral reform in the form of One Nation, One Election. The first four elections after Independence, from 1952 to 1967, were held in the same format with both the Lok Sabha and state assemblies going to polls the same day. The first disruption to this practice happened when Jawaharlal Nehru's government used a lame excuse to dismiss the democratically elected government in Kerala headed by Communist Party leader EMS Namboodiripad in 1959. The EMS government was the first elected government after the formation of the Kerala state in 1956. Indira Gandhi, in collaboration with G B Pant, had engineered this dismissal. Elections were held in 1960 and 1965 for the Kerala Assembly. But the mandate in 1965 was so fragmented that a government couldn't be formed, and the state was put under President's Rule. Elections were held again in 1967 along with all other assemblies and Parliament, bringing the system of one election back.

The second major disruption happened in 1969 when a split in the Congress party left the central government led by Indira Gandhi in a minority. Indira survived for a couple of years with outside support from parties like DMK, CPI and CPI (M). But, eventually, in early 1971, Parliament was dissolved and fresh elections were held. The indiscriminate use of Article 356 of the Constitution in later years, leading to the dismissal of elected governments in states by the Centre, became another big reason for the breakdown of this practice. Between 1951 and 2015, the article was invoked 115 times.

The net result was that from "one nation one election" until 1967 we landed up in a situation of "one year many elections". Much has been written about the benefits of returning to the practice of holding simultaneous elections to state and central legislatures ever since the Narendra Modi government appointed a committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind to submit a report on the feasibility of the same. The committee held extensive consultations with all stakeholders and submitted its recommendations to the government. The report has secured the cabinet's approval and will be placed before Parliament for making necessary constitutional amendments.

The Opposition is raising several objections but it should remember that simultaneous polls are not new, but a practice that existed in our country in the first two decades after Independence, when partisan politics disturbed the rhythm of electioneering. It doesn't hurt regional parties or the federal spirit. It also must be remembered that several regional parties like the Akali Dal, DMK and the Communist parties existed in the first two decades of simultaneous polls.

We must return to the healthy practice for one important reason. Pramod Mahajan, a veteran BJP leader, and a minister in the

We must return to the healthy practice for one important reason. Pramod Mahajan, a veteran BJP leader, and a minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, used to say that elections are fought only in the last three months while governance takes precedence during the remainder of the five-year term. Today, with elections taking place every six months in one or the other part of the country, governance becomes the biggest casualty. Pressure on human and financial resources too is enormous.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, used to say that elections are fought only in the last three months while governance takes precedence during the remainder of the five-year term. Today, with elections taking place every six months in one or the other part of the country, governance becomes the biggest casualty. Pressure on human and financial resources too is enormous.

The Kovind committee's recommendations attempted to address these challenges.

There are certain issues on which Parliament needs to hold a healthy debate. One reason why the five-year cycle is disturbed is the lapsing of governments into a minority due to defections. That was addressed through an earlier reform making it difficult for elected members to change parties. Some loopholes still exist but, broadly speaking, it is no longer easy for legislators to change parties. Another destabilising challenge is the business of no-confidence motions. The best way would be to replace it with a provision for only a confidence motion — any party can bring in a motion to prove confidence in another government, but not simply to prove no confidence in one government. That puts extra pressure on parties to find an alternative before destabilising a government.

In any case, returning to simultaneous polls is bound to usher in an era of better governance, which will result in better accountability.

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

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"[Kamala Harris] should... continue to show that she takes seriously the power and responsibility of government to improve American life. Americans need and deserve a president committed to that work."

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

Walking with myself

It does not just have personal meaning. It is also a political act, a symbol of mobilisation and resistance



OPENING ARGUMENT
BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

WALKING MEANS DIFFERENT things in different societies. The act of walking in India brings with it political and personal meaning. In the personal health category, medical science is undivided in its assessment of the health benefits from walking. Walking improves overall health. A 30 minute walk a day increases cardiovascular fitness, strengthens bones, reduces excess body fat, and boosts muscle power and endurance. This reduces the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and certain kinds of cancer.

Then there is the unmitigated joy that a walk can induce, and the benefits it brings for mental health. One of life's simplest pleasures is a walk amid lush greenery. It's also a perk of living in Delhi, a city that has a commitment to maintaining some of its parks. Delhi's parks are legendary — Lodhi Gardens, Sunder Nursery, Deer Park, the Ridge, Astha Kunj, Roshanara Bagh are among the many. Reports indicate that 23.6 per cent of Delhi comprises green cover or forests and trees — the largest percentage amongst any of the big Indian cities.

An undisturbed walk free from smartphones is a meditative activity — a conversation with oneself. For writers walking is part of the writing process. Merlin Coverley has a great book, *The Art of Wandering*. His thesis is that walking and writing are two facets of the same activity. He illustrates his point by using examples of walker-writers like the poets William Blake and John Clare, to the thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The poet John Clare wrote what seems like a post-walk sonnet: "While grassy forest quakes surprise/And the wild wind sobs and sighs/My home rocks as like to fall/On its pillar green and tall/When the pattering rain drives by/Clock-o'clock keeps warm and dry."

This could have been written of my walk through Lodhi gardens on Tuesday late afternoon this week. The gentle rains lashed the gardens, ducks swam by and monkeys glared fiercely at the falling rain drops. A lone walker was nonchalantly walking by, eating a packet of Lays chips, when a monkey walked up to him and demanded the chips and quickly walked away. The Lodhi tombs loomed large, framed by the dazzling blueish-gray skies that by now were seemingly throwing the rain drops everywhere, and washing the abundance of plants and trees in the gardens that were now a dazzling green. As I looked about, the stress of the court day faded away, and I wanted to write to capture this moment.

Walking in the Lodhi Gardens took me back to my childhood walks with my father there. Gyms were not a thing in the Delhi of the 1980s. People walked to burn fat, to have conversations with their children, to make sense of pre-liberalisation India where material choices were limited but attention spans were unlimited and focused.

Walking is also about meditating, having conversations with oneself, about life, about arguments in court, about my children, about observing the greenery and also about interrogating the work that one does and the choices that one makes. Most importantly, it is also about being without a smartphone. It is about holding one's own attention.

Walking in India is not just a conversation with one's inner self. It is also a political act. It is a symbol of political mobilisation and resistance — a revered instrument of peaceful resistance along with mobilising for one's cause. India's most famous "walker" is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. As a child I learnt about the Salt March, his rather effective instrument used to humble the British Empire.

What I was not taught was that the Salt March was a 240-mile march spanning 24 days. Bapu walked from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal town of Dandi. This journey culminated in breaking the then government law by gathering natural salt found on the seashore and boiling seawater to produce salt. This inspired millions of Indians to engage in civil disobedience to break the British imposed salt taxes on Indians. Hence, this journey to resist an unjust tax is called the "salt satyagraha".

ICMR's project on Gandhi and Health@150 concludes that Gandhi walked almost 79,000 kilometres during the Independence Movement till his assassination. He had a body mass index of 17.1, weighed 46.7 kilos, and stood at 5 feet 5 inches. His good health is attributed to walking and a healthy diet. More importantly, Bapu understood the potential of the walk as a technique of mobilisation and for building a movement. This love that we as a polity have for our leader who engages in long marches and walking satyagrahas is unique to India.

Bapu's deployment of the long walk as an instrument of political mobilisation has passed onto contemporary Indian politicians. Former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar marched 4,200 kilometres in 1983 over four months. Former Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh Y S Rajsekhar Reddy walked 1,500 kilometres. Years later, his son Jagan Mohan Reddy would undertake a 3,648 kilometres walk to mobilise people in the new state of Andhra Pradesh. They are among the many Indian political leaders who have deployed the walk mobilisation technique.

Most recently, Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra is an example of using the walk as an instrument of resistance. He walked almost 4,080 kilometres over a period of almost 150 days. The yatra was launched on September 7, 2022, commencing in Kanyakumari and ending in Srinagar's Lal Chowk. Despite the initial lack of significant coverage by the mainstream media, it enabled a refashioning of Rahul Gandhi as a political leader of heft. There is something that Indians love about the marching cerebral politician who will put foot to earth and take them on a journey.

Meanwhile, I will continue my solitary walks, have conversations with myself, dwell on the flowers and trees around me in Delhi's perfect September — when the skies are blue, the air is breathable, the peacocks are out, the flowers have droplets of rain on their petals.

Guruswamy is a Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court

The divisive playbook again

It is the BJP that has repeatedly hurt Sikh sentiments



PARTAP SINGH BAJWA AND AADIL SINGH BOPARAI

THIS IS IN response to Union minister Hardeep S Puri's article, 'Failing Sikhs Again' (IE, September 16). The Sikh community has been the backbone of India's armed forces and has nurtured the food bowl of the country. Earnestness and valour are its guiding lights. The community has a history of steadfast commitment towards human rights and the rule of law. Even during the turbulent phases in its history, the community has not compromised the teachings of its religion and has stood with the disadvantaged and the marginalised.

Over the past few years, we have noticed a pattern of subjugating minorities and those who hold a contrary opinion to the ruling dispensation. A gamut of arm-twisting tactics has been deployed by the current establishment to suppress voices and seek blind obedience. This ranges from hate speech, online abuse, physical violence, misuse of agencies, bulldozing houses and the pernicious trend of labelling dissenting voices as anti-nationals. The "othering" of minority communities is the default political strategy of the BJP to peddle a false sense of victimhood and pit

one community against the other.

We seek to remind Puri that the son of his former ministerial colleague allegedly ran over Sikh farmers at Lakhimpuri Kheri in Uttar Pradesh. It was the intervention of the Supreme Court which instilled a semblance of fairness in the investigation process. To add salt to the wounds of the aggrieved Sikh families, the BJP re-nominated this former minister as a candidate for the Lok Sabha elections this year. However, the people's court returned a resounding verdict and the candidate was defeated at the hustings.

In February, Shubhakaran Singh, barely out of his teens, was shot dead by the police at the Khanauri border between Punjab and Haryana. The lopsided investigation and attempts to suppress facts by the BJP-led Haryana government prompted the High Court to appoint an independent judicial panel to unravel the truth. During the farmers' agitation, at the Punjab-Haryana border, the police reportedly used pellet guns leading to several farmers losing their eyesight. The high-handed tactics of the ruling party and its yearning to suppress

contrarian voices pose a danger to our democracy.

During the two years of farmers' agitation on the borders of the national capital, over 700 farmers reportedly attained martyrdom. The insensitive dispensation often labelled the protestors as "disruptors" and "terrorists" to de-legitimise the peaceful agitation against the farm laws which would have marked the death knell for the livelihood of the farmers and put them at the mercy of a handful of corporates. A diverse section of farmers protested peacefully but were met with police brutality. We did not hear a single word of empathy and condolence from the BJP.

This is coupled with the fact that a section of BJP MPs routinely use pejorative expressions for the Sikh farmers and seek to undermine their concerns as a foreign conspiracy of sorts. This hurts the sentiments of the community and is a recipe for further alienation. This can potentially lead to pervasive discrimination and stigmatisation of the community. Earlier this year, a young Sikh IPS Officer in West Bengal was allegedly humiliated for doing his duty and

called a "Khalistani" by BJP activists in the state. Such incidents create a sense of bitterness among the minority community. The powers that be should take swift action against those who drive a wedge in society.

In his address in the US, Rahul Gandhi has brought to fore the larger context of the BJP ideology of divisiveness and discrimination against religious minorities. We have repeatedly highlighted that the ruling government's majoritarian agenda is an anathema to our syncretic culture and is fraught with risks. Rahul Gandhi has a special affinity with the Sikh community and draws immense traction during his Punjab visits. This bears testament to his popularity among the general public. The BJP's calumny campaign and open threats of violence demonstrate that the party is rattled by Congress's growing popularity. Unfortunately, the BJP's divisive agenda is sowing the seeds of alienation and it takes precedence over our cherished values of plurality.

Bajwa is the Leader of the Opposition, Punjab Assembly and Boparai is an Advocate and Spokesperson of the Congress party

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN UNFEASIBLE PLAN

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Must be challenged in House and Court' (IE, September 20). One Nation, One Election is a politically unfeasible, administratively unworkable and constitutionally not a viable proposition. Parliamentary and assembly elections have different dynamics and issues at stake. The move could undermine diversity; mixing national and state polls is an injustice to the interest of the state. The BJP stands to benefit the most if voters exercise their franchise once in five years. It is an authoritarian move to secure as many as seats in Lok Sabha, assemblies. The INDIA bloc has opposed the move. We all must follow its lead.

SS Paul, Nadiya

FOR SPEEDY JUSTICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'New code, old capacity' (IE, September 20). The reframed and renamed criminal laws, on paper, look appealing. But the proof will be in the pudding. It is doubtful that the legal and judicial process, working under the constraints it does, will be able to work the way the statute book envisions them to. A tremendous

scaling up of operations will be required to make the delivery of justice speedy and fair. Accountability in the new criminal laws becomes meaningless without a commensurate expansion of all peripherals. To start with, the existing vacancies in the judiciary should be filled on priority.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

AGAINST FEDERALISM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'For a more efficient democracy', (IE, September 20). While such a system would reduce election frequency, it may also dilute local issues and representation, which are critical components of a vibrant democracy. The historical reference to simultaneous elections from 1952 to 1967 lack nuance. The political context has changed drastically since then; multiple elections can reflect democratic engagement at various levels. The assertion that development work stops due to the Model Code of Conduct being enforced is incorrect. Politicians can carry their work out unimpeded for the better part of four and a half years. Overall, this proposal will lead to the weakening of the federal structure of our nation.

Swarnava Mitra, Kolkata

A new White Revolution: where India stands, where it aims to be

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
 NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 20

OPERATION FLOOD, launched in 1970, ushered in the White Revolution and transformed the dairy sector in India. On Thursday, Union Home and Cooperation Minister Amit Shah announced plans for "White Revolution 2.0". What is the big picture currently in India's dairy sector, and what is the objective of the government's new initiative?

White Revolution 2.0

The idea of White Revolution 2.0 revolves around cooperative societies, which were also the bedrock of Operation Flood five decades ago.

Dairy cooperatives procured 660 lakh kg of milk per day in 2023-24; the government wants to increase this to 1,007 lakh kg/day by 2028-29. For this, it has formulated a strategy of expanding coverage and deepening the reach of cooperatives.

White Revolution 2.0 will "increase milk procurement of dairy cooperatives by

50%...over the next five years by providing market access to dairy farmers in uncovered areas and increasing the share of dairy cooperatives in the organised sector", according to the Ministry of Cooperation.

This will also generate employment and contribute to the empowerment of women in the process, the ministry said.

Scope for expansion

Since it was created in 2021, the Ministry of Cooperation has focused on expanding the network of cooperatives, in particular dairy cooperatives.

According to officials of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), the regulator of the dairy industry in India, dairy cooperatives operate in around 70% of the country's districts. There are about 1.7 lakh dairy cooperative societies (DCSs), which cover around 2 lakh villages (30% of the total number of villages in the country), and 22% of producer households. These cooperative societies procure about 10% of the country's milk production and 16% of the marketable surplus.

In the states of Gujarat, Kerala, and Sikkim,

and the Union Territory of Puducherry, more than 70% of villages are covered by dairy cooperatives. In the states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh, and the UT of Jammu & Kashmir, however, coverage is only 10-20%. And in West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, and the smaller states of the Northeast, less than 10% of villages are covered.

Coverage, funding

NDDB has drawn up an action plan to establish about 56,000 new multipurpose dairy cooperative societies over the next five years, and to strengthen 46,000 existing village level DCSs by providing more advanced milk procurement and testing infrastructure. Most of the new DCSs will be established in Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh.

In February 2023, NDDB launched a Rs 3.8 crore pilot project to set up dairy cooperatives in uncovered gram panchayats in the districts of Jind (Haryana), Indore (Madhya Pradesh), and Chikmagalur (Karnataka). The

79 DCSs established as part of the pilot are together procuring 15,000 litres of milk per day from about 2,500 farmers, sources in the Cooperation Ministry said.

The bulk of the funding for White Revolution 2.0 will come through the National Programme for Dairy Development (NPDD) 2.0, a new central sector scheme under the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

Sources in the Ministry of Cooperation said targets for White Revolution 2.0 have been subsumed under the proposed scheme, the details of which are currently being finalised. A draft note has been circulated for approval from the Expenditure Finance Committee, they said.

Under the scheme, financial assistance will be provided to set up village-level milk procurement systems, chilling facilities, and training and capacity-building. "Assistance will be provided to 1,000 Multipurpose Primary Agricultural Credit Cooperative Societies (MPACSs) at the rate of Rs 40,000 per MPACS from the resources of NDDB," an official said.

Milk scenario in India

India is the world's top milk producer, with production having reached 230.58 million tonnes during 2022-23. In 1951-52, the country produced just 17 million tonnes of milk.

The average yield is, however, only 8.55 kg per animal per day for exotic/crossbred animals, and 3.44 kg/animal/day for indigenous/nondescript animals. The yield in Punjab is 13.49 kg/animal/day (exotic/crossbred), but only 6.30 kg/animal/day in West Bengal.

The national per capita availability of milk is 459 grams/day, which is higher than the global average of 323 g/day; this number, however, varies from 329 g in Maharashtra to 1,283 g in Punjab.

As per the Basic Animal Husbandry Statistics (BAHS) 2023, the top five milk producing states are UP (15.72%), Rajasthan (14.44%), Madhya Pradesh (8.73%), Gujarat (7.49%), and Andhra Pradesh (6.70%), which together contribute 53.08% of the country's total milk production.

Almost 31.94% of the total milk production comes from indigenous buffaloes, followed by 29.81% from crossbred cattle.

Nondescript buffaloes contribute 12.87%, indigenous cattle 10.73%, and nondescript cattle 9.51%, according to BAHS figures. The share of goat milk is 3.30%, and that of exotic cows, 1.86%.

While total milk production increased from 187.75 million tonnes in 2018-19 to 230.58 million tonnes in 2022-23, the annual growth rate of production came down from 6.47% to 3.83% during this period.

The milk group, comprising milk consumed or sold in liquid form, ghee, butter, and lassi produced by producer households contributed almost 40% (Rs 11.16 lakh crore) of the value of output from the agriculture, livestock, forestry, and fishing sector in 2022-23 — much higher than cereals. The dairy sector provides livelihoods to more than 8.5 crore people directly or indirectly, of whom the majority are women.

About 63% of the total milk production comes to the market; the remaining is kept by producers for their own consumption. About two-thirds of the marketable milk is in the unorganised sector. In the organised sector, cooperatives account for the major share.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

HOW STARLINK SATELLITES ARE 'BLINDING' ASTRONOMERS

ELON MUSK'S Starlink satellites are impeding the work of astronomers, a study published on Wednesday in the journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics* found.

Currently, the Starlink "constellation" comprises more than 6,300 working satellites orbiting Earth at an altitude of around 550 km. These satellites deliver high-speed internet to places which otherwise would not have access to it.

At the same time, they also create "radio noise", or unintended electromagnetic radiation (UEMR). This is what impedes the work of radio astronomers observing the sky from Earth.



Starlink satellites orbit around 550 km above Earth. SpaceX

study found that Starlink's second-generation satellites — which currently account for less than a third of the network — emit UEMR at levels 32 times brighter than its first-generation satellites. This is despite Starlink already running into trouble about the UEMR of its first-gen satellites.

"While the generation 1 satellites indeed got dimmer in the last year — so Starlink actually did something to them [to reduce radio leaks] — the new generation unfortunately seem to be brighter again," said Winkel.

Moreover, as launching satellites becomes cheaper, some estimate that as many as 100,000 satellites could be orbiting Earth by 2030. The number was pegged at 11,330 in June 2023 by the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA).

Experts say that these developments signal the need for regulations for satellite operators, just like there exist regulations for radio pollution from ground-based electronic sources like cellphone towers. "There is no way to make any electrical or electronic apparatus without this kind of leakage... the question always asked is: how much is leaked?" Winkel said. This is what regulations can help minimise.

Currently, astronomers are largely reliant on forging good faith interactions with companies like Starlink, which put satellites into space.

Blinded by light

Radio astronomy is a branch of astronomy that studies celestial objects at radio frequencies. Unlike optical telescopes that detect visible light, radio telescopes are designed to detect radio waves (which have higher wavelengths and lower frequencies) emitted by objects in space.

But just like bright visible light can blind the observer — like the bright headlights of an approaching car — the same can also happen at radio frequencies. This is essentially why radio noise is a problem.

For radio astronomers, observing while a satellite is in its field of view is like trying to see the faintest star visible to the naked eye next to a full Moon. Cees Bassa of the Netherlands Institute for Radio Astronomy (ASTRON) and the lead author of the recent study, told *Science Adviser*.

Benjamin Winkel, a scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy who contributed to the study, said the interference is literally "blinding" scientists. "When we say 'blinded' it means your eye collects too much light for you to see anything, you are getting saturated. This is exactly what happens with our radio telescopes," he told *DW*.

Need for regulation

Things might get worse. The recent

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EXPLAINED LAW

HC's 'Fact Check Unit' order

The Bombay High Court has struck down the Centre's 'fake news' fact-check mechanism in what is essentially a 2-1 verdict. What has Justice Chandurkar of the HC ruled, and what happens now?

OMKAR GOKHALE
 MUMBAI, SEPTEMBER 20

THE BOMBAY High Court on Friday struck down as unconstitutional a key provision of the amended Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021 which empowered the government to identify "fake news" on social media platforms through a "Fact Check Unit" (FCU).

In a 99-page ruling, Justice Atul S Chandurkar sided with the opinion delivered in January this year by Justice Gautam S Patel, leading to what is now essentially a 2-1 verdict. A two-judge Bench of Justices Patel, who has since retired, and Neela Gokhale, had delivered a split verdict in the case. Justice Patel had struck down the amended rules; Justice Gokhale had upheld them.

Friday's ruling will have a larger impact on FCUs that even some states have established.

What is the law in question?

In April 2022, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) promulgated the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023 (2023 Rules), which amended the Information Technology Rules, 2021.

The amendment to Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the IT Rules, 2021 expanded the general term "fake news" to include "government business".

Under the Rules, if the FCU comes across or is informed about any posts that are "fake", "false", or contain "misleading" facts pertaining to the business of the government, it would flag it to the social media intermediaries concerned.

The online intermediaries would then have to take down such content if they wanted to retain their "safe harbour", that is, legal immunity with regard to third-party content published by them.

The Rules raised concerns over free speech and the extent to which the government can regulate it. The FCUs allowed the government to be the "only arbiter" of truth in respect of business concerning itself.

How did the matter come before Justice Chandurkar?

Given the split verdict of January, as per rules of the Bombay High Court, the case was referred to a third judge who would hear the matter afresh.

Justice Chandurkar was assigned the task

LEGAL TEETH FOR FACT-CHECK UNIT UNDER PIB

A FACT-CHECKING UNIT has been in existence in the Press Information Bureau (PIB) under the Ministry of I&B since November 2019.

THE IT Amendment Rules 2023 introduced a "Fact Check Unit" (FCU) under the PIB as a legal mechanism to fact-check online content pertaining to "any business of the Central Government".

THE FCU was notified on March 20, but was stayed by the Supreme Court until the Bombay High Court arrived at a final decision in the present case.

THE NOTIFICATION was intended to give the FCU legal status and teeth, and impose a legal obligation on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to take down any content that the FCU branded as "fake".

EXISTING UNIT has so far "fact-checked" thousands of WhatsApp forwards, YouTube videos, and newspaper and digital media articles. Then I&B Minister Anurag Thakur told Rajya Sabha in July 2023 that the FCU took action in 28,380 instances involving "fake news" on digital platforms between November 2020 and June 2023.

SUCH CONTENT is prominently stamped as "fake", and the decision is publicised through the unit's social media handles — @PIBFactCheck on X, /PIBFactCheck on Instagram and Facebook, etc.

HOWEVER, BEYOND such branding, the PIB's fact-checking unit cannot do much. The proposed FCU is intended to change this situation.

DIVYAA

on February 7. On March 11, Justice Chandurkar refused to grant a stay on the notification to set up the FCU until he gave his final opinion. Following his interim order, the High Court dismissed the interim applications seeking the stay with 2-1 majority.

On March 20, the Centre notified the FCU under the Press Information Bureau (PIB). However, a day later, the Supreme Court stayed the operation of the notification until the Bombay High Court took a final decision on the petitions challenging the amended Rules.

Justice Chandurkar concluded the hearing on August 8 and reserved his verdict.

What were the arguments before the HC?

Stand-up comic Kunal Kamra, the Editors' Guild of India, the News Broadcasters & Digital Association, and the Association of Indian Magazines challenged the constitutional validity of the Rules, terming them arbitrary, unconstitutional, and in violation of fundamental rights.

The Centre said the Rules were not against any opinion, criticism, satire, or humour targeting the government, and were meant to only proscribe or prohibit the peddling of fake, false, and misleading facts on social me-

dia related to "government business".

On what grounds did Justice Chandurkar strike down the Rules?

In his opinion on the split verdict, Justice Chandurkar agreed with Justice Patel, and held that the amended Rule 3(1)(b)(v) was violative of Articles 14 (equality before law), 19(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression) and 19(1)(g) (right to practise a profession or trade) of the Constitution.

He said that the impugned Rule curtailed the fundamental rights of citizens beyond the reasonable restrictions prescribed under Article 19(2), which was "impermissible through the mode of delegated legislation".

The judge held that the expressions "fake, false or misleading" in the Rule are "vague and overbroad", and endorsed Justice Patel's view that under the right to freedom of speech and expression, there is no further "right to the truth". It was "not a responsibility of the state to ensure that the citizens are entitled only to 'information' that was not fake, false or misleading as identified by FCU", Justice Chandurkar said.

He said that the Centre's claim that decisions given by the FCU can be challenged be-

fore a constitutional court "cannot be treated as adequate safeguard", and therefore, the Rule cannot be saved by reading it down or making a concession of limiting its operation.

Echoing the views of Justice Patel, Justice Chandurkar noted that the impugned Rule resulted in a "chilling effect" on the intermediary due to the "threat of losing safe harbour", and also on the freedom of speech — and was therefore liable to be struck down.

What was the split decision of the HC?

Justice Patel said that the petitioners were "correct in saying that the State cannot coercively classify speech as true or false and compel the non-publication of the latter". "That is nothing but censorship," he noted.

"The sinister and insidious facet to the impugned amendment is that this new agency (FCU) has far more than a loud bark: it has fangs and claws, for its unilateral view of what is or is not the 'truth...'" Justice Patel said.

In a contrasting view, Justice Gokhale had said alleging bias against members of the FCU merely because they were government appointees was "unfair", and recourse to courts of law was always open in case of any bias.

The Rules "were not directly penalising" the intermediary or the user, and "did not bring any chilling effect on their rights", she said, adding that the challenge to the character of FCU authority which was "yet unknown" was "premature".

Dismissing the pleas, Justice Gokhale held: "Right of citizens to participate in the representative and participative democracy of the county is meaningless unless they have access to authentic information and are not misled by misinformation..."

What happens in this matter now?

Justice Chandurkar's opinion has settled the matter in favour of the petitioners by a 2-1 majority. His opinion will be placed before a division Bench of two judges, which will formally announce the 2-1 majority against the impugned Rule. This is the procedural part.

There is an option of an appeal before the Supreme Court, given that similar issues are pending before the Delhi and Madras HCs too.

Other aspects of the 2021 Guidelines are also pending before various HCs. Among the key provisions are mandates for social media platforms to set up a grievance redressal and compliance mechanism, which include appointing a resident grievance officer, chief compliance officer, and a nodal contact person.

All about Sri Lanka presidential election, why India is watching closely

ARJUN SENGUPTA
 NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 20

SRI LANKA will vote to elect a new president today, in the country's first election since the mass protests of 2022 that led to the ouster of the Rajapaksa — brothers Mahinda and Gotabaya were the prime minister and president, respectively.

These protests were sparked by Sri Lanka's worst ever economic crisis that saw inflation touch 70%, and a crippling scarcity of basic necessities such as food, cooking gas, and medicines. Things are better now but a full recovery is still a while away. This makes the economy the primary issue in the election for most Sri Lankans.

New Delhi, which has deep strategic stakes in the island country, is watching the polls closely.

The field

In the fray to be the next president are 38 candidates, all men. Sri Lanka's 17 million eligible voters can vote for up to three

of them. Whoever secures more than 50% of the voteshare is declared the winner. In case nobody passes this mark today, there is a legal provision for a run-off election.

As things stand, one of three candidates is likely to emerge victorious.

RANIL WICKREMESINGHE, 75

The six-time former prime minister became president after Gotabaya's 2022 ouster. Under his leadership, Sri Lanka's teetering economy has shown signs of recovery — this has been central to his pitch to voters.

"I have shown the people that when I take up a task I complete it. Now it's up to you to decide what kind of path we should take from Sunday," Wickremesinghe said in his final rally on Thursday, in reference to his debt-restructuring efforts and negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout.

However, he does not enjoy a solid base of his own, and has been accused of shielding the Rajapaksa family from prosecution — allegations Wickremesinghe has denied.

He is contesting as an Independent.

ANURA KUMARA DISSANAYAKE, 55

The Marxist member of Parliament from Colombo is leading the race according to a latest opinion poll, *Reuters* reported. He has promised to reduce poverty and fight corruption.

Dissanayake's party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has never come close to power nationally. It has twice led Marxist insurrections, and played a pivotal role in the 2022 protests that propelled it to national relevance.

There are concerns about the JVP's stance on Tamil separatism, and Dissanayake's continuing opposition to any investigation into alleged war crimes perpetrated during the last phase of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009). Some commentators like the political columnist Kusal Perera, have said Dissanayake and JVP have "absolutely no democratic stance other than covering their Sinhala Buddhist racism by saying they

stand for unity", *Al Jazeera* reported.

SAJITH PREMADASA, 57

The son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa, Sajith is the leader of Sri Lanka's main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). He finished runner-up to Gotabaya in the previous election in 2019. He has pledged to reduce the cost of living for Sri Lankans, promote tourism and agriculture exports, and get the rich to pay more taxes.

Although some polls have shown him leading, in a country yearning for radical change, Premadasa's political background may be a liability.

View from New Delhi

In recent years, India's vital concern has been strategic — to counter Beijing's increasing hold over Sri Lanka. For this, New Delhi has sought to deepen its influence among both the Sinhala and Tamil communities.

New Delhi felt that Mahinda Rajapaksa, during his tenure (2005-15), had leaned too

heavily towards China. His brother Gotabaya (2019-22), however, distanced himself from that position. In between, Maithripala Sirisena (2015-19) too took a more balanced stance vis-à-vis India and China as well.

Among the frontrunners in the current election, Premadasa's SJB has historically been suspicious of the Chinese, and has often criticised Beijing's "debt trap diplomacy", which involves gaining political leverage by extending credit and infrastructure support to developing nations who then struggle to repay.

Premadasa also supports the full implementation of the 13th Amendment, something that India has long demanded. Passed in 1987 as a precondition for Indian intervention in the civil war, the legislation mandates the devolution of power to provincial councils of Sri Lanka's nine provinces. But no government has implemented its provisions fully for fear of being accused of allowing Tamil separatists to form their own state in the north. Quite naturally, all major Tamil parties are backing Premadasa.

On the other hand is Dissanayake,

whose JVP traces its origins to the pro-China faction of the Sri Lanka Communist Party in the 1960s. The leftist leader has been highly critical of the Adani Group and its influence over multiple sectors of the Lankan economy, from ports and airports to energy. Dissanayake said last week that if elected, he would cancel Adani's 450 MW wind power project in northern Sri Lanka, claiming it was a "corrupt deal" against Sri Lanka's interests. He has also promised to keep Indian fishermen from "brazenly poaching" in Sri Lankan waters.

That said, he made a high-profile visit to New Delhi in February, during which he met External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Following the meeting, Jaishankar posted on X that he had a "good discussion" on India's bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka.

With the loss of a pro-India regime in Maldives, and more recently, in Bangladesh, India would want to ensure that it maintains healthy relations with whoever comes to power in Sri Lanka — irrespective of their politics.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

Opinion

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2024

● **COUNTDOWN TO SPACE**

Isro chairman S Somanath

“Gaganyaan is prepared for launch, we are planning for it by the end of this year”

The caste imperative

A caste census should ensure reservation and delivery of welfare measures is fair and supported by evidence

ON TUESDAY, UNION home minister Amit Shah said the government will soon conduct the decennial Census that was deferred in 2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the fact that he stopped short of promising a caste census, without ruling out its possibility, shows an ambivalence and discomfiture of the political class in addressing the caste question head-on. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), helming a government with coalition partners like the Janata Dal (United) which carried out a caste survey in Bihar last year, should take a leaf out of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's book. The BJP's ideological parent recently voiced its support while stating that a caste census should not be used for political or electoral purposes. Though the proviso of a non-political/non-electoral end may sound more idealistic than practicable, there is a strong case for enumerating castes.

Besides scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the Census has not divulged caste population data in independent India. Between 1881, when the first census was begun under British rule, and 1931, censuses tallied all castes. In 2011, a socio-economic caste census was undertaken. But the caste data was not made public because of flaws in enumeration. The Congress has now tried to drum up support among the Opposition to call for a caste census from prior to the general election this year. Last week, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi argued that it would help ascertain the participation of lower castes, backward castes, and Dalits. Indeed, authentic data on such sections will clarify how disproportionate their institutional representation is.

India is nowhere close to achieving castelessness, as the caste system remains the bedrock of our society. Casteless claims are only a preserve of the privileged classes who neither face caste discrimination nor are reliant on sops. When elections are fought on caste arithmetic, it is only fair that accurate data is available to help dissuade politics, and policies, from pandering to dominant groups. It is feared that if a caste census is done, it would trigger demands for greater reservation in public sector jobs, educational institutions or electoral constituencies. But it should lead to a more targeted approach to affirmative action. In recent years, for instance, powerful communities in a few states — such as Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, and Marathas in Maharashtra — have agitated seeking reservation or inclusion in castes lower in the rung. Often it results in arbitrary decisions taken by governments as political parties weigh electoral implications over parity. Granular data in this case would shed light on which castes need greater support and which don't.

In fact, the BJP-led central government has already tapped into the 2011 socio-economic caste census to identify beneficiaries for effectively implementing welfare schemes such as direct benefit transfer and national health insurance. Such a database also needs to be updated. In the absence of fresh data, reservation for other backward classes has tended to be based on the 1931 Census figures. A Census exercise along with caste numbers provides an opportunity to address such anomalies, and ensures that reservation and delivery of welfare measures is fair and supported by evidence. The BJP should therefore take an unequivocal stand and go ahead with a caste census, and make the results public. Such a step not only promises administrative benefits, but it would also disprove criticism of the ruling party as catering mainly to an upper caste base.

Income disparities are growing among states

Newer growth geographies have emerged like Odisha and Sikkim in east and Northeast

THE RELATIVE INCOME performance of various states broadly suggests a pattern of widening disparities as the richer ones have steadily pulled apart from the poorer ones. In 1960-61, the most prosperous state in the country was Delhi whose per capita income was more than double the national average at 218.3%, and it rose further to 250.8% in 2023-24. The poorest state of Bihar's relative per capita income deteriorated from 70.3% to 32.8% over this period although this stems also from its bifurcation. The implications of this are indeed dismal as it implies that an average person in Bihar still has an income level 77% lower than an average Indian, although this number does not include remittances.

The latest working paper of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) highlights the persisting decline of West Bengal — which had a head start in industrialisation along with Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu at the time of Independence — whose relative per capita income declined from 127.5% to 83.7% to now trail even Odisha. The worsening relative performance of the vanguard agrarian state of Punjab — in comparison with neighbouring Haryana — too, is a source of concern, leading working paper authors to speculate whether its focus on only agriculture has contributed to a form of Dutch disease hindering its transition to industrialisation. But the fact is that agricultural surpluses did not flow into industry in Haryana either. Gurugram's success largely stems from Maruti Suzuki and lots of foreign investments.

The question naturally is whether there is a narrative of regional disparities: notably, whether states with a higher per capita income than the national average are concentrated in one part of India, as the stereotypes suggest of a go-go south versus the overpopulated, impoverished Bimaru states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (UP)? In its survey of mid-90s India, *The Economist* argued one had to draw a line from Kanpur in UP to the tip of the sub-continent: "On the western side are bits of India that work; on the east, the bits that don't."

The EAC-PM working paper does indicate that the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have emerged as top performers in terms of their relative income levels. Kerala's relative gains could be an underestimate as it does not take into account remittances, which are the mainstay of its economy. In the western region, Maharashtra and Gujarat have demonstrated strong economic performance as both these rich states compete for domestic and foreign investments and corner a lion's share. Their tendency to attract investments only reinforces the Biblical axiom, for whosoever hath, to him shall be given! The south and west clearly have done better than the rest as have the maritime states, barring West Bengal.

That said, there is no neat south-north or west-east divide as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh's relative income has shown considerable improvement over the last decade and half. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, however, still languish as the poorest states. The latter's relative income in 2023-24 was lower than what it was in 2000-01. The big takeaway is the emergence of new geographies of income growth in the east and Northeast. Odisha has traditionally been a laggard state but of late it has registered vastly improved economic performance by attracting big-ticket investments in steel, for instance, that exploit its iron ore resources.

In the Northeast, too, there are signs of prosperity. Sikkim's relative per capita income was 86% in 1980-81 but subsequently surged to 319.1% in 2023-24. Sikkim currently has the highest per capita income in the country. Mizoram and Tripura have also done well. Income growth thus is observed in more than one region of the country. But it remains true that the rich states have become richer while the poorer ones remain impoverished relative to the national average.

Views are personal

● **POWER POINT** EMPLOYEES ARE SPENDING MORE AND MORE TIME AT 'WORK', AND LESS AND LESS TIME ON 'LIFE'

Fear psychosis at the workplace

IT TOOK A mother's anguished letter to draw attention to the death of Anna Sebastian Perayil, a chartered accountant working at EY India. In the letter, the grieving mother wrote about the overwhelming workload and toxic atmosphere that took her young daughter's life.

Anna's may be an extreme case but there is no doubt that thousands of young professionals are being forced to run on a treadmill that nobody cares to stop. Thankfully, most learn how and when to get off, but many don't. Should companies leave these young, vulnerable minds alone? It's not only about EY India; the sad truth is barring a few, most companies simply ignore the need to have a proper mentoring and grievance redressal mechanism at the workplace.

To be sure, stress in itself is not negative. A certain amount of stress is necessary to send the adrenaline soaring skywards — like the stress cricketers face before an important match or when one crosses a busy road. Management consultants have a word for this — positive stress — that provides life's zing, and keeps us from being bored.

But in these days of hyper-competition, many companies are obsessed with continuously serving bitter pills: Hunker down, reduce headcount, and cut every cost you can. Predictably, many have gone in for multi-tasking (do at least two person's work for the price of one), extended working hours (12-hour days are not unusual anymore), reduction of variable pay, and lower entry-level salaries.

In such a situation, the old catchphrase "work-life balance" has taken a backseat. Introduced in the mid-1980s, the phrase was used to describe the extent to which workers/executives are able to tend to personal and family needs, in addition to their professional responsi-

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR
shyamal.majumdar@expressindia.com

ilities. That's distant memory now as more and more people are having to spend more and more time at work, and less and less time on "life".

While some of these bitter pills are inevitable, some companies are no doubt overreacting and creating a fear psychosis in office. The problem, say psychologists and mental health experts, is often more acute in the case of younger employees, who are living away or have little time for friends and families and facing loneliness. Added to that is the glorification of long working hours, a lack of job security, and most organisations failing to follow through on the healthy work practices they espouse.

At the heart of the problem is the culture of a company that breeds bosses who think mentoring is an alien concept. Such bosses either take all the credit for themselves, or think employees have no life outside work, or give out too many tasks with impossible and constantly changing deadlines. There are stories about bosses who seem to be having the spine of a jellyfish — someone who would never stand up for their staff.

There is also the obsessive micro-manager who would give assignments but then manage them to death. He/she trusts people the way you would trust a five-year-old behind the wheel of the car.

Then there is this officer talking about his table-thumping boss who ordered managers to instill fear in employees to boost productivity. A senior manager in a large company put in his papers a month ago after his boss told him that he has the IQ of an eraser.

It's the HR department's job to make sure no company is saddled with such managers due to short-sighted and faulty executive promotion policies, which result in converting exceptional performers into mediocre or sub-standard managers. HR must first find out whether the candidate has the right combination of mental abilities, personal interests, and personality traits to allow for success as a leader.

That's why many far-sighted companies would promote even an average accountant to a manager because he has the potential to outperform an outstanding accountant in the same managerial position. This does not mean that the outstanding accountant should be ignored, but that the career ladder for him may possibly lie sideways rather than head upward. The old corporate ladder that stretches to the executive suite need not be available for everybody.

Feeling disrespected at work has the largest negative impact on an employee's

overall rating of corporate culture. An abusive management is defined as sustained hostile behaviour toward employees, as opposed to a boss who has a bad day and takes it out on team members.

According to *MIT Sloan Management Review*, when employees join a company, they expect to find a culture that is inclusive, respectful, ethical, collaborative, and free from abuse by those in positions of power. Not only are these baseline elements of a healthy corporate culture, they are also what companies typically promise in their official core values. When corporate culture fails to deliver on these fundamental commitments, employees understandably react with something stronger than annoyance or disappointment.

What companies don't realise is that the health costs of stress in the workplace may be much more than anyone thought. A dramatic increase in stress levels has led to spiralling anxiety, burnout, and depression across the globe. According to a United Nations report, workers of the world are united in just one thing these days: record levels of stress. What is more, the report warns, anxiety levels are set to dramatically increase with spreading globalisation, and the economic costs for business will be massive.

Good companies are going in for unvarnished communication with their employees. They are cutting out rumours by being as candid as possible about where the company stands. A CEO's impersonal, sugar-coated message on the intranet is just not enough, and HR consultants say companies must have enough empowered people at the top who can explain things to their junior colleagues and tell them how everyone can play a role in discovering opportunities.

One hopes the issues raised by Anna Sebastian Perayil's mother are taken seriously by company managements.

Ebb and flow of water-sharing treaties



SHRAVAN YAMMANUR

Advocate-on-record, Supreme Court

India must learn from its experience with the Indus Waters Treaty and reassess the negotiation of treaties governing the Ganga or Teesta rivers

EARLIER THIS MONTH, a call by Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus for finalising negotiations of the Teesta water-sharing treaty with India was surprising, given the lack of political and social capital now available with Bangladesh. The complexities of transboundary river agreements require India to take a calibrated approach as it has to grapple with historical, legal, and political dimensions.

The Teesta, which originates in India and flows into Bangladesh, has long been a bone of contention between the two nations. The 414 km-long river flows through Sikkim and West Bengal before entering Bangladesh. It is crucial to supporting nearly 14% of Bangladesh's crop production, and almost half a dozen districts of West Bengal are dependent on its waters. While a formal water-sharing agreement appeared possible in 2011, domestic and regional challenges have stalled progress.

An Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) was established in 1972. It was set up to ensure the most effective joint effort in maximising the benefits from common river systems. In 1984, the JRC provided for an increase in Bangladesh's share based on hydrological data to 37.5% of Teesta's waters. India has thus been accommodative of Bangladesh's needs and concerns even without a treaty.

However, with over 83% of the river's catchment area in India, the issue of equitable water-sharing has been a sensitive one given Bangladesh's propensity to use the China card. Two months ago, then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had expressed a preference for India over China to execute the \$1-billion Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration

project to develop the river basin after hinting at the use of Chinese funding and technology in the strategic project.

India and Bangladesh entered into the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty in 1996, due for renewal in 2026. It was a milestone in India-Bangladesh ties. However, with the new interim government in Bangladesh, India has an uphill task in negotiating the Teesta waters issue and work towards renewing the Ganga treaty as the negotiations must be delicately balanced within a larger regional and international context.

The equitable distribution of transboundary rivers is governed by international law, particularly the Helsinki Rules of 1966 and the 1997 UN Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. These rules and convention advocate for the "equitable and reasonable utilisation" of shared rivers, urging states to avoid actions that could cause significant harm to downstream nations. India is not a party to the 1997 UN Convention but the principles of equity and shared responsibility guides future negotiations of its water-sharing agreements.

Under international law, India is bound by the principle of equitable and reasonable use, as well as the obligation not to cause significant harm to Bangladesh. Yet, India must consider its own development needs, especially in light of hydroelectric projects in Sikkim and West Bengal.

Bangladesh has sought to address the potential ecological damage that may be

caused by such projects, even proposing joint conservation efforts. Both nations can benefit from shared technical expertise to restore the health of the river, a move that could bolster India's diplomatic standing and regional leadership.

India's experience with the Indus Waters Treaty, a water-sharing agreement with Pakistan, offers valuable lessons. The treaty, which divides the Indus waters, has withstood geopolitical upheavals, including wars, showing that sustained cooperation is possible in a challenging political environment. But ongoing disputes between India and Pakistan over the Kishenganga and Rattle hydroelectric power plants highlight the need for clear dispute-resolution mechanisms as Pakistan has abused the Indus treaty to consistently stall India's hydroelectric projects, and initiated paral-

lel proceedings which defeat the purpose of water-sharing pacts. India has refused to recognise and participate in the parallel arbitration proceedings as the matter was pending before the neutral expert according to the terms of the Indus waters treaty. Last month, India sent a notice to Pakistan for review and modification of the treaty. This is the second such notice by India, necessitated by Pakistan's failure to respond to one issued last January seeking government-level discussion on modifying the treaty. India cited the impact of cross-border terrorism as one of the reasons for demanding the review and modification, besides climate change, demo-

graphic changes, and its clean energy needs. India has recognised that water-sharing agreements must reflect its geopolitical and security concerns by allowing for equitable management of transboundary waters with a clear dispute settlement mechanism.

As India engages with Bangladesh on critical water-sharing issues, it must consider the political and social landscape there. The recent political turmoil, including attacks on minority Hindu communities, raises questions about the interim government's ability to negotiate in good faith. Rights violations and growing tensions in Bangladesh should be addressed first before embarking on new or renewed treaties. The Teesta water dispute is not just a bilateral issue. It has significant regional implications. By embracing principles of international law, fostering cooperative environmental stewardship, and encouraging Bangladesh to address internal challenges, India can lead the way to a sustainable solution.

India, as a regional leader and democratic powerhouse, must leverage its position to ensure Bangladesh upholds basic human rights standards. Engaging with Bangladesh on water-sharing issues while ignoring abuses would undermine India's own values and international credibility. India must learn from its experience with the Indus Waters Treaty and reassess the negotiation of treaties governing the Ganga or Teesta rivers. The negotiation of India's water-sharing treaties is not only an environmental and economic issue but must be deeply rooted in the broader political and security dynamics in South Asia.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Undue work pressure

Apropos of "A mismatch of expectations and reality" (*FE*, September 20), we can imagine the enormity of work pressure Anna Sebastian Perayil had to go through in a short span of six months with EY. It is very difficult to become a chartered accountant and then land a job with one of the Big four consulting firms, which is a dream for thousands of aspirants across India. It is true that

stress is not vanishing anytime soon, so two things must be done to tackle it. First of all, coping mechanisms that we train children in while raising them have to be changed. Second, companies need to show more empathy as they cannot achieve success by sacrificing employees. —Bal Govind, Noida

Water-sharing

India has invoked the principle of "fundamental change of

circumstances" in international law to seek modifications to the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan. Citing Pakistan's sustained cross-border terrorism, India has issued the notice, highlighting concerns such as population growth, environmental challenges, and security issues. The treaty, signed in 1960, governs the sharing of water from the Indus and its tributaries between the two nations. By invoking this principle, India aims to renegotiate the treaty to address

modern challenges. The original agreement does not account for issues such as climate change, growing population, and regional security. India's move marks a shift in its approach to the treaty and relations with Pakistan. The notice sets the stage for potential renegotiations, paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable water management. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazzaribagh

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It's easy to lie with statistics. It's hard to tell the truth without it

Andrejs Dunkels

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

— Rammath Goenka

RBI SHOULD KEEP EYE ON STABILITY AFTER BIG CUT IN U.S. RATES

THE US Federal Reserve has reduced its policy rates by 50 basis points, the first cut in over four years. The bigger-than-expected reduction marks the beginning of a much-awaited pivot and eases the tight monetary conditions that were aimed at bringing inflation down from a 40-year high of 9.1 percent in 2022. Prices are steadily cooling down, and the latest rate cut is seen as the US central bank's victory over inflation. Lending rates had touched a two-decade high of 5.3 percent after July 2023. Now, borrowing will be more affordable, stimulating spending and investment. The Fed is likely to trim rates by another 50-75 bps by the end of the year; another percentage-point reduction is expected each in 2025 and 2026. It's not just the Fed—all major central banks are launching into a rate easing cycle. The European Central Bank has cut rates by 50 bps since June, while the Bank of England, which first cut rates in August, is expected to announce more cuts.

Though the Fed's rate changes are valid within US jurisdiction, but their impact is often felt globally, particularly in emerging markets like India. The immediate effect will be seen through more foreign investment flows into India as investors flee the US market in search of higher returns. While a higher foreign capital inflow is welcome, it will drive up demand for Indian equities and bonds, besides increasing the demand for the rupee, potentially leading to its appreciation against the US dollar. A stronger rupee, in turn, will lower the cost of imports; but it will also affect Indian exporters, which isn't desirable given India's ambitions to emerge as a global export hub. Rate cuts not only weaken the dollar but also firm up the prices of commodities like crude oil, which is a negative for oil-importing countries like India.

That said, all eyes are now on the RBI, which has been maintaining that its policy decisions will not mirror those in the US, but will be purely driven by domestic factors. It had last cut the repo rate by 40 bps to 4 percent in May 2020, and then increased it by a staggering 250 bps to 6.5 percent to tame inflation. As Governor Shaktikanta Das has noted, maintaining financial stability should be a top priority.

SPEED UP TRIAL IN ACTOR ASSAULT CASE

IT has been more than seven years since a leading Malayalam actor was abducted and sexually assaulted, allegedly as part of a conspiracy hatched by a fellow actor. But despite reminders and deadlines from the Supreme Court, the trial in the case is yet to conclude. The long delay has raised concern over how the trial is being conducted. The top court shared the concern while recently granting bail to the alleged assaulter, Sunil N S alias Pulsar Suni. The slow progress was one of the reasons the court cited while releasing Suni, who has spent the last seven-and-a-half years in jail following the February 2017 assault. "Considering the long incarceration and the fact that the trial is not likely to conclude within a reasonable time, a case is made out for enlarging the appellant on bail," the court said.

That the case's investigating officer was grilled for 109 days highlights the unusually slow nature of the trial going on at the Ernakulam District Principal Sessions Court. While the special prosecutor examined the officer for 19 days, the lawyers of eight of the nine accused cross-examined him for one day. The counsel for actor Dileep, the alleged conspirator, cross-examined him for nearly 90 days. All of this resulting in a mammoth, 1,800-page deposition. The examination of all 261 prosecution witnesses is now complete. However, the examination of the accused by the court under Section 313 of CrPC, examination of defence witnesses, if any, and the arguments and final hearing are pending. It means this trial, that began on January 30, 2020, still has a long way to go.

It has run into several hurdles, including a break for further investigation and adjournments due to the pandemic. There have also been attempts to drag the legal process. On several occasions, the accused as well as the prosecution have approached the Kerala High Court and the Supreme Court. Two attempts were made to change the judge and two special prosecutors resigned during the trial. While some of the reasons are valid, attempts to deliberately stall the legal process should not be encouraged. There is a need to speed up the trial, as the victim has been waiting for justice for a long time. Justice has been certainly delayed; we hope it would not be denied.

QUICK TAKE

ENDURING BENEFITS OF MNREGA

A World Bank working paper has put a smile on the face of welfare policy wonks by identifying an unintended benefit of one of India's biggest schemes. A Patrick Behrer and Hemant Pullabhotla's research shows that public works enabled by MNREGA have significantly recharged groundwater levels across regions. It helped that more than half the job scheme's initial funding through 2009 was for water-related projects. Digging ponds had become so common that several states requested the Centre to allow work on other projects like road-building, too. But now, with climate change upending agriculture and ecologies, we might want to consider going back to MNREGA's early focus.

HERE is a celebrated Sherlock Holmes quote: "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." This is a more familiar version of the adage from 'A Scandal in Bohemia'. A slightly different and less colourful version exists in 'A Study in Scarlet', conveying the same intent. Whether a capital mistake or not, it is a current mistake to theorise, and passionately assert, in the complete absence of data.

Witness the discourse and debate on inequality, which makes blood pressures shoot up. Inequality is defined with respect to a metric, a variable whose distribution is being mapped. Inequality in the distribution of wealth, which is a stock, is one measure. Inequality in the distribution of income, which is a flow variable, is another. One should rightly be sceptical of estimations of wealth, especially if imputation of the value of real estate or shares is involved.

Strangely, a lot of people who pontificate on policy do not seem to know that India, like many other countries, does not officially collect data on incomes. That's because data on income is believed to be unreliable. Instead, we collect data on consumption expenditure, an exercise the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) started in 1950.

Inequality in the distribution of consumption expenditure will be lower than in income. Nevertheless, from the former, we can deduce something about the latter, at least as a trend. There is a difference between a census and a survey. A census is a complete enumeration of the population. A survey is based on a sample. If the sample is truly representative, the survey will tell us something about the characteristics of the population. For consumption expenditure, NSSO has surveys known as the household consumption expenditure survey (HCES).

The trouble is, the HCES isn't undertaken every year. Historically, HCES data is available once every five years. Until recently, it was available for 2011-12, not later. A lot of the stuff floating around on inequality was based on information for 2011-12 and we mechanically assumed it was equally true of today's India.

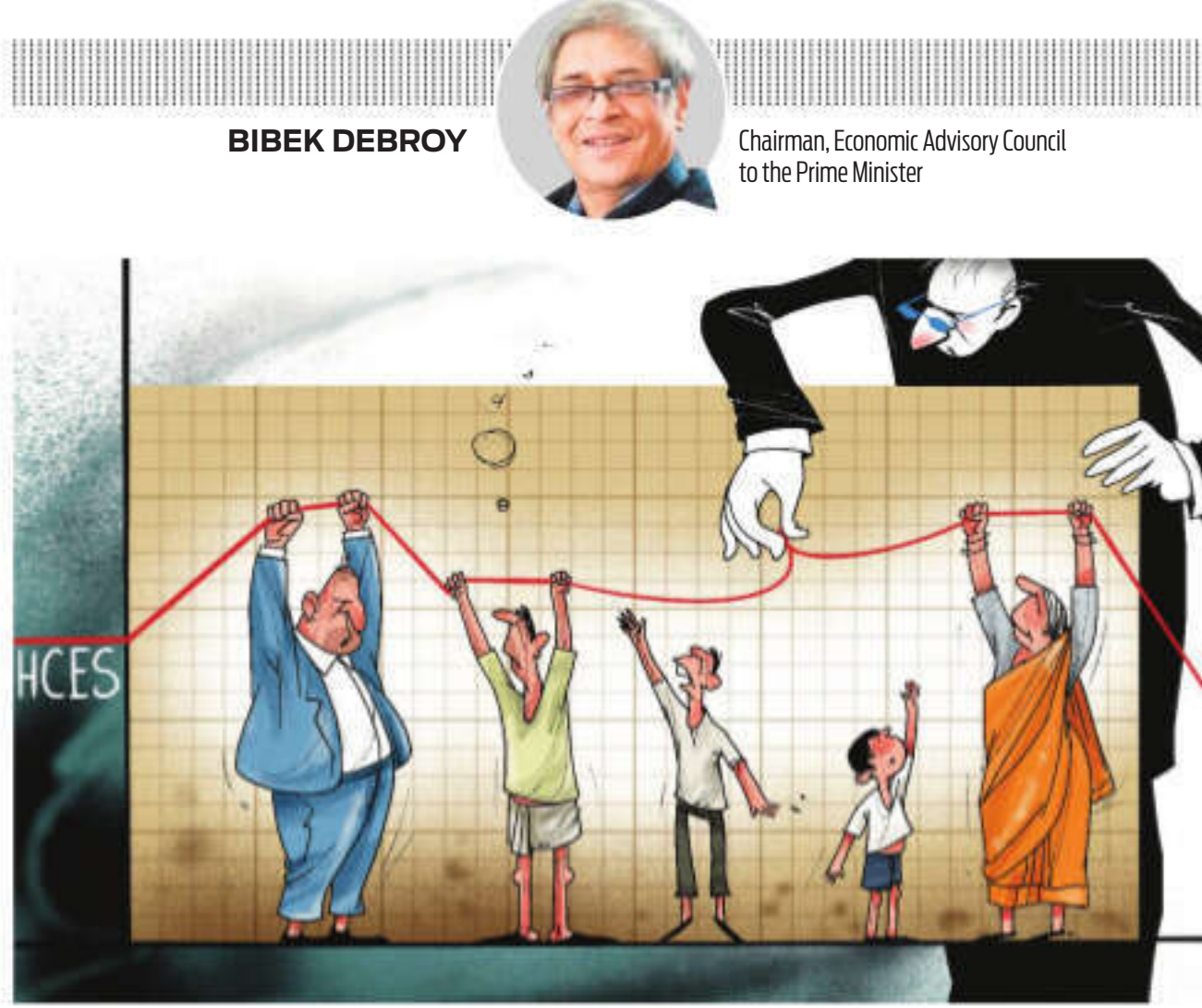
But now, HCES for 2022-23 has become available. Whenever there is a new survey, with improved and slightly different methodology, questions are raised about comparability with earlier surveys. This is a valid point, but we should not make a mountain out of a molehill. There are con-

Researchers are yet to mine all the information gathered by the latest consumption expenditure survey. It calls for hard work, rather than hastily-drawn opinions that could be erroneous

THE WEALTH OF DATA ON WHAT INDIANS CONSUME

BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister



SOURAV ROY

sistency checks that can be used. There are different measures of inequality.

One such aggregate and popular measure is the Gini coefficient. It ranges between 0 and 1. Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the Gini coefficient shows a decline in inequality in India. Measured this way, there has been no increase in inequality. Those are the facts. Inequality is a relative concept, poverty is an absolute one. There is a poverty line and using something like the HCES, one computes the percentage of population below the poverty line, defined as a minimal consumption basket. Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the percentage of population below the poverty line declined. That too is a fact.

The HCES has a wealth of data on consumption expenditure patterns of

households. Researchers have not yet begun to explore this in detail. Recently, the PM's Economic Advisory Council (EAC-PM) brought out a working paper on what HCES shows about changes in food consumption. The paper has been authored by Mudit Kapoor, Shamika Ravi, Sankar Rajan, Gaurav Dhamija and Neha Sareen, and it is available on the EAC-PM website.

What does the research show? One, monthly per capita consumption expenditure has increased throughout India, but it has increased more for rural India than urban India. There are variations across states. But overall, the message of rural prosperity is undeniable. Two, for the first time in independent India, the share of food in monthly consumption expendi-

NAME CHANGERS MAY NOT BE GAME CHANGERS

COLONIALISM is something we need to live with—at least in memory. And the memories might persist in bittersweet ways and spawn delicious ironies at times.

"What's in a name?" asked William Shakespeare. The Bard of Avon might have been surprised by Bollywood's response. Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogical tribute to the litterateur changed his plays' names to much acclaim. *Othello* was adapted as *Omkara*, *Hamlet* as *Haider*, and *Macbeth* became *Maqbool*. Each of these films manages to convey the essence of Shakespeare's deeply human perspectives to a distant, post-colonial audience in a language and ethos alien to the original playwright, precisely because the director manages to make viewers from another culture relate to the core of the works. Name changing was a part of the effort.

The politics of renaming re-emerged last week as the Union home minister announced that Port Blair would be renamed Sri Vijaya Puram, raising cheers in some islands of humanity and jeers elsewhere. The new name's signal of shedding the colonial baggage seems appropriate enough.

But name changes are not necessarily game changes.

The government renamed the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands because Tamil king Rajendra Chola had used the archipelago as a naval base to launch an attack on Sri Vijaya, as a part of modern-day Indonesia was once called. It's ironic when a decolonisation effort takes a name from a campaign linked to what looks like a colonisation effort by an ancient ruler.

From all indications, residents of the Andamans who trace their ancestry to freedom fighters exiled to the islands or jailed by British rulers are wondering how they got left out in a name change that jumps back 1,000 years in preference to 100. It might have something to do with the assumption that renaming the place after its most Sangh-friendly inmate, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, would have been seen as an irony by those critical of him for writing an apology to British rulers in exchange for freedom.

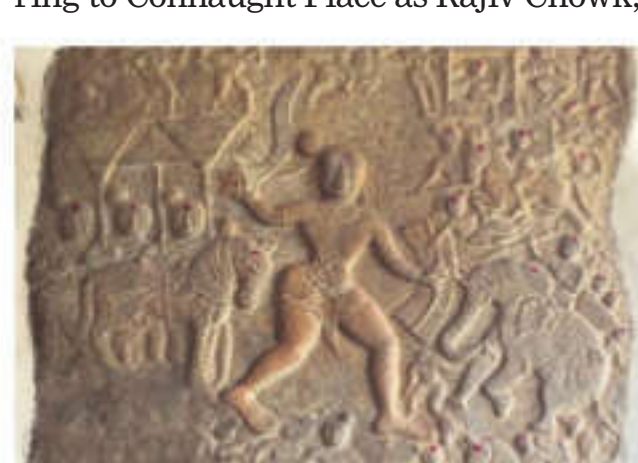
It must be pointed out that Sri Vijaya Puram's airport was named after Savarkar in 2002 when the BJP was in power. Ross Island in the Andamans has now been named after Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, something that would be more acceptable to the ruling party's rivals.

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

There are other ironies, too. It's fine to see Calcutta renamed Kolkata, and lovers of the erstwhile Bangalore may yet learn to live with Bengaluru. Tamilian locals always referred to Madras as Chennai when speaking their own tongue. But it is rare to find a Dilliwalla referring to Connaught Place as Rajiv Chowk,



VINOD KUMAR

Changing place names should be collaborative. New monikers may not stick if the locals don't like it. It's ironic that in its zeal to shed colonial baggage, the government has christened Port Blair, named after a British surveyor, as Sri Vijaya Puram after a Chola colonial expedition launched from the islands

and even rarer to see anyone referring to Connaught Circus as Indira Chowk. Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar worked hard to rename the landmarks after leaders he was loyal to. But he met with partial success. Thanks to the fact that the metro station there was also named Rajiv Chowk, the change earned some currency.

Some things sound cooler in their older references, at least to the locals. In Bengaluru, Frazer Town, where I used to live once, has been renamed Pulakeshi Nagar; but only the local police station bears that name. Everybody else prefers the old tag. Political pressures can go only so far. The locality was named after slightly-differently-spelt Stuart Mitford Fraser, a tutor and

guardian to a Mysore king. That is a mix of Hindu heritage with a colonial twist.

I can personally also relate to the fact that tongue twisters don't work. Kerala may be god's own country, but the tourists thronging the state are far more comfortable using the colonial Trivandrum than the mouthful of Thiruvananthapuram.

The jury is still out on whether one renames something to please oneself or others. Port Blair, named after British naval surveyor Archibald Blair, sounds much easier on the tongue than Sri Vijaya Puram. Reverse-swinging colonial names is a collaborative project. If the locals don't like it, it would be a tough call. Some names have positive memories or global reach not worth tampering with. Bombay has a fine ring of familiarity to it, at least to me. As has Bangalore.

Ironies abound in rebound, too. While Port Blair may have been renamed after an ancient Chola king's naval offensive, there is not one street in the national capital of Delhi named after any king from Tamil Nadu, though 20th century leaders such as K Kamaraj have their street tributes. Even Kargil War heroes of recent vintage have Delhi landmarks named after them, but not Tamil warriors or kings of yore.

Renaming of colonial symbols, much like colonialism itself, is an *ad hoc*, often arbitrary make-it-as-you-go project. The prime minister installed in the new parliament building a gifted symbol of Chola glory, the sceptre called Sengol, amid much fanfare. But one is tempted to ask why the party did not even mention anything like it in all these decades, whether in power or out of it.

A lot has to do with contemporary politics. The Mughals did it. The Dravida parties have done it. The Congress also indulged in it in a post-colonial zeal. But there is only so far that can take you. Changes can bring joy, but history cannot be just wished away. "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

(Views are personal) (On X @madvrstry)

MAILBAG

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GST approach

Ref: *Take regional parties on board, allay fears on simultaneous polls* (Sep 20). The policy has raised questions on the disbalancing federal structure of the nation. 'One nation, one tax' stirred a similar uproar. However, the GST council practises deliberative federalism and controversies apart, the regime has worked in the taxpayer's favour. Possibly, a similar approach can be adopted.

Aparna Vats, Bengaluru

Pluralistic nation

The meaning of 'one nation' is a nation not divided by social inequality. But India is divided in terms of justice. Plus, it is a pluralistic nation that has unity in diversity. Therefore, it is impractical to have simultaneous polls.

P Kiran Joseph, Dharmapuri

Government reassurance

The Union cabinet's greenlighting of the 'One nation, one election' report is a giant leap towards economic efficiency and political stability, but it's crucial to address the elephant in the room: regional parties' concerns about federalism and democratic diversity. After all, India's strength lies in its diversity, and local issues and cultural identities shouldn't get lost in the shuffle of national campaigns. Wider consultation and reassurance from the government are vital to get regional parties on board.

Avinashiappan Myilsami, Coimbatore

Vast universe

Ref: *New keys to universe in galaxy-killing find* (Sep 20). The author wonderfully explained all the aspects of the Pablo's galaxy. In 2019, Nasa took the first-ever photo of a black hole using the James Webb telescope. Humans are just a small particle that lives in this never-ending universe for milliseconds.

Sujal Sharma, Delhi

Tax reboot

Ref: *Why GST is no longer a good and simple tax* (Sep 20). The GST has certainly moved the economy in the direction of establishing a more integrated national market. But it needs a reboot and new structure to make it friendlier. The government should take further steps to simplify the tax system. The goal of the GST should be to make doing business in India easy and convenient.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Allrounder Ashwin

Ref: *A century to remember* (Sep 20). All-rounder Ravichandran Ashwin's century against Bangladesh in the first test match is laudable. His performance of 102 in 112 balls is an inspiration. It was a good performance.

Sravana Ramchandran, Chennai

Ears are Alive with The Sound of Music

...or cancelled noise, with personal listening

The market for immersive music listening is turning truly personal, with audio device hardware-makers turning to spatial sound experience to push sales. The entertainment industry now resides, to a large extent, on the cloud, with media platforms and gaming companies streaming content to personal devices like smartphones. Audio hardware such as headphones and speakers are much smarter now in computing power to render high-fidelity versions of music. The switch from family to individuals as the consuming unit is driving sales of audio hardware everywhere. India is no exception. The ubiquitous need to consume music and entertainment is also spreading demand.

Premiumisation is gaining as user experience is a key component of engagement metrics digital content-creators pursue. Technologies like spatial audio available exclusively in cinemas a few decades ago are being miniaturised to be replicated in handheld devices. This trend will strengthen as humans consume more content through augmented reality (AR). The audiophile experience needs to be available on a mass scale, and existing sound gear manufacturers have made a successful transition. Sony exemplifies this through its journey from making analogue devices to becoming an online entertainment creator, which, in turn, is driving sales of its digital audiovisual hardware. Other brands like Dolby have made the switch by mating their mechanical mastery of rendering sound with advanced computing needed to reproduce it faithfully. Tech companies such as Apple and Microsoft have also weighed in with their demand to deliver software through matching hardware.

The market for controlled sound has a mixed impact on sustainability if generated and consumed in minuscule amounts by individuals. There are recycling concerns and positive effects on ambient noise. Improvements in sound clarity make listening to music more pleasurable. The world is better off hearing the universal language better. And for a noisy country like India, noise-cancellation technology can even enthrall a niche market.

Enough S&T Rhetoric, India Inc, Get R&Dy

This month, Nirmala Sitharaman announced GST exemption for research funding for higher educational institutions and research centres established under central or state laws that also enjoy I-T exemptions. This is great. India's R&D efforts need a big push. Its R&D spend is a piddly 0.65% of GDP, of which GoI spends more than 60%. The recent approval of 'Vigyan Dhara', a scheme that aims to enhance resource allocation efficiency and operational synergy for a more streamlined and impactful STI ecosystem, and the earlier Anusandhan National Research Foundation, designed to seed, grow and promote interdisciplinary research across sectors, will hopefully reduce R&D torpor.

But it's the private sector that needs to be called — and called out. A recent ET analysis of the top 25 publicly listed consumer goods companies also part of Sensex and Nifty 50 indices reveals that 15 of these firms either reduced or maintained their R&D expenditures as a percentage of revenue in FY24 compared to FY19. Only 10 marginally increased their R&D investments. So, with everyone and their CEOs talking 'innovation', when it comes to actually putting one's money where one's mouth is, money and mouth for India Inc is severely mismatched.

Business leaders often cut back on R&D funding when they don't see breakthrough results within a given timeframe. That R&D is a long-term game and not quick-commerce is something our private players should understand while they keep 'innovation-dropping'. By staying invested, companies can create new revenue streams or expand into other countries. R&D doesn't always mean investing in scientists in labs. It can also involve using tech for automation, freeing up humans for critical thinking. The field is broad enough.



JUST IN JEST

You can either strive to outperform others, or not — either way is fine

Take It Easy, Not Everyone's Maldini

Much pressure and lotsa flak are suddenly in the air about toxic workplaces that aren't just meth labs. Overworking, apparently, is the new silent menace — just a year after underworking was supposedly the bogeyman. The fault may not lie only in workplaces, but also in the mindset of individuals for whom FOMO is a real malaise. This isn't the first gen that has internalised the pressure of staying ahead of others, or even in line, in the workplace. It's unlikely to be the last. Kids are hardwired by guardians from the stage of entrance exams into kindergartens that self-worth and 'taking it easy' is for losers. Yes, to be, say, a Paolo Maldini, arguably football's finest defender ever, lakhs of hours must be put in — apart from having innate talent, that is. But not everyone has that talent, or even wishes to put in that much work. Which is absolutely fine. Not everyone needs to be a proverbial Maldini. But problems can arise when one mixes the two up and tries to force the issue.

There are people comfortable with doing optimum work. And there are people who strive to overperform. The system, for obvious reasons, celebrates the latter. But, hey, not everyone needs to fall for that internal memo. Not to sound too corny, work as best as you can and care less about what the world thinks of your productivity quotient. You'll perform better.

UP's specialised educator model for early childhood education should be a guide for other states

Early Birds Can Ace the Race



Bibek Debroy & Aditya Sinha

Competitive federalism has traditionally been viewed as improving ease of doing business, attracting FDI and wooing industries. While this is vital, the concept of competitive federalism must not be confined to economic metrics. Sustainable growth hinges on the development of human capital, such as health, education and skill development.

One such frontier is early childhood education (ECE). A June 2024 study, 'Structured early childhood education exposure and childhood cognition — Evidence from an Indian birth cohort', published in Nature highlights ECE's lasting benefits. Children who attended 18-24 months of ECE showed a boost in cognitive abilities, with scores in areas like processing speed increasing by 19.55 pts at age 5, and full-scale intelligence improving by 7.24 pts by 9. These gains remained strong even when factors like family income and early health were considered.

These programmes ensure that disadvantaged children start school with the same opportunities as their advantaged peers. A 2010 US-based study, 'The rate of return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program', found that participants who received high-quality ECE showed improvements in cognitive development, with IQ scores increasing by an average of 4.5 pts at age 5. This cognitive boost led to long-term benefits, including 20% higher high school graduation rate, 30% higher earnings by 40, and a 50% reduction in crime rates compared to those who did not attend the programme. From an economic standpoint, ECE benefits outweigh costs. Long-term savings in reduced spending on special education, social servi-



Tick the chick list

ces and public assistance are substantial. For example, in the US, intensive early education has been shown to double the likelihood of college attendance and decrease the need for special education services.

Moreover, cost-benefit analyses have demonstrated a return of \$7 for every \$1 invested in ECE, driven by long-term gains in educational attainment, earnings, and reductions in welfare dependency and crime.

In India, ECE, supplemental nutrition and health services are dealt with through Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Research has demonstrated that early-life exposure to ICDS enhances educational attainment among adolescents and adults.

A 2020 study, 'The Impact of a National Early Childhood Development Program on Future Schooling Attainment: Evidence from Integrated Child

Development Services in India', found that male individuals aged 15-54 and female individuals aged 15-49 who were non-migrants and had access to an ICDS centre during their first three years of life completed an additional 0.1-0.3 grades of schooling compared to those without such exposure, with the effect being more pronounced among females. Clearly, India needs to do more on ECE. The quality of education provided under such programmes is also problematic in some states. One reason for this is the overworked anganwadi workers. Tasked with a staggering 25 distinct roles, they are expected to handle everything from health and nutrition education to breastfeeding counselling, coordination of supplementary nutrition programmes for children and mothers, record keeping, educational home visits, and collaboration with primary healthcare personnel on initiatives like immunisation. This extensive workload strains their capacity and jeopardises the overall effectiveness of ICDS.

A 2023 randomised control trial (RCT) in Tamil Nadu demonstrated the impact of bolstering ICDS staffing levels. Adding a half-time worker led to doubling preschool instructional time, yielding substantial gains of 0.29σ

(standard deviations) in maths and 0.46σ in language test scores for children who remained enrolled over 18 months. Even among the broader cohort of initially-enrolled children, test score improvements of 0.13σ in maths and 0.10σ in language were observed. Moreover, the intervention markedly reduced child stunting and severe malnutrition rates.

Taking a cue from this, UP advertised 10,684 positions for ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) educators for all 75 districts last month. Their responsibilities include:

- ▶ Preparing children aged 3-6 years for formal education by creating an environment conducive to physical, mental, social, emotional and academic development.
- ▶ Focusing on children's creative development through activities involving shapes, sounds, colours, and interactions with nature and animals.
- ▶ Coordinating with parents and other caregivers to ensure participation in the child's learning process.
- ▶ Creating child profiles to track developmental milestones. This programme is also supported by the education ministry, GoI.

UP's example of prioritising ECE through recruitment of specialised educators should serve as a model for other states. The tangible benefits of such investments — improved cognitive abilities, higher educational attainment and long-term socioeconomic gains — underscore the need for these programmes to become a standard across India.

As states vie to outdo one another in business, they must equally compete to ensure that every child, irrespective of geography, receives the best possible start in life.

The moment you are asked, 'Are you sure?' you begin to have doubts, is it not? You will perhaps review your decision, run it past trusted friends and family, and, if necessary, make some changes to improve it. You may even junk it and decide on something entirely different. Beyond that, to keep wallowing in self-doubt is certainly not a good thing as that can lead to low self-esteem and erosion of self-confidence. Sometimes, delays can have worse consequences than a flawed decision. You simply have to march forward.

Krishn, in the Gita, says overthinking is not desirable. Instead, it is better to focus on one's duties, and do one's best without getting distracted by possible outcomes. With such focus, the mind remains centred and uncluttered, enabling the possibility of good results. Indecisiveness is the sign of a mind that is easily swayed and distracted, unfocused and, therefore, uncentred.

The quality to aim for is equanimity, the sthithaprana that Krishn talks about, the one who remains steadfast under all circumstances, with no expectations and no thought of the fruits of one's actions. A good way to achieve this is through regular meditation, that boosts self-confidence and brings mental clarity. With discipline and determination, all hurdles on this front can be overcome. So, the next time you are asked, 'Are you sure?' you will dither no longer. You will respond with confidence and determination, sure of yourself and your actions.

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Debroy is chairman, and Sinha is OSD, research, Economic Advisory Council to the PM (EAC-PM)

Focus on creative development through activities involving shapes, sounds, colours and interactions with nature and animals

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Are You Sure?

NARAYANI GANESH

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LOLLING ON SATURDAY

Shortest Innings

Recently married Ravi was sitting down to watch an IPL game when his wife Jyotsna, after a longish period of silence, said, 'Ravi, I've been thinking. You spend too much time watching cricket. Maybe you should watch your silly game only on weekends.'

Ravi looked horrified. Jyotsna responded, 'Darling, what's wrong?' 'For a minute, there you were beginning to sound like my ex-wife.'

'Ex-wife!' she screamed, 'I didn't know you were married before!' 'I wasn't,' he replied.

Hold a Trump Card
Donald Trump was walking through Manhattan and saw a long queue. Wondering what it was for, he joined it. People would look over their shoulder, see that it was Trump behind them, and leave the queue, so he would proceed closer and closer to the front.

As he was getting closer to the front, he asked one guy, who was also about to walk away, 'Wait a second, what is this queue for and why are you now leaving it?'

'It's for Canadian immigration visas. But if you're getting one, I don't need one now.'

Tip of the Week
Since 3 out of 4 small businesses fail, our recommendation is to start a large business.

Chat Room

ONOP: One Nation, Onerous Poll

Apropos 'All Together Now, Get The Scale of It Right' (Sep 20), the Union cabinet has recently approved the 'one nation, one poll' proposal recommended by the high-level committee headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind, but challenges remain for GoI to turn it into reality. The ruling BJP may strongly pitch in simultaneous polls on the grounds that it would provide governments more time to focus on governance, diminish voter fatigue, encourage greater participation of voters in the electoral process and help save billions of rupees. However, it can hardly ignore the legitimate concerns of opposition parties about the adverse impact of concurrent polls on the country's federal structure, besides undermining democratic diversity. Sustained dialogue with the Opposition to address their legitimate concerns about ONOP is the need of the hour.

M JEYARAM
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

We Haven't Missed the Bus to Africa



Mahesh Sachdev

Despite pageantry, high-level participation and big-ticket announcements, the 9th edition of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing that took place on Sept 4-6 was marked by incrementalism. Slowing Chinese economy has curbed its appetite for African commodities, the main driver of the ties.

Africa's lower export revenues have exacerbated the economic asymmetry. For instance, till 2013, the China-Africa trade was nearly in balance. But, in 2023, China had a surplus of \$84 bn out of the total trade of \$282 bn. China's debt to Africa has mushroomed to around \$170 bn, making it nearly 12% of the total debt owned by Africans. After five years of declining Chinese debts to Africa, these climbed in 2023. In some cases, these commercial loans have become unsustainable 'debt traps'. With coups d'état galore in Africa, Chinese debts have also become riskier. However, facing Western ostracisation, FOCAC is good

political optics for Beijing. China was on a wanton quest for Africa's raw materials for over two decades. It fuelled China's overcapacities from real estate to manufactured goods, and the current bust is a sobering story. Now that commodity prices are down, Africans have learnt that it's best not to put all eggs in one basket and perils of borrowing-driven development.

Nevertheless, FOCAC-9 has been reason enough for some experts to hyperventilate that India has 'missed the bus to Africa'. This is untrue. We are Africa's second-biggest trading partner — around \$100 bn in FY23 — and fourth-largest investor. India's 3-mn-strong diaspora is omnipresent in the continent. The following needs must be met to help craft a better strategy in Africa:

▶ With 54 countries, 1.4 bn people and myriad needs, Africa is too large and diverse to be the backyard of a single country. Centuries of engagement with the continent have given us respect and momentum in several domains that we need to deploy.

▶ China has its well-known attractiveness for Africans, and India is often no match for them. But the converse is also true, say, in pharma. We should concentrate on our strengths.

▶ The Chinese model of mass manufacturing is unsuited for Africa.

Our proven MSME role model best fits Africa's eco-political requirements of appropriate and ruggedised (jugaad-based) tech, low-capital requirement, company-to-company bonding, and personnel-to-personnel synergy. Language and culture are less of barriers between Indians and Africans. However, the MSME ecosystem needs active government funding and support.

▶ Soft skills are India's forte. We are most appropriate for Africa's managerial prowess, IT, skilling, education and healthcare needs. Building such capacities can release synergies and create lucrative opportunities.

▶ Over 75 years, India has built credible eco-political institutions from the central bank to EXIM banks to EC, and stock markets, Aadhaar, UPI, Jan Dhan, DBT, India Stack and startup ecosystem. Most African countries are interested in leveraging or upgrading their ecosystems with such innovations. This could anchor bilateral economies.

▶ Despite its expansive farmlands, African agricul-

ture is in distress. Our success in this sector can be replicated, unleashing opportunities. Commercialising this sector through a collection of produce, such as edible oils, processing them locally and exporting them to India can be mutually rewarding.

▶ Defence and security sector is a priority for African countries, particularly Sahel countries — Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger — facing Islamic insurgencies. We should leverage the opportunities.

▶ Our large corporate sector has the wherewithal and staying power to explore opportunities in Africa, but should not compete in the same market.

▶ At the government level, India needs a more national interest-driven, holistic, but granular strategy towards Africa. We must not abdicate our funding and skilling to the African Union but offer these directly to the African states as a quid pro quo to strengthen our diplomatic hand. Signing comprehensive economic cooperation agreements with African countries would spur our trade.

▶ At a policy level, we need not blindly follow the FOCAC model. It wastes too much diplomatic energy and creates distractions. Engaging with Africa is too serious a matter for showmanship.

The writer is former India's ambassador to Algeria

India seems to be still interested

Graduates, Let's Work It Out



Surya H K & Sandeep Sen

India Skills Report 2024 highlights the fact that 48.7% of the country's university graduates are unemployable. Every year, an average large Indian university churns out around 10,000 graduates. This should prompt economists, policymakers and educationists to ask obvious questions: how many of them are going to apply for jobs? How many jobs are available? How many of these graduates are even capable of taking the first step in the job application process, let alone be skilled enough to do the job well?

A bulk of India's graduates are not just unemployable but also severely ill-prepared to even begin the journey of job seeking. With GoI's goal of creating employment opportunities for over 4 cr young Indians across a 5-yr period, it's crucial we understand why this is happening, and then seek solutions to address the gaps.

▶ There's a huge disparity in the quality of higher education. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report, there are over 51 lakh students enrolled in postgradua-

te programmes. Assuming each PG programme has 500 seats, only 25,000 seats exist in the top 50 programmes. That's an acceptance rate of 0.5%.

While GoI has begun the new listing of 'Institutions of Eminence' (8 public, 3 private) with infra, resources, research opportunities and teaching excellence required for a robust higher education experience, most students are enrolled in courses with outdated curricula, dilapidated facilities, untrained faculty, and no hands-on training or industry exposure. This leaves most students grossly unprepared for the world of work.

According to National Institutional Ranking Framework 2024, only Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bengaluru scored 83.2 out of 100. Every other institute scored under 70.

▶ There's a perception problem of what constitutes 'good education', and



Match supply with demand

how this is operationalised and delivered. Our dependence on the entrance exam industrial complex is doing serious harm — to students and parents, the social fabric, and the future success of our workforce. This system has caused students to equate good education with good entrance exam scores. Rote learning is ingrained as a value and practice.

▶ Our education system is unable to provide students with agency and skills that will serve them for a lifetime. There's no scope for critical thinking and creativity. Most students are ill-equipped to hunt and apply for internships, or to work on real-world projects that require them to connect with industry.

Most students are not thinking about employment before graduation. Many don't even have a legible CV draft or are prepared for a job interview. So how can higher education programmes fix this?

Programmes need to understand the context of their students and set the pace accordingly. Courses that introduce students to the journey of self-discovery and skills-alignment are crucial. Underrated qualities such as resilience and adaptability are often what employers value over hard skills such as coding and empirical research.

Internships provide a gateway to access real-world learnings. Universities can facilitate this connection by encouraging industry partnerships not just from big enterprises but also from startups, homegrown initiatives or neighbourhood businesses. An eco-

system that creates a space for meaningful professional experiences can elevate even a mediocre programme to one that rivals the best.

This will not only allow students to gain an understanding of benchmark professionalism but also, in some cases, help them get a foot in the door through pre-placement offers, teach them the value of hard work and money, and new communication styles and etiquette in a workplace.

Exposing students to industry professionals by hosting conversations, panels and seminars not only allows them to begin dreaming about the work they will end up doing, but also in modelling their professional careers around inspirational role models. Universities can even facilitate on-campus internships and jobs.

Universities must evolve from mere degree factories to dynamic environments where students are encouraged to discover their strengths, build networks and gain real-world experience. By shifting the focus from rote-learning to holistic development, our graduates can be empowered to step into the workforce with confidence, creativity and resilience, qualities that will not only make them employable but also capable of driving India's future growth.

Surya is visiting faculty and design lead, Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change, Austria, and Sen is visiting faculty, The Vedica Scholars Programme for Women, New Delhi



A thought for today

There are some subjects that can only be tackled in fiction

JOHN LE CARRE

Spooks' People Skills

Tech has supercharged spying. But humint is still key

Booby-trapped devices are nothing new. But even seasoned espionage agencies are shaken and stirred by the weaponisation of supply chains in Lebanon's exploding pager and walkie-talkie attacks. Vulnerability of supply chains – compromising hardware or software at source – has long been flagged in threat assessments, especially when supply chains include rival nations. A terrible successful first, Lebanon attacks were but a demonstration of the extent of harm and synchronicity that can be built into devices.

It is barely disputed the attack has Mossad's stamp. Satcom, cybertech and advanced surveillance networks have taken the art and science of espionage to levels almost indecipherable for those not fed on a diet of spy thrillers. Even the literature on the genre, of deception and manipulation, infiltration and ciphers, of dead drops and dead men, cyberspies and APTs (advanced persistent threats), has evolved with the changing nature of the world's second oldest profession.

Spying remains mostly boring work, poring over tonnes of info, far removed from the glamour or romance of very early spy tales. If Maugham's Richard Ashenden (1928) was the first secret agent with a touch of reality – the short stories based on Maugham's own experience with British intelligence – real-life accounts of a Kim Philby or Aldrich Ames, of unlikely spy Virginia Hall or legendary Soviet secret agent Richard Sorge, were about ordinary men and women trained for extraordinary circumstances.

But here's the thing. Successful attacks make news, while the novels, stories and reels deal mostly with thwarting plans and attacks. The Lebanon attack, long in the making, came just two weeks before the first anniversary of the Oct 7 Hamas attack – that Israeli intelligence spectacularly missed. All the spook-gadgetry in the world can come to naught if humint can't make sense of the chatter.

Don't Judge

Courts should refuse to hear pleas against creative freedom

Bombay HC was spot on saying creative freedom can't be held hostage to law and order problems. Hearing a case against denial of film certification to *Emergency*, it directed the Censor Board to make a decision by Sep 25. But while this HC got it right, many HCs and other courts have ruled otherwise. This inconsistency doesn't help the cause of freedom of expression. MP HC had issued a notice to the Censor Board on the same movie, for example.

The bigger point is whether courts should be venturing into this domain at all. As SC itself observed in the *Adipurush* case, "everyone is touchy about everything now." By entertaining petitions over "hurt sensibilities" and becoming arbiters of what is kosher, courts end up granting censorship calls legitimacy they shouldn't have. As it is, India has an inglorious record on censorship of films and books over decades. For the longest time, creative output

hasn't had a judicial eye on it in other democracies. Literature classics like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Lolita* were proscribed in some Western countries. But those days are over. They should be over in India, too. For movies, India has a regulator. GOI should reconstitute the censor board appellate tribunal – abolished in 2021 – to hear appeals. Courts should refuse to hear such petitions. They have better things to do – the case backlog is over 50mn.

Why AI Can Harm Us How We Can Stop It

Harari dips into ancient history to analyse the newest threat

Humans are at once the smartest and the most stupid animals on earth, says Yuval Noah Harari in *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*. We produce nuclear missiles and algorithms that have the power to destroy us. Why? Because our information networks are predisposed to using power unwisely. Networks bind members, through fiction, fantasy and mass delusion. Nazism and Stalinism were exceptionally powerful but ignorant networks, the book argues.

Tech entrepreneurs often espouse a rosy view of information, suggesting that AI is the key to our pressing challenges. But despite the fact that your smartphone now contains more information than the library of Alexandria, humans have never been closer to annihilating themselves.

Meanwhile, the populist view of information claims there is no truth. Power is the only reality. While this sceptical view has roots in the radical left, it is now echoed by right-wing figures like Trump and Bolsonaro.

The book seeks a middle ground between these two extremes. It explores the nature of information flows in the ancient past and present-day states, from the church and its schisms to rival political systems, and the roles of mythology and bureaucracy.

We have dramatically increased connectivity, between the Stone Age and the Silicon Age – global networks link billions of people through common stories. Stories are an information technology, as are bureaucratic lists and documents. Bureaucracy may oversimplify complex reality, but there's no better way to manage large-scale human networks.

The problem is when networks don't self-correct. A dictatorship, for instance, is a centralised information network that lacks strong self-correcting

mechanisms, while a democracy is a distributed information network that has them. Mass media enables mass democracy, but the 20th century also saw totalitarian regimes that aimed to control every aspect of people's lives and concentrate power with no checks.

Harari says, with AI, we are creating an "alien inorganic intelligence", argues that this is an entirely new realm, and we only have a small window of time to shape our future.

Will AI favour democratic or totalitarian regimes, will it tend towards truth or order? The book argues that AI is like nothing that's come before, and a new Silicon Curtain may divide humans from unfathomable algorithmic overlords. It could as easily cause catastrophic harm. It can process

information and generate new ideas – it is not a tool, but an agent. Algorithms already make crucial decisions for us and know us better than we know ourselves. They can hack the human operating system, manipulate us with stories. They can surveil us intimately, even getting under our skin and reading our bodily signals. This non-human intelligence has enormous power, but it can also be wrong, misaligned with larger goals. An inter-computer reality could dominate human intersubjective reality.

The book suggests ways to mould tech in a democratic direction, baking in principles of benevolence, decentralisation and mutual openness. Bots that swamp and shape public discourse should be banned, to keep democracies safe. Today, US and China are AI superpowers, and their digital spheres are taking distinct shapes, dividing the world into separate information cocoons. Does international regulation of AI stand a chance?

Creating wiser information networks calls for building human institutions with strong self-correcting mechanisms. This is mundane work, but it matters the most.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Dilemma For Netanyahu, Nasrallah

As Israel-Hezbollah conflict broadens... Can Israelis live through another war after 11 months of Gaza attacks? Can Hezbollah gamble with the future of Lebanon, its own and its chief's fate?

Attila Somfalvi



Columnist based in Tel Aviv

Israel's escalation strategy in this war – on Friday evening, Indian time, Israeli air force carried out strikes in Beirut – is not about the sheer quantity of explosives dropped on Lebanon, but rather about the precision of intelligence and the willingness to carry out pinpoint, lethal operations. This was evident in the elimination of Hezbollah's chief of staff Shukur, in the assassination of Hamas leader Haniyeh in Tehran, and in the destruction of pagers, communication devices, and the targeting of other Hezbollah officials hiding in Beirut's Dahiya district.

In the early months of the war, Israel avoided striking high-ranking Hezbollah leaders, but in recent weeks, that restraint has become irrelevant. Even as these words are being written, officials in the Tel Aviv war room are awaiting updated intelligence on another Israeli airstrike in Dahiya – this time, it appears, aimed at taking out Nasrallah's head of operations.

Israel's focus has shifted. Rather than indiscriminate bombardment, the emphasis is now on decapitating the leadership of Hezbollah, a shift that signals the changing dynamics of the conflict. And as long as the intelligence remains sharp, these strikes will continue to undermine Hezbollah's operational capabilities.

This conflict between Israel and Hezbollah has evolved into one of the most bizarre hostilities on the planet today. For the past 11 months, the two sides have been pummeling each other with every possible means – launching missiles, dropping bombs, deploying drones, engaging in intelligence operations that seem straight out of a

James Bond film (mostly Israel).

Every few days or weeks, almost as if following a scripted plot, someone declares a "red line" has been crossed, threatening an unprecedented, earth-shattering retaliation that will be remembered for generations. Then, after a few days of heightened tension, the "revenge" is carried out. The parties accept the outcome and return to battering one another exactly as they did before the supposed red line was crossed. From all the evidence accumulated over these 11 months of skirmishing, it's clear that neither Hezbollah nor Israel truly wants to escalate into a full-scale war.

This war of attrition, which has

half, Israel has begun to shift course – both in rhetoric and action. While the war in Gaza nears its conclusion, with or without an official declaration, the threats of a northern war have grown increasingly tangible.

This week, Israel revealed – without explicitly admitting it – some of its most extraordinary capabilities, simultaneously neutralising thousands of pagers and communication devices used by Hezbollah operatives. Though Israeli officials declined to comment on this remarkable operation, they see it as having restored Israel's intelligence services to their rightful place among the world's best. Hezbollah's secretary-general Hassan

forces are lurking. That reality is simply untenable. UN Security Council Resolution 1701, passed after the 2006 Lebanon War, has eroded over time, allowing Hezbollah's terrorist forces to establish themselves along Israel's northern border, just metres from the comfortable homes of Israeli citizens. For many years, this arrangement was a modus vivendi that Israelis could live with. After Oct 7, however, this will no longer be tolerated.

Thus, Israel must achieve a decisive outcome – whether through diplomatic channels or by unleashing its formidable firepower. Yet, unlike Gaza, Hezbollah presents an entirely different challenge: more painful, more threatening, more heavily armed, more determined, and far more supported by Iran.

While Lebanon would burn, and Israel could potentially send the country back centuries in time, the cost to Israel would also be steep. Hezbollah has amassed more than 100,000 missiles and rockets over the years, along with drones and advanced weaponry, capable of wreaking havoc on Israeli cities – despite Israel's exceptional air defence systems.

Are we on the brink of a broader war? It remains unclear. Both Israel and Hezbollah know that neither would emerge from such a conflict unscathed. The costs would be immense. Yet Israel understands that the current threatening reality cannot continue. No sane nation would tolerate threats of this nature on its borders, and no sovereign state can exist with terrorists and missiles looming at its fence.

The question now is whether Hassan Nasrallah will take the hint from Israel's intelligence operations this week or gamble with Lebanon, his organisation, and perhaps even himself. For Israel, the question is whether its people, after 11 months of war, have the resilience to face a prolonged and unpredictable battle with an enemy that has been preparing for this very moment for decades.



displaced tens of thousands of Israelis from their homes in the north and emptied villages in southern Lebanon, seemed until recently to be an acceptable status quo for both sides.

Both recognise that their clash is inevitable, but neither side desires it. Each side, for its domestic audience, has spun a narrative: Hezbollah clings to its resistance as long as Israel operates in Gaza, while Israel broadcasts its focus on Gaza, signalling that it would prefer not to open a second front in the north.

However, this charade appears to be reaching its limit. In the past week and a

Nasrallah was forced to deliver a lengthy, dramatic speech filled with threats and curses, once again accusing Israel of crossing red lines.

Just days ago, Israel's war cabinet defined a new objective, one that had not been part of the initial goals of 'Operation Iron Swords': to return tens of thousands of Israelis to their homes in the north. To achieve this, Israel knows it must push Hezbollah back from the border.

No Israeli will return home after Oct 7 knowing that mere metres from their doorstep, Hezbollah's elite Radwan

Can Sri Lanka Really Afford A Regime Change?

The island nation votes today. Wickremesinghe stabilised the country after 2022's turmoil. But Lankans almost always vote out incumbents. Doing so this time, though, is inviting trouble

Padma Rao Sundarji



Columnist based in Sri Lanka

From grey to pink, orange to silver: Sri Lanka's skies shift hues all day. Over the past 15 years, its citizens, too, have repeatedly sought new political alternatives. So, will the presidential election today see yet another 'vote for change'?

In 2009, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, revered for ending the 30-year-long separatist war in which 120,000 people were killed, sailed home to a second term. There followed a period of rapid development and reconstruction. But corruption and nepotism mounted, China laid its first debt-traps and the Rajapaksa family fell from grace.

In 2015, despite all else, there was relative prosperity. But the 'people's voice' – a term heard frequently in Sri Lanka right now – rose again and elected as president Maithripala Sirisena who promised 'good governance'. Barely two years later, his star waned. Sirisena had not undertaken constitutional reforms, there was a shortage of cash. MPs received additional perks, while unemployment, taxes and prices shot up. When 269 people were killed and 500 injured in ISIS terror attacks on Easter Day 2019, it proved the last straw.

The 'people's voice' dumped Sirisena and brought back the terrorist-vanquishing Rajapaksas. This time, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Mahinda's younger brother (defence secretary at the time of LTTE's defeat), was elected president. Mahinda became PM and various Rajapaksas settled into other exalted posts.

By 2022, that second honeymoon had ended. Sri Lanka's economy collapsed completely. External loans had mounted, there was no foreign exchange to pay them off. The terror attacks and then the pandemic had dealt a blow to tourism, a revenue-earning mainstay. Gotabaya's total ban on chemical fertilisers destroyed Sri Lanka's export of tea, the Ukraine war caused a shortage of grain. There was no cooking gas and no petrol, even as ships laden with both, waited in the harbour to be paid first.

Protests spilled onto the streets and gov't responded with brute force. Anger turned into loot and arson,

Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned and Ranil Wickremesinghe was named interim PM. Gotabaya, too, stepped down and fled the country. Sri Lanka was rendered headless.

At the time, opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and Leninist-Marxist MP, Anura Kumara Dissanayake – who are both contesting today's presidential poll – had led thunderous demonstrations against the Rajapaksas. And yet, both declined the unenviable job at the helm of a broke and furious nation. It was left to Wickremesinghe, then 73, to take over as interim president.

Two years later, lavish weddings are in full swing, families are shooting the ocean breeze on the Galle Face

years, the experienced politician has persuaded international donors to restructure external debt and ease pressure on Sri Lanka's coffers. He has cut public spending, raised taxes and controlled lending rates and inflation.

And yet, Sri Lanka's affluent chatterati – many of whom reside abroad – love to deride him as 'The Establishment'. In fashionable cafes at the Dutch Hospital shopping centre, they swear allegiance to either Dissanayake – known as 'AKD' – or the LSE graduate Premadasa before anyone who cares to listen. As for Namal Rajapaksa, 38, Mahinda's son who is also contesting with vigour, they have nothing but scorn. 'Woke' Sri Lankans also champion the 'Tamil Cause' vociferously but draw a blank when asked the name (Pakkiaselvam Ariyanethiran) of the first Tamil in their country's history to contest a presidential poll (this time).

Opinion polls have registered an upswing for Ranil Wickremesinghe, but still place AKD and Sajith Premadasa in the lead. "AKD represents the revolution, Premadasa the change and Wickremesinghe stands for stability," says leading activist Jehan Perera. "Remember: there's still a substantial percentage of undecided voters."

India played a leading role in helping ease Sri Lanka's crisis and many Sri Lankans acknowledge that help. South Block seems confident and unconcerned about who will win. But other than AKD playing to the gallery about how he will cancel a 'corrupt' wind power project awarded to Adani group, neither he nor Premadasa has clearly spelled out how they intend to address India's trade interests in Sri Lanka, and its security concerns over Chinese naval forays into Sri Lankan waters.

So, will Sri Lankans settle for the continuity that Wickremesinghe represents? Or bring in untested candidates at this very crucial time in the country's history, merely because they promise 'change'?

Ranil Wickremesinghe's election symbol is, aptly, a blue cooking gas cylinder. In response to a question by a local newspaper on what's at stake in today's poll, the seasoned politician sounded clear:

"The future of Sri Lanka, nothing else," he said. The writer is a foreign correspondent and author of Sri Lanka: The New Country



Green, tall hotel towers are ablaze with fairy lights, there is full occupancy. To anyone who witnessed the desperate scenes of grandmothers hauling gas cylinders forward, inch by inch, to keep their place in snaking queues during the 2022 crisis, Sri Lanka seems to have turned the corner.

And it is Wickremesinghe, an erstwhile foreign minister, opposition leader, and prime minister multiple times, who is behind that gradual revival. In the last two

Calvin & Hobbes



Are Homo Sapiens Worth Saving?

Sonal Srivastava

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh said in a statement on Climate Change for the United Nations that all civilisations are impermanent and must come to an end one day. "But if we continue on our current course, there's no doubt that our civilisation will be destroyed sooner than we think. The Earth may need millions of years to heal, to retrieve her balance and restore her beauty. She will be able to recover, but humans and many other species will disappear until the Earth can generate conditions to bring us forth again in new forms."

According to the World Economic Forum, billions of animals are slaughtered for food every year. One of the reasons for increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is the rearing of livestock for human consumption. Add to that deforestation, wars, massive

and how different species might be praying for human extinction. This brings us to the question of whether humans are worth saving. What is the point of saving a person who causes suffering by eating the flesh of other animals or destroys their habitat to serve his ends?

Movements such as the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, VHEMT, has been advocating voluntary extinction of humanity by choosing not to reproduce, furthering the proposition that the cessation of human existence would prevent the degradation of the Earth's ecosystems.

Imagine grey wolves, Arctic foxes, hippopotamuses, rhinoceroses, cheetahs, tigers and lions roaming without a worry in urban concrete jungles in cities such as New York, London, Paris, New Delhi, Tokyo and Beijing.

Details of the sixth extinction may be disturbing. In the realm of environmental ethics and philosophy, there are discussions on how human actions impact other species and ecosystems

THE SPEAKING TREE

Imagine grey wolves, Arctic foxes, hippopotamuses, rhinoceroses, cheetahs, tigers and lions roaming without a worry in urban concrete jungles in cities such as New York, London, Paris, New Delhi, Tokyo and Beijing.

Sacredspace



All eternity is in the moment.

Pico Iyer

However, should we be worried as the gloom and doom reports regarding climate change and the sixth extinction boosted by algorithms appear on our social media feeds? Perhaps not. From the Indic standpoint, it is comforting to know that existence is cyclical and duties and responsibilities regarding creation, preservation and dissolution are neatly distributed among the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Brahma creates, Vishnu sustains, and Mahesh dissolves creation, only for it to be renewed for another cycle, ad infinitum.

Krishn says in the Bhagwad Gita, "Arjun, if you suppose this soul to be the subject of constant birth and death, even then, you should not grieve... Death is certain for the born, and rebirth is inevitable for the dead. You should not grieve over the inevitable." For what is existence, if not a brief pause between being manifest and unmanifest, it is all but a Divine play, Krishn's Lila.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Judges' Pak remark

Onus on judiciary to combat communal stereotypes

IN this age of social media and incessant public scrutiny, it's not easy for persons in high places to say anything and get away with it. Once immune to criticism, judges, too, are feeling the heat. Taking suo motu cognisance of reports about controversial remarks by Justice Vedavyasachar Srishananda of the Karnataka High Court, the Supreme Court has sought a report from the HC Registrar General. In a video clip that has gone viral, the judge is heard saying during a case hearing that a certain area of Bengaluru is in Pakistan. Justice Srishananda left no room for doubt that he was referring to the Muslim community when he said that every autorickshaw in that area had 10 people and even a strict police officer would be beaten up there.

The judge has laid bare his deep-rooted prejudice, causing embarrassment to the entire judiciary. The delivery of justice is bound to be adversely impacted when some judges are perceived to have political or communal leanings. In May, Justice Chitta Ranjan Dash of the Calcutta High Court had thanked the RSS in his farewell speech and fondly recalled his long association with the right-wing body. The disclosure had cast a shadow on his entire career and shown the high court in a poor light.

Article 50 of the Constitution, which puts the onus on the State to separate the judiciary from the executive in public services, seems to have been conveniently forgotten. As is often the case these days, the Supreme Court has taken it upon itself to set things right. Upset at the provocative remark of Justice Srishananda, a five-judge SC Bench has said that it may lay down basic guidelines. It's the need of the hour to ask judges at all levels to mind their language. The apex court had taken a commendable initiative last year by bringing out the Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes. Something similar is required to counter communal stereotypes.

Modi's US visit

Treading cautiously amid diplomatic tensions

PRIME Minister Modi's visit to the US comes at a critical juncture, marked by electoral tensions in the US and diplomatic challenges. The visit is notably subdued compared to his 2019 tour, where he famously endorsed Donald Trump with the slogan 'Ab ki baar Trump Sarkar.' This time, India is cautiously treading the line between engaging with both Republicans and Democrats as the US election looms, ensuring it does not appear to favour either side. At the heart of the current diplomatic equation is India's need to maintain a balanced relationship with both political factions in the US. Modi's rapport with Trump may have served India well during the latter's presidency, but it would be risky to appear partisan in the evolving geopolitical landscape. With Vice-President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee, India must ensure that its strategic ties with the US are not jeopardised, regardless of who wins the White House.

Further complicating matters is the backdrop of the Gurpatwant Singh Pannun case. A US court recently issued a summons against key Indian officials over an alleged plot to assassinate the Khalistani activist. While India has dismissed these charges as 'unwarranted', the issue remains a thorn in India-US relations, threatening to sour diplomatic ties.

This visit focuses on multilateral engagements like the Quad summit and the UN Summit for the Future, marking a shift from Modi's earlier high-profile, personality-driven diplomacy to a more nuanced approach. The agenda includes strengthening ties on regional security, technology and climate change, along with solidifying India's position as a global peacemaker. Modi's engagement with the Indian diaspora in the US and meetings with CEOs also underscore his government's aim to bolster economic partnerships. The trip reflects India's focus on a more nuanced, long-term diplomatic vision while navigating geopolitical complexities and US electoral politics.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1924

Hindu-Muslim differences

IT is too much to expect that in a country of more than 300 million human beings, some of whom have not yet risen above the communal point of view, there will be a complete cessation of communal troubles even as the result of the voluntary and vicarious suffering which the greatest and noblest of the country's sons has imposed upon himself by way of penance. However, we do expect that this great act will lead to an immediate searching of heart on the part of all politically minded Indians who may have had anything in the past, either directly or indirectly, to do with such troubles, and to an immediate examination of the present conditions with a view to the elimination of all existing cause of tension. It is gratifying to note that first step in the process has been taken already. Three of the most representative men of the two communities have issued invitations to a large number of persons in all parts of India, including non-official Englishmen, to meet at Delhi on the 23rd with a view to discussing the situation created by the recent Hindu-Muslim riots. That the invitations will in most cases evoke a wholehearted response we have no doubt whatever. Even if the Mahatma had not taken the drastic step he has, the very fact that so many occurrences of the most deplorable kind have taken place in such quick succession in places so far away from each other as Delhi and Nagpur, Kohat and Lucknow, would have made a conference of all leading Indians who love their country and are anxious to see it free and self-governing an absolute and imperative necessity.

Why Modi has thrown the dice in J&K

It's in the PM's self-interest — as well as in national interest — to let full statehood return

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

THERE'S a calm in Srinagar that hasn't been seen in years. Parks are full of children playing football and parents sitting around, gossiping. Lal Chowk is clean, with a huge hoarding that displays an ad for a pregnancy test kit. A Starbucks restaurant has opened in a mall on the bund, in front of the tall row of chinar trees still standing sentinel. Auto-wallahs and Uber-wallahs (who still won't go to Pantha Chowk in the evening) and shopkeepers celebrate the return of the Indian tourist to the Kashmir valley. Schools are full and open the year-round — outside Presentation Convent, an electronic board says, "A good student is one who drinks deeply from the well of knowledge."

Still, take a deep breath and stand on the Jhelum bund, and wonder — is this the calm before the storm? What will happen when people realise, after the Assembly elections are done on October 1, that the 'Delhi model' of truncated power will be imported into Jammu & Kashmir?

That there is no easy return to full statehood, at least not yet, despite PM Modi's promise at an election rally earlier this week. That Modi's hand-picked man, the Lt Governor, will continue to take charge of powerful departments like land and law and order issues, while an elected CM runs the rest of the show.

Or is this the calm after the storm — have the people realised that there's no more point in stone-pelting or protesting or joining militancy? Certainly, Kashmiris, more than anyone else in the country —



HEARTENING: The first phase in a three-phase poll has just taken place, in south Kashmir, in parts of the heart of insurgency — a 60 per cent turnout is an astonishing indicator. ANI

with the exception of Manipuris — are keenly aware that one wrong step will provoke the Indian state into cracking down so hard that the memories of firing that August morning in 2019 to scare off a people's protest in Soura, a Srinagar suburb, will remain just that — a handful of diminished memories.

Perhaps, this is a calm because of the storm. It is clear that PM Modi has thrown the dice again, and played the most important ace in his pack. Modi knows that the stakes, especially in the international arena, are enormous — he's going to the US and will rub shoulders with global leaders, who are sure to ask him about Kashmir.

He knows better than most that the conduct of the ongoing poll will make all the difference — it will either enhance his credibility or it will deepen the doubt. As it is, he has lost some of his awe in the wake of the Lok Sabha polls; any further squandering in Haryana and Maharashtra will undermine him further.

But Kashmir is different. This election is not just about who wins — although, if the BJP manages to form the government, by hook or by crook, then

The best part is that everyone in the former state knows, today, that things can be fixed, good governance is possible, and best of all, militancy can be controlled.

that is not just icing on the cake, it's unmitigated delirium — but a verdict on the past five years. Besides the fact that some public projects have been won by contractors from eastern Uttar Pradesh, the home region of Lt Governor Manoj Sinha, the fact is that some of Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's most capable officers and soldiers have coluded in ensuring the successful delivery of goods, which has directly translated into a reduction in militancy.

That's why this election is different. It's definitely about a definite reduction in new recruits into militancy — there are said to

be about 75 in the Valley and another 75 in Jammu region. This summer, the Indian Army lost not just jawans, but an unusual number of officers, mostly in ambushes by highly trained and motivated terrorists carrying US-made weapons like M-4 assault rifles — presumably stolen from the Afghan theatre — who dug tunnels under the international boundary to enter the Jammu region and take Indian soldiers by surprise.

Still, it is to the credit of the Indian Army that it has regrouped, both on the Line of Control — where a ceasefire agreement with Pakistan remains intact — as well as in the Jammu region. It seems to have, more or less, wrested back the advantage.

This election is important because it will draw a line under PM Modi's most important political decision so far. When Article 370 was summarily abrogated that early August morning, a web of security was thrown around J&K. Pockets of resistance, such as the media, were isolated. Journalists and photographers and activists were put on no-fly lists and local newspapers turned into little more than mouthpieces. Politicians were put under house

arrest or summarily thrown into jail. Some of them, like the sitting MP from Baramulla, Engineer Rashid, arrested under the UAPA anti-terror law, are back campaigning this election, bringing many to ask whether he and other candidates from the banned Jamaat-e-Islami, fighting as Independents, are in fact proxies of the BJP.

The bigger question, five years on, is whether it was worth it. Can you measure the fact that the streets are clean, the parks are full, kids go to school and the highways are as smooth as Hema Malini's cheeks, against the fact that democracy, as we know it, has been off-kilter these five years? Most of all, bureaucrats, however competent, cannot replace politicians, whose job it is to listen to people and their grievances. The question is, will the polls usher in a new era, and if so, how different will it be from the old era?

That's why it is in Modi's self-interest — as well as in India's national interest — to let a full statehood return to J&K. The best part is that everyone in the former state knows, today, that things can be fixed, good governance is possible, and best of all, militancy can be controlled. Imagine what a model that is for an elected government round the corner.

The first phase in a three-phase poll has just taken place, in south Kashmir, in parts of the heart of insurgency — a 60 per cent turnout is an astonishing indicator. It means that stone-pelters can be persuaded to turn from stones to votes, that years of pent-up resentment can be channelled towards the greater good. Kashmir's years of chaos and grief can never be forgotten, but imagine, if this election is the beginning of a new page.

If it is, and a full restoration of democracy is in order, then Kashmir can dream of returning to normalcy. Today, it stands on a precipice. One step forward or backward is sure to decide its destiny.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Free and fair elections have demonstrated that J&K is part of India. — Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Travel friends don't stay the course

SUMIT PAUL

I have always wondered why people who become 'friends' during journeys hardly ever meet again. Most of us have experienced this phenomenon. We bump into strangers on a bus, train or plane and hit it off with them. We exchange phone numbers, addresses, etc. Alas, after we bid adieu to each other, our ways never converge as we resume our daily routine. Why does this happen? In the Hindi film *Jab We Met*, Shahid Kapoor and Kareena Kapoor meet on a train, become friends and ultimately life-mates, but the reality is altogether different.

In a short story by Pakistani raconteur Intizar Hussain, a young man and a woman meet during a journey; when their respective destinations arrive, they exchange each other's addresses. However, they never write to each other. They again run into each other 20 years later. They talk animatedly, but when the journey ends, they smile and say goodbye to each other, expecting nothing in future. They have become mature enough to know that a friendship struck up on a trip does not last.

During our travels, we make friends in order to kill boredom and while away the time. I have met many people on buses, trains and aircraft. I interacted with them but seldom did I give my phone number, e-mail ID or other contact details. I know that it's futile to expect a fellow traveller to be my friend after the journey is over. Friendship is something that needs time to develop. It cannot happen in a few hours.

In life's journey, we are all travellers. To quote Urdu poet Bashir Badr, '*Musafir hain hum bhi, musafir ho tum bhi/Shayad kisi mod pe phir mulaqaat hogi*' (I'm a traveller, you are also a traveller/We might bump into each other again).

When many of us find it hard to live with each other, how can people whom we meet on a short trip become our pals forever? It's enough that they stay friends till the journey lasts. Moreover, we treat the word 'friend' in such a casual manner that we have forgotten the profundity attached to it. Friendship is an exalted emotion. It takes years to nurture strong bonds. Friendship is like wine — it matures with time.

It's a travesty of friendship if it can be formed frivolously on a trip. That's why the English language has two markedly different words: Friends and acquaintances; in Hindi, *dost* and *pehchanwale*. So, let friends remain friends and don't have great expectations from those you run into during a journey. Remember that travel friends disappear without a trace. Only tried-and-tested pals remain with you till the end.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unrealistic expectations at work

Apropos of 'Centre opens probe into CA's death due to excess workload'; while the exact cause of the death is yet to be ascertained, the incident has prompted a welcome conversation about the harms of unrealistic work expectations. The tragedy must prod employers to adopt a more humane and empathetic approach while dealing with their employees. Different people have different ways of dealing with pressure. Not everybody can cope with a stressful work environment. A lot of employees quit their jobs because they feel overwhelmed. Even many who choose to stay employed often opt out of tasks beyond their assigned duties and become less psychologically invested in work, a phenomenon known as quiet quitting. But the real solution lies in enhancing the understanding between the management and the employees.

MONA SINGH, BY MAIL

Perils of toxic work culture

With reference to the news report 'Centre opens probe into CA's death due to excess workload'; the tragic death of a 26-year-old chartered accountant in Pune has sparked a massive outrage and renewed concerns about the toll that a toxic work culture can take on an employee's mental health. The incident highlights the need for a better work-life balance in the corporate sector. The rise in cases of young people dying as a result of stress must be thoroughly probed. Notably, India ranks among the top 10 countries when it comes to the number of hours worked per week. It is high time that employers took a serious view of the issue and created flexible work shifts for their employees.

SALONI SHARMA, JAMMU

Water security at stake

The Indus Water Treaty (IWT) has stood as a rare beacon of cooperation between India and Pakistan, weathering wars and diplomatic storms for decades. Today, it faces an existential threat as India pushes for renegotiation. This move, if handled with hostility, risks unravelling a lifeline vital

for millions in both nations. Water knows no borders, and the IWT's dissolution could spark wider regional tensions. India must resist the urge to choose unilateralism and work towards diplomatic engagement instead. Both nations should honour the established dispute resolution mechanisms, ensuring that the treaty remains a tool for peace and cooperation. Let us not allow short-term political gains to jeopardise a treaty that has preserved harmony for decades. The future of water security and peace depends on it.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

Criticism of CJI, PM is fair

With reference to 'Fairly or unfairly, judges are being judged' (*Trusts and Turns*); I disagree with the writer's view that the CJI often faces unwarranted criticism from his liberal friends. As someone who occupies the highest judicial post in the country, he will be judged by members of the public for his actions, observations and judgments. And as the person at the helm of affairs in the nation, PM Narendra Modi will also continue to face severe censure if he puts a foot wrong. Public criticism is part and parcel of holding a position of power and responsibility. Besides, by participating in *aarti* together, the CJI and the PM have set a bad precedent and sent out the wrong message to the public.

PURSHOTAM KUMAR, KURUKSHETRA

CJI's grave misstep

Refer to 'Fairly or unfairly, judges are being judged' (*Trusts and Turns*); it was an insightful read. The writer has rightly pointed out that CJI DY Chandrachud's decision to invite Prime Minister Narendra Modi to his residence for *aarti* of Lord Ganesha, Maharashtra's beloved deity, was obviously a misstep. The move has understandably drawn a lot of flak from various quarters, including members of the legal fraternity. And it is unfortunate that what should have been a private event received so much publicity in the first place. Hopefully, all involved in the episode will act more responsibly in future.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

India's deft balancing act on foreign policy front



SHALINI CHAWLA
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW,
CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

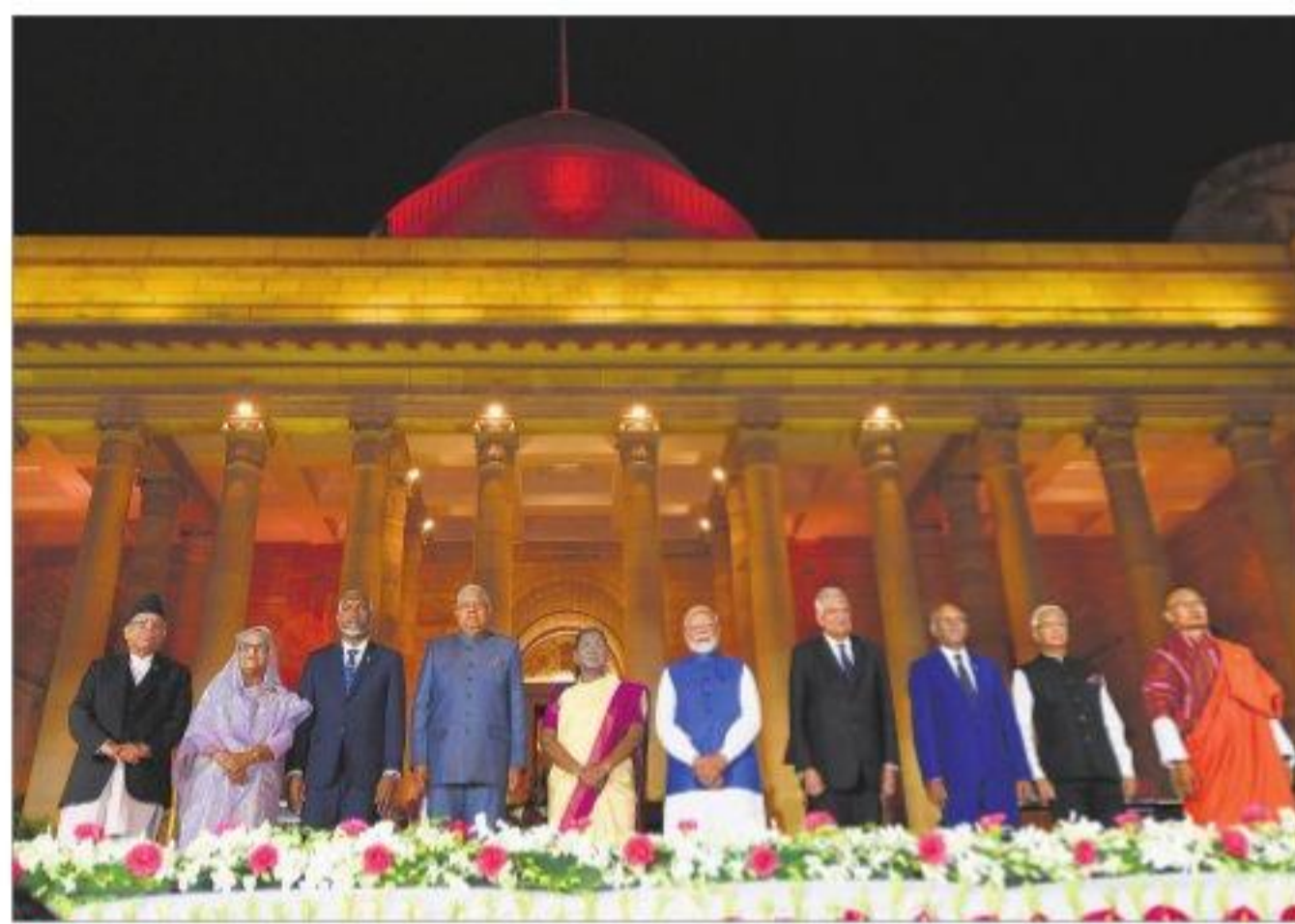
THE Narendra Modi government outlined two axioms of India's foreign policy — 'Bharat First' and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family) — when it came to power in June this year. Its intention has been to maintain the momentum of the foreign policy initiatives that yielded success in the last decade. After the 2024 General Election, questions were raised about the government's ability to steer decisions on foreign policy because of the lack of an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. During the first 100 days of Modi 3.0, some crucial foreign policy initiatives were taken to address critical emerging challenges.

India's national interests have been driving its relations with the major powers, and it is fair to say that it has managed to strike a balance between maintaining an autonomous position and creating friendships. Russia has remained a constant in India's foreign

policy (historically and amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war), reinforced by PM Modi's visit to Moscow in July. New Delhi's prime areas of interest in its relations with Russia continue to include defence, energy and the strategic domain.

New Delhi's relations with Washington remain significant, given India's most critical strategic challenge of China's growing assertion on its border and Beijing's expanding presence in neighbouring countries. India-US ties are likely to grow, irrespective of whether a Democrat or a Republican gets elected in the US. The existing trajectory of the partnership indicates expansion of cooperation in economic, strategic, technological and defence sectors.

The criticality of its neighbourhood for India was evident in the statement made by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar at the Jasjit Singh Memorial lecture at the Centre for Air Power Studies in August: "What we have tried to do in the last 10 years is actually to economically bring our neighbours much closer... there will be political ups and downs... these are realities we have to accept... but...we today have more resources, more capabilities, we are geographically at the centre, our size is so



PRIORITY: India's neighbourhood policy needs a push, with the focus on regional economic integration. PTI

much bigger... we need to drive the process, we will set the pace, and we will go the extra mile." Undoubtedly, India's neighbourhood policy needs a push. It cannot achieve the objective of becoming a \$5-trillion economy without focusing on regional economic integration.

The heads of India's neighbouring countries (except for Pakistan and Afghanistan) and heads of island nations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) were invited to PM Modi's swearing-in ceremony. The External Affairs Minister's visit to Male in August appositely con-

PM Modi's third term will see India push for UN reforms to make the Security Council more representative and inclusive.

veyed India's intentions that the Maldives remained an important partner of India in maintaining peace in the IOR.

In its relations with Pakistan, India remains firm on a strictly conditional dialogue. The two nations have had no diplomatic dialogue after the January 2016 terror attack on the Pathankot Air Force station by Pakistan-sponsored terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed that derailed the Modi government's peace initiatives. Pakistan has often tried to highlight the reversal of the abrogation of Article 370 as a precondition for talks or

diplomatic exchange with India. This position is a nonstarter, as India's decision and position on Article 370 remain unchanged. Also, the Jammu region has seen significant infiltrations from Pakistan and a series of terror attacks since June.

This is the 10th year of India's Act East Policy (AEP), which charted the way for its engagement with the East. PM Modi's recent visits to Brunei and Singapore signified the importance of the AEP. India is exploring a wide range of areas of cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, such as semiconductors, hydrocarbons, healthcare and skill development. Singapore is the largest trading partner for India within ASEAN and the top source of foreign direct investments into India. Brunei is important for India's space programme, and New Delhi is seeking to enhance space cooperation with it. The likelihood of India's strengthened cooperation with ASEAN countries remains high in the coming years.

Voice of the Global South has been on the foreign policy agenda of the government. India hosted the inaugural Voice of Global South Summit in January 2023 and the second edition in November. It saw good participation, and the feedback was incorporated

into the agenda and discussions of the G20. The 2023 Voice of Global South summits helped India's G20 presidency, and they saw the inclusion of the African Union as the 21st member of the G20. This enhanced India's stature in the world considerably. The Voice of Global South Summit held last month was a continuation of India's efforts to bring the countries of the Global South together on one platform and address common issues, including food security, energy security, terrorism, extremism and digital technology. India has been quick to respond to many of the issues.

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative is expected to see a further push in the coming years. The focus is also likely to be on the Indian Ocean strategy, which received an impetus after 2014 with a series of diplomatic visits and crucial initiatives like the launch of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). Importantly, PM Modi's current tenure will see India push for United Nations reforms to make the Security Council more representative and inclusive. The evolving geopolitical dynamics present a complex set of challenges for New Delhi. And India's foreign policy will continue to evolve. Modi 3.0 looks keen to build on its foreign policy initiatives.

Punjab needs a robust policy to tackle agrarian crisis



RANJIT SINGH GHUMAN
PROFESSOR OF EMINENCE,
GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

PUNJAB does not have an agriculture policy till date despite the fact that three policy drafts have been submitted over the past decade or so. The first draft (58 pages), prepared under the chairmanship of GS Kalkat, was presented to the state government in March 2013. It was neither made public by the government nor turned into a policy. The second one (21 pages), prepared under the chairmanship of Ajay Vir Kakhar, was presented to the government in 2018. This, too, met with the same fate.

In January 2023, the government constituted an 11-member committee of experts under the chairmanship of Sukhpal Singh to prepare the third draft. This committee prepared an exhaustive policy draft (211 pages) and presented it to the government on October 13, 2023.

The government, however, took more than 11 months to make it public, and that too under the pressure of farm-

ers' unions. Inexplicably, the government also simultaneously engaged the Boston Consulting Group as a consultant to seek advice on crop diversification. This only shows that successive governments have neither been serious about formulating an agriculture policy nor have had faith in their duly constituted committees. The second and third drafts were prepared under the chairmanship of the chairpersons of the Punjab State Farmers and Farm Workers' Commission, a statutory body.

A significant underlying thread in all three drafts is the acknowledgement of the agrarian crisis as a consequence of declining farm income and other factors. The crisis has been amply reflected in the suicide surveys conducted by three state universities — Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Guru Nanak Dev University and Punjabi University. As per official data, more than 16,000 farmers and farm labourers have died by suicide between 2000 and 2016 in Punjab. The numbers would have only risen in subsequent years.

In view of the deepening agrarian crisis, all three drafts have laid emphasis on improving the productivity, profitability and sustainability of farming and income of the farmers and farm labourers. The 2030 UN Agenda on Sustainable Development



ROADMAP: Like the previous drafts, the latest one lays emphasis on improving the productivity, profitability and sustainability of farming. FILE PHOTO

Goals suggests that all sectors, including agriculture, be considered from three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. The agenda says that if a farm is not economically sound or not resilient to external shocks or if the well-being of those working on the farm is not considered, a farm cannot be sustainable. Increased investments in R&D and infrastructure, strengthening extension services, high-value crops, improved livestock and dairying, value addition, assured marketing, establishment of the price stabilisation fund, crop diversification, curbing the depleting water table and deteriorating soil health have been the rec-

Punjab does not have an agriculture policy till date. Three policy drafts have been submitted to the government over the past decade or so.

ommended solutions in almost all policy drafts.

The first and second drafts had 12 and 14 policy recommendations, respectively. The third has 28. Though the latest draft seems to have immensely benefited from the earlier ones, it has a number of novel and more elaborate recommendations compared to the earlier ones.

Based on agro-climatic zones, the third policy draft has recommended the cultivation of crops in their natural growing areas. The establishment of institutes of excellence with focus on agrimarketing research and intelligence, innovative agricultural marketing and multi-purpose cooperative societies, democratic and

transparent functioning of the cooperative sector, etc., are main recommendations in this domain. The policy has laid down special emphasis on every crop and has recommended that Punjab be developed as a seed hub.

Unlike the earlier drafts, this one has come up with an elaborate plan to develop organic farming. A Punjab-specific crop insurance policy, enhanced compensation to the families of suicide victims to the tune of Rs 10 lakh each, provision of free healthcare to farmers and farm workers, pension to farm workers and small farmers after the age of 60, one-time debt settlement and registration of money-lenders are some of the other salient recommendations.

The draft also recommends legal guarantee of MSP for the crops being cultivated in Punjab, but does not say anything about the implementation of the Swaminathan formula, which is a major demand of farmers. The earlier two drafts, too, had highlighted the issue of non-procurement of crops at the MSP, except wheat and paddy. Again, the third draft shows a serious concern about the depleting water table and increasing use of electricity in the agriculture sector, but is silent on free power to run tubewells. Contrary to it, the first draft had recommended metering of power and charging beyond a

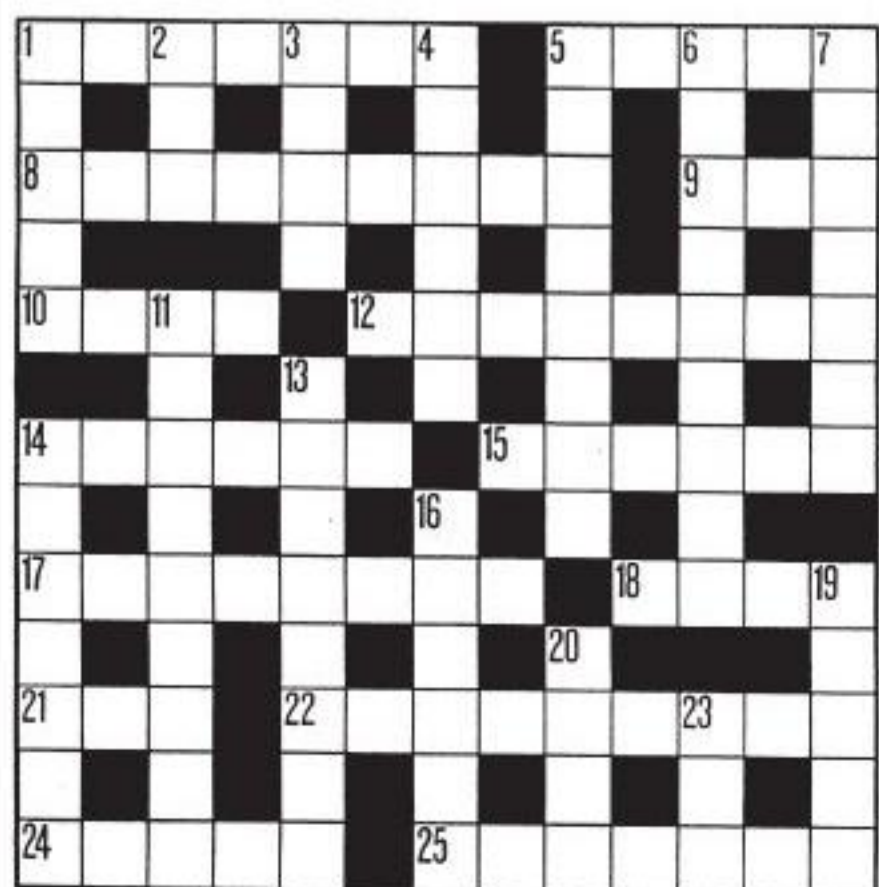
certain level of free supply, while the second one had recommended restriction of free power to farmers having up to 10 acres of land.

However, the good part is that the latest draft has strongly recommended a ban on paddy cultivation in 15 highly over-drafted blocks. Notwithstanding this, there are a good number of best practices of water-saving cultivation being experimented by some farmer groups. The farmers' commission may interact with them before finalising the policy.

In view of the shrinking job avenues in the agriculture sector, the issues of unemployment and disguised unemployment in farming deserve a serious consideration, but the draft has made only a passing reference to them. The large number of vacant posts in PAU, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, government departments and boards concerned have been aptly highlighted in the draft and merit immediate government attention.

The recommendations in the draft need an informed public discourse by all stakeholders, even as the finances are a major challenge. Still, there are many recommendations that require little or no finances. Let's hope that the third draft culminates in an appropriate agriculture policy that will be effectively implemented.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Sober reflection (7)
- Hackneyed (5)
- Behave pretentiously (3,2,4)
- A silvery-white metal (3)
- Hood of monk's habit (4)
- Follower of a teacher (8)
- Elegance of manner (6)
- Formally endorse (6)
- An attribute (8)
- Engrave (4)
- Person's destiny (3)
- Alone (2,7)
- Slim and long-legged (5)
- A room for works of art (7)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Sinecure, 5 Suds, 9 Forum, 10 Monster, 11 Pat on the back, 13 Emerge, 14 Acumen, 17 Turn of phrase, 20 Impinge, 21 Erase, 22 Till, 23 Spotless.

Down: 1 Soft, 2 Narrate, 3 Common ground, 4 Remote, 6 Ultra, 7 Striking, 8 Undercurrent, 12 Restrict, 15 Message, 16 Upkeep, 18 Repel, 19 Less.

DOWN

- Subject of conversation (5)
- Extracted (3)
- Band of criminals (4)
- Unimportant details (6)
- Cut into two equal parts (8)
- Incapable of doing the task (3,2,2,2)
- Kind of oil used in paints (7)
- Leave in the lurch (4,3,2)
- A deliberative body (8)
- Of the general public (7)
- Intense (6)
- Impressively large (5)
- State of misery (4)
- Look at closely (3)

SU DO KU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
SEPTEMBER 21, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Bhadrapad Shaka 30
- Aashwin Parvishite 6
- Hijari 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 6.14 pm
- Vyagatha Yoga up to 11.36 am
- Bharani Nakshatra up to 12.36 am
- Moon enters Taurus sign 6.09 am

FORECAST

SUNSET	SATURDAY	18:20 HRS
SUNRISE	SUNDAY	06:11 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	23
New Delhi	35	24
Amritsar	35	24
Bathinda	35	25
Jalandhar	35	26
Ludhiana	35	24
Bhiwani	34	25
Hisar	34	25
Sirsa	35	25
Dharamsala	32	20
Manali	25	15
Shimla	26	16
Srinagar	26	16
Jammu	33	21
Kargil	26	08
Leh	23	05
Dehradun	33	23
Mussoorie	24	17

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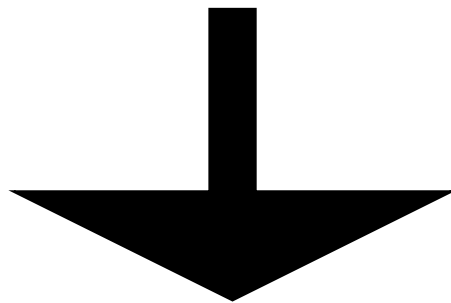
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