



# GROUND ZERO



Omkar Dinanath, a resident of Kathua's Saida village, was fired upon by militants. He sustained a bullet injury in the arm.  
IMRAN NISSAR

## Fighting militants in the mountains

This year, officials recorded the highest militant footprint in Jammu region since 2005. Insurgents have revived old infiltration routes and set up base in the Pir Panjal and Chenab valleys, seeking cover in dense forests and caves. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports on the worries and challenges of the security forces in tackling this problem

It has been 45 days since 20-year-old Abishkek Badkali's father, Amarjit Sharma, a chemist, was murdered at night in Mela village in Kathua district of Jammu division. His family and the residents of Mela are still in shock. They have near heard of brutal murders taking place in this region, located in the lush green Shivalik hills in the outer Himalayas.

A charpoy lies at the entrance of the single-storey house of the family. This is where the family – Abishek, his mother, and sister – gather for some respite from the unbearably hot rooms inside. The backyards of the small cluster of houses in Mela village are dotted with the deciduous Khair trees, and Chir pines; the forest stretches out ahead. Venturing deep into them could be dangerous for many, but for militants, whose presence has been increasing in the region, the density provides cover and security.

Abishek, a science graduate, says his father, 49, left the house at 10 p.m. for a walk on June 9. "I was relaxing on the terrace. When he didn't return, we called him on his phone, but he didn't answer. When we started searching for him on the narrow track leading to the forest, we saw him lying dead on the ground, with his face towards the surface. There was a deep, long cut on his neck," he says.

The residents of Mela are certain that militants killed their beloved "doctor sahib". "We all suspect that my father spotted the local guide of the militants. They may have killed him to ensure that the identity of the guide does not get revealed," says Abishek.

After the dilution of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 2019, which ended the special status of the erstwhile State, more and more militants have been entering Jammu, according to senior security officials. They say this is "a deliberate and desperate bid to destabilise the region after the abrogation of Article 370 integrated J&K into the mainstream."

The government believed that militancy had ended in the Jammu region by 2005 after security forces had launched major operations. In 2020, however, 18 militants were killed in the area. In 2021, militants made the Pir Panjal valley, comprising Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu division, their new base and began attacking Army camps and convoys, especially in Dera Ki Gali and Bhata Dhurian.

Now, militancy has spilled over into the Doda, Ramban, and Kishtwar districts in Chenab valley in Jammu division. Twelve security personnel, including 11 soldiers from the Army, were killed this year in the Jammu division. So were five militants. Fourteen militant attacks were reported in June and July alone this year – nearly one every four days. Security officials describe the Pir Panjal and the Chenab valleys as "Jammu's Tora Bora", the mountain ranges in Afghanistan where al-Qaeda survived for years.

### Kathua, a transit route

On June 11, two days after Amarjit Sharma's body was recovered, two militants surfaced in Saida village, just 10 kilometres away. They knocked on the shutters of a *kirana* shop that sells basic necessities, such as oil, salt, and spices.

"I was sleeping on the floor when I heard them knock," says 62-year-old Maniram Sharma, the owner. "I saw two boys in their 20s with guns. One sported a short beard. The other had shaven his moustache. They asked for water. Before they came to me, I had heard a loud bang. I heard later that they had opened fire nearby. I noticed that they had a Lahori accent, which is used on

Militants have revived old infiltration routes in Jammu region, especially using the International Border  
Senior police officer

the other side of Punjab (Pakistan)."

According to locals, the militants had opened fire in the village. One unidentified militant died after a grenade exploded in his hand. Another, who ran towards the forest and later killed a jawan of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), was killed in a 15-hour-long anti-militancy operation, carried out jointly by the J&K Police and the CRPF. The militants also opened fire on civilian houses. Omkar Dinanath, a civilian, was hit in the arm and carries a scar. The incident has also left a bullet mark on the wall of his house.

Since the encounter, the residents of Saida return home early and are suspicious of outsiders. "People have grown fearful. We are poor. We have to tend fields and cattle to survive," says Shankar Chand, a resident of Saida.

The police recovered knives from the militants at the encounter site. They have sent them to the forensic science laboratory to determine whether one of these was used to kill Amarjit Sharma.

"Even at the peak of militancy in J&K (in the 1990s) and in Punjab (mid-1980s to the mid-1990s), we never encountered a gunman in Saida village. The government must find a political solution to end militancy," says Maniram.

Located around 20 km from the International Border (IB) between India and Pakistan, Saida village, much like many other villages in Kathua, is being used as a transit route by militants from Pakistan, say police officials. They describe how militants dig tunnels and enter the region.

On July 5, a farmer stumbled on one such tunnel in Thangli village in the Hiranagar sector of Kathua, when the water from his farmland started draining only at one point, 500 metres away from the border. Security forces have started a major exercise on the IB to detect underground tunnels but admit that it "is humanly impossible to sanitise the entire region" on a daily basis.

Kathua, a Hindu-majority district, is adjacent to Punjab. The police say the militants use the area to fan out into nearby districts such as Doda, which has become the new battleground.

That militants are shifting their base is nothing new in Kashmir. In the last three decades, militant commanders have shifted their base from north Kashmir to central Kashmir and later to south Kashmir. However, security agents say they did not think that the militants would shift to districts where they have little local support.

"Militants have revived old infiltration routes in Jammu region, especially using the IB, in Kathua and Samba. And also in Punjab. These routes were active during the Punjab militancy, which impacted Jammu too, and also during the peak of Kashmir militancy. All these routes had dried up by 2000 due to the efforts of security forces," says a senior police official, who recently attend-

ed a high-level inter-State meeting of top officials of the Army, Border Security Force, and police from J&K and Punjab, in Kathua.

### A challenging terrain

A Jammu-based Army officer says the highest militant footprint in Jammu region since 2005 has been recorded this year. "The terrain is being used by terrorists to their advantage. It is a challenging situation, but we are prepared to defeat them," he says.

Security agencies say this is "a deliberate move to achieve certain strategic goals including raising the cost of the conflict by forcing troop de-induction (the withdrawal of troops from conflict areas) and re-induction (redeployment of troops where trouble resurfaces) processes, subverting troop thinning exercises, and shifting focus from the Ladakh front".

The Army has re-inducted more than 700 soldiers this month. It has stepped up patrolling in the Pir Panjal and Chenab valleys. It also uses drones to patrol the dense forests. An official says a tip-off about the presence of militants from the upper reaches of the Doda mountain region takes the Army anywhere between six hours to a few days to reach the spot. The mountain slopes are sparsely populated and dotted with caves, which the militants use for shelter.

The forest area in Jammu is eight times the size of Delhi. Militants who were dominating the Pir Panjal valley, a mix of coniferous and deciduous forests, between 2020 and 2023 are shifting towards higher peaks and the forests of the Chenab valley, says a senior police official.

"The upper reaches in the Pir Panjal and Chenab valleys are far away from the roads. It takes the Army days to patrol these pockets by foot and return to their bases," the Army officer says.

In Doda, the mountains are 1,200-1,500 ft high. The militants have been spotted in the upper reaches of the Bhalessa, Chattergala, and Dossa forests. "This arc has provided strategic depth to militants," says a senior police official.

"They are operating from the upper ridges. The presence of nomads in the upper reaches in summer makes it easy for the militants to fetch food. They keep changing their locations. They get to know about the Army's movement because of their positions," says a senior police officer, who led anti-militancy operations in the Doda belt in the recent past.

Doda was a hub for militants in the 1990s. According to police data, 118 locals have shifted to Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir since the 1990s. The police have begun to re-open old cases against locals and seal the houses of suspected active militants. Such action has pushed many people who joined the mainstream back to the margin, say residents.

### Change in modus operandi

Jammu is witnessing a dynamic shift in militancy. According to Army officials, terrorists no longer engage the security forces in a stand-off fire, but lay an ambush with the intention of killing them and fleeing from the spot. "They are highly trained in jungle warfare," says an Army officer.

The arrest of two locals – Nissar Ahmad, 56, a resident of Rajouri's Gursai, in April 2023; and Hakam Din, 40, a resident of Rajouri's Bandhrahahi, in June this year – gave officials an idea about the modus operandi of the militants. Ahmad allegedly hosted a group of them, who later carried out an attack in Dangri that left seven civilians dead in January 2023. Din allegedly sheltered a group of militants who were responsible for the attack in Reasi in June, which left nine pilgrims

dead and more than 33 people injured. Ahmad, the father of two schoolgoing children, has also been accused of ferrying weapons for the militants. He had militant links in the 1990s, but stayed silent all these years, the police say.

According to the police, militants do not rely on locals for shelter for a long period of time; they remain on the move. There is growing evidence that the militants use mobile apps like Alpine, which trekkers use, to cover steep slopes of mountains, without accessing the Internet.

Din did not have any association with militants earlier, but hosted the Reasi attackers. He admitted that he informed the militants about the movement of the pilgrims' bus, say the police. In fact, he stayed in the area where the attack took place, in Teryath village near Shiv Khori area, to provide a cue to the attackers about the movement of the bus, say the police. "Din's role went beyond providing shelter. His ideological inclination too is under investigation," says another senior police officer.

Both Din and Ahmad belong to the Gujjar community. A police officer says the support network for the militants could increase because of various factors, such as increasing polarisation between Hindus and Muslims. The Gujjars feel alienated after a new reservation policy included the Paharis, who, they believe, are a linguistic group and well-off. Growing unemployment could also push more Gujjars into the support network, he says. The Rajouri-Poonch belt is home to around 11 lakh Gujjars and Bakerwals. Hundreds of them have been rounded up for questioning in the past three years, especially around areas where militants attacked security forces. Army officials say they have set up special mobile schools, and medical patrols for Gujjars, Bakerwals, and even their livestock, "to reach out to the population".

### From across the border

Police officials also worry that the effects of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020 will spill over into J&K.

"In the past, locals would mostly say Urdu and Punjabi-speaking militants passed by or stayed with them. Sometimes, Pashto-speaking militants roamed the forests too. Whether they are from Afghanistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (a province in Pakistan close to Afghanistan) has to be investigated," says another senior police officer.

Officials point out that the increasing use of U.S.-made M4 carbine, steel bullets, guns fitted with night thermal cameras, Glock and Beretta pistols, Austria-made Steyr AUG rifles, and Turkey-made rifles indicate this spillover.

"Handling guns fitted with night thermal cameras requires a higher degree of training. Those are not like pistols or AK rifles, which are easier to fire from," says a police officer.

"Most active militants have also changed the way they dress. Khan suits and Afghan headgear are hardly found in the photos that were recovered during investigation. The militants don't have flowing beards. A militant roams around the way an Army trooper would. It is hard to differentiate the two," he adds.

With winter approaching in a few months, the upper reaches will be covered in snow and will turn hostile for the militants. Security agencies fear that the militants will come down the mountains, which could mean more encounters. "Our bigger worry is that they may recruit locals in the Doda belt. That could prove disastrous. It is a hard-earned peace in Doda for security agencies. But the high unemployment rate, inflation, and polarisation could all be exploited by them. We need to take measures now," says a police officer.



Abishek Badkali's father, Amarjit Sharma, a chemist, was murdered at night in Mela village in Kathua district of Jammu division. IMRAN NISSAR















INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION. —Ramnath Goenka

### CPM'S LEAP OF FAITH COULD HELP ENSURE POLITICAL SURVIVAL

KARL Marx wrote, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions... it is the opium of the people." The German philosopher, considered the father of communism, denied the existence of a divine being and predicted that communism would eventually eliminate the need for religion. Yet, more than a century later, we have a situation where India's main communist party, the CPI(M), is being pushed to deviate from its long-standing policy and adopt a liberal stance on matters of faith. With its survival at stake, the CPI(M) in Kerala has reportedly decided to offer legitimacy to religious belief among its members, allowing them to practice rituals and visit places of worship. Not just that—the party is encouraging its members to take the reins of temples. This change of stance, a major turn in the history of communism in India, reverses the resolutions adopted at the party's 2013 Palakkad plenum. The plenum had restrained leaders and cadres from performing religious rituals and visiting temples. It had also banned party members from being part of temple committees. But the debacle in two successive parliamentary elections was a reality check. The leadership is now certain its historical rigidity on matters of faith had cost the party a serious erosion of support base, especially among the Hindu votes it had banked on for decades. The shift in policy is both necessary and timely. It could help the party fight the onslaught of the BJP and ensure continued political relevance. The fact is that faith has a tight grip on Indian society and a vast majority of people are believers. Accepting this and adapting itself gives any political organisation a chance to survive. What happened in the 2024 election is an indication of what is in store for communist parties in Kerala, the only state where they are in power. The CPI(M) witnessed a mass erosion of its traditional vote bank, especially in the Ezhava support base. Atheism has been central to communist policy, but sticking to militant atheism can prove fatal when the party is fighting for survival after losing ground nationally. However, in its attempts to regain strength, the party must not pander to communal sentiments and shed its secular character. Inclusiveness can ensure longevity, but turning to communalism could end the communist cause completely.

### T'GANA STRIKES BALANCE, FUNDS REMAIN A WORRY

THE ₹2,91,159-crore first budget of the Congress government in Telangana is quite attractive at first glance. Finance Minister M Bhatti Vikramarka, while complaining of a legacy debt burden of ₹6.71 lakh crore, still made generous allocations to big-ticket schemes, rural water supply, and improving infrastructure in Hyderabad—striking a balance between welfare and development. Of the total outlay, revenue expenditure is projected to be ₹2,20,945 crore and capital expenditure ₹33,487 crore. In this, a lion's share of ₹72,659 crore has been set aside for agriculture to fund the state's ambitious welfare schemes, including a crop loan waiver that alone works out to ₹31,000 crore. The intention to execute priority irrigation projects is significant, as is the decision to join the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana since crop insurance has been a major problem for the farming community. But the million-rupee question is whether the revenue receipts would be up to the expectations. The budget estimates that the total revenue receipts would be about ₹2,90,814 crore, including public debt of ₹62,112 crore. Of the total revenue expenditure, public disbursements account ₹Rs 17,001 crore, including debt repayment of ₹13,117 crore. The actual receipts might fall short of the estimates. In 2023-24, as per the revised estimates, the receipts stood at ₹2,26,095 crore against the anticipated ₹2,89,672 crore—a substantial shortfall. Already burdened under the weight of the ₹6-lakh-crore debt, the state government may be averse to go in for additional loans in case the revenue receipts do not match up to expectations. The only other alternative for the state is monetising its assets. But going by history, getting a good price depends on the prevailing macroeconomic trends. In such a case, the finance minister would have to do a tightrope walk by pruning the size of the welfare schemes despite the risk of being taken to task by the opposition and the people. On the bright side, the government has sought to walk the talk on making Hyderabad, the crest jewel of Telangana, into a world-class city. The proposal to extend the metro to the Old City and the airport is surely the need of the hour. Similarly, getting the new Hyderabad Disaster Relief and Asset Protection Agency operational is a welcome step.

#### QUICK TAKE

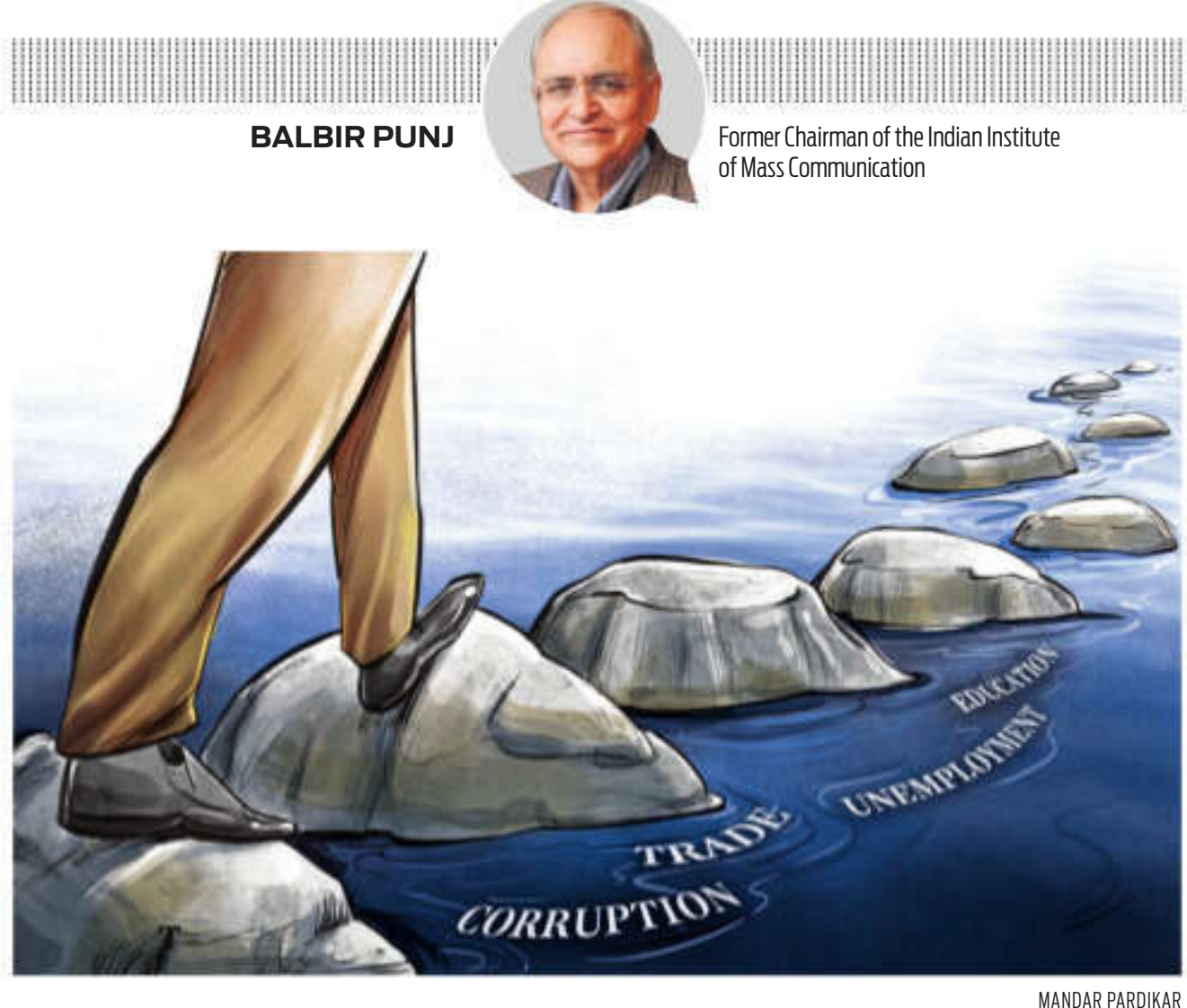
### MORE ATTENTION TO ADHD

ATTENTION deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, one of the most common mental disorders affecting children, is on the rise worldwide. The symptoms, which include inattention, excessive movements and impulsivity, can be manifest among adults too. A recent call from British doctors focused the world's attention on whether there is overdiagnosis of the disorder. One meta-analysis suggests that ADHD is indeed overdiagnosed among both children and adolescents in the US. We, in India, are far below those diagnostic curves. But with dropout and suicide rates among schoolchildren rising, we need to increase our attention on their mental health. Schools would be the most fitting place to start.

THE 2024-25 Budget is a smart fusion of political stratagem, coalition compulsions and deft moves to accelerate economic growth to help realise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's resolve to turn India into a developed nation by 2047. However, given the domestic constraints and a dismal emerging global economic scenario, the NDA government's quest to make India a global financial powerhouse is fraught with serious challenges. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have disturbed global supply lines and devastated the world markets a great deal. No wonder the latest forecast for global growth five years from now, at 3 percent, is the lowest in decades. The rise of India would be hamstrung by this bleak international scene, because a vibrant Indian economy will need to increasingly engage with the rest of the world. The budget is undoubtedly an exercise to retrieve the political ground the BJP lost to the opposition in the Lok Sabha polls. But it's not populist or irresponsible. The underlying theme is fiscal prudence and consolidation. The promise to peg the fiscal deficit at 4.9 percent of GDP in 2024-25 is a significant reduction from 5.6 percent last year. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also reiterated her resolve to reduce the deficit to below 4.5 percent by next year. The misgivings about India emerging as a developed nation over two decades from now aren't entirely misplaced. The country faces some insurmountable challenges that are difficult to deal with, particularly with a fractured polity that has evolved post-2014. Toxic narratives divorced from reality are banded about to derail public discourse. Caste identity, a divisive signature tune, is the season's flavour. What's the basis for believing that Modi's vision of a developed India is not just a pipe dream but something doable? His track record. During his previous two terms, Modi managed to break the mould. Defying the system, he ensured the delivery of benefits to people sans leakage. Modi made available gas connections, foodgrain, toilets, housing, drinking water and road connectivity to crores of Indians. As a result, poverty levels dropped drastically. Today, India is among the world's fastest-growing large economies, with a GDP growth above 8 percent. But here is the proverbial catch. The aspirations of millions who have moved out of the morass of poverty have since outgrown what state freebies can offer. This exploding phenomenon is full of uncharted

Among the things that need fixing for India to become a developed nation by 2047 are education, agriculture and power. Judicial and bureaucratic reforms would also be essential

### 7 RED FLAGS THAT CAN SOUR INDIA'S GROWTH STORY



BALBIR PUNJ Former Chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication

challenges and unexplored opportunities. The expectations of India's young millions have soared to unprecedented levels. They now want access to a decent standard of living. But can India meet their aspirations? There are seven red flags that can hold the country back. **Education and jobs:** Among the 'real' challenges India faces, the latest Economic Survey has outlined the lack of jobs. According to the survey, the country must create an estimated 78.5 lakh jobs annually. The government has launched five schemes to fix the problem. It's a patchwork solution and leaves the core problem untouched. The issue is not unemployment, but 'unemployability'. Leaving aside some islands of world-class academic excellence, most organisations styled as educational institutions don't dispense education or talent, just degrees. The state-run education system is broken. There is no serious effort to resurrect it. According to the 2023 Annual Survey of Education, almost a quarter of all Indians aged 14-18 cannot fluently read a class 2 text in their regional language. Only 43 percent can solve simple division sums. There are millions of slots waiting for qualified candidates. India ranked seventh in a talent shortage, with 81 percent of employers reporting difficulty finding a skilled workforce. The skill gap is estimated at 2.2.5 million. It's difficult to miss the irony—millions of jobs going begging while countless remain unemployed. **Rising trade gap with China:** The In-

### THE MACROECONOMIC MAGIC OF DESI WEDDINGS

HIS has been a month of heavy lifting for macroeconomists—and I am not necessarily talking about the Union Budget presented earlier this week. The week before that was full of social media posts extolling the virtues of job creation and economic growth fuelled by India's most talked-about wedding that took place 11 days before Nirmala Sitharaman presented her proposals. Apart from 24x7 cricket and politics experts, we now have a macroeconomic species—a tribe that struggled to apply the brakes on adverse gossip floating on the Anant Ambani-Radhika Merchant wedding that, as unconfirmed but gloriously similar guesstimates go, has been pegged at \$600 million or about ₹5,000 crore. The said experts probably included people who had never heard of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist who told us how government spending can kick-start sluggish economies. All you need to do is switch the government with the Ambani family and you have New Age Keynesianism. "The government should pay people to dig holes in the ground and then fill them up," said the economist who famously took Britain out of the Great Depression in the 1930s. "It doesn't matter what they do as long as the government is creating jobs." We had folks telling us on Facebook that wedding planners, decorators, caterers, dress designers and a whole load of other service providers found profitable opportunities as the Ambanis splurged on a months-long event that spanned pre-wedding dos, foreign cruises and other ceremonies I am not inclined to research on. Understandably, the macroeconomic fallout included those who ordered dresses of their own or built up other expenses to attend the celebrations. Much like the Keynesian variety, wedding budgets have the multiplier effect. Besides, we are reminded that the Ambanis spent their own money, not that of taxpayers. Nuanced spoilsports may say the twain are joined at the hip by political connections. But that's for naysayers. The positive spin on wedding expenditure should silence those who were gossiping about everything, from who showed up and who did not to how Justin Bieber—attending the event in what looked like a rural Punjabi's underwear—did not quite match the glittering bandh-gala opulence of most celebrity male guests. Murmured protests on the morality of ostentation are bound to get somewhat

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REVERSE SWING

blunted by macroeconomics. One LinkedIn writer claimed she was offered incentives to write good things about the mega wedding after social inequalities and vanity became part of the chatter. We do not quite know if the macroeconomic experts answering the ₹5,000-crore questions on the wedding were from the Ambani School of Economics or the Jio School of Public Relations, both of which do not exist. However, a reverse swing of macroeconomics that shifts spending from the exchequer to *desi* parents can partially address both PR issues and unemployment. But let this be said clearly: Mukesh Dhirubhai Ambani is not the inventor of opulence and vanity in *desi* weddings, though he might have just upped the microeconomic limits of celebrations. Weeks before the Anant-Radhika wedding, share market brokerage Jefferies said that India's wedding industry is approximately worth about ₹10 lakh crore (\$130 billion) and is second only to the food and groceries market. To put things in perspective, Mukesh and Nita Ambani accounted for only 0.005 percent of India's annual marriage ceremony market. Jeffries says India sees about 80 lakh to a crore weddings a year, compared to 70-80 lakh in China and 20-25 lakh in the US. The Chinese, however, spend more than the other two. India may be fast heading there. I should know a thing or two about this. I have a friend who, with his wife, started a pioneering bridal exhibition and fashion show three decades ago. "Weddings are a recession-proof industry in India," I recall him saying. The band, the baja, and baraats do not quite stop in India, though Covid nearly managed that. I have a friend who quit a successful career as a TV journalist to start a lucrative wedding shoot company and another who gave up a software engineer's job to become a wedding photographer. My anecdote matches the macro numbers thrown by market researchers. Even the uninvited, substantially unwashed part of the populace can have a slice of Ambani-ness. A viral video from Delhi's Sarojini Nagar market had a shopkeeper flaunting a precious stone necklace he said was identical to one worn by Nita Ambani. Available in various colours and costing only Rs 178 apiece, this imitation jewellery may inspire more macro conversations. What's more, we have weddings expanding in time to include pre-wedding and post-wedding dos. Tamilians, at least the Brahmin variety, were used to a fun-and-games ceremony called *nalangu*. We now have added the saangeet ceremony imported from the North. The Big Fat Punjabi Wedding is now the Big Fat Pan-*Desi* Wedding. We may soon incorporate tribal rituals as a patriotic contribution to national integration. We are not yet talking of post-wedding gigs that involve a public display of pregnancy. You just have to look at Instagram posts to know flaunting baby bumps has been borrowed from Western showbiz in an ever-expanding idea of marital bliss. Arguably, this is not the demand curve Keynesians speak of. Nevertheless, you could say India is always ahead of the curve in the macroeconomics of marriage. (Views are personal) (On X @madviversity)

Human decisions affecting the future cannot depend on strict mathematical expectation, since the basis for making such calculations does not exist. It is our innate urge to activity which makes the wheels go round

John Maynard Keynes

#### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

**Overwhelming process**  
Ref: Kannadiga quota bill needs to be reconsidered (Jul 26). It is true that ensuring compliance to the hiring quota for Kannadigas will be an overwhelming process. While locals must get a fair chance to work in big firms, it should not be upon the firms to prepare said workforce. That is the government's responsibility. Appeasement politics cannot lead a people to growth.  
**Vishnupriya Kanichodi, Chennai**

**Employment equality**  
The proposed bill is likely to face significant challenges in implementation and legality. The requirement for extensive state machinery to ensure compliance places an enormous administrative burden, making enforcement impractical. Furthermore, such a reservation policy may conflict with constitutional provisions on equality and freedom of movement and employment, thereby failing legal scrutiny.  
**Narayanan Kizhundayar, Thrissur**

**Reforming examinations**  
Ref: NEET solution in fixing the system, not scrapping it (Jul 26). The editorial clearly points out the need for NEET. Scrapping the exam amounts to robbing deserving students of a wonderful opportunity. Can the states against NEET make their own examinations foolproof? Certainly such large scale competitive examinations need to be reformed.  
**P Prema, Thanjavur**

**Common syllabus**  
The NEET system is good for students and parents as it is a centralised exam, especially as many students go to different cities across India to study. It will be better if the government brings out a common syllabus for class 8 to 12 instead of CBSE, ICSE or state board so that all students can be brought to the same platform.  
**Sreenivasan Raman, Bengaluru**

**Root cause**  
Scrapping the NEET is not the solution. We must identify the root cause for the exam system's failure. The nation can't afford to keep the careers of so many students on the chopping board year on year, so systemic reforms are needed.  
**Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam**

**Heroic driver**  
It was heart-wrenching to read the news of a school bus driver in Tiruppur who saved the lives of 20 students when he stopped the bus just in time before collapsing due to cardiac arrest. It is a tragic yet heroic incident as the bus driver's altruistic act saved precious young lives. This humanitarian act is truly inspiring.  
**R Sivakumar, Chennai**







# Go all out to end Pakistan's low-intensity war in J&K



**LT GEN HARBHAJAN SINGH (RETD)**  
FORMER SIGNAL OFFICER-IN-CHIEF

**P**AKISTAN has not come to terms with the fact that Jammu and Kashmir did not join it after India gained Independence in August 1947 and was partitioned, in spite of an invasion launched by our neighbour just two months after it came into being. Wars launched in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971 to attain the goal by force of arms also failed. So, in 1989, Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) began a separatist, jihadist, anti-minority and armed insurgency in J&K to achieve this end. In spite of the legal accession of J&K to India in 1947, besides the conduct of elections, the grant of considerable aid and development projects, there exists a tendency among some Kashmiri brethren to lean towards Muslim-majority Pakistan, even though it is a failed and unstable state. The true colours of the separatist movement must be seen in the light of the

genocide of Kashmiri Pandits in 1990-91, the community's exodus from the Kashmir valley and the inaction of the Indian state. There was no dispute among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in J&K; all of them had imbibed Kashmiriyat for centuries, irrespective of their religion. Then why did this horrific cleansing take place in the Valley? India's policy has been to block the infiltration of terrorists along the International Border (IB)/Line of Control (LoC). In 2004, a fence was constructed to that end. Terrorists who still manage to infiltrate are hunted down by the security forces — comprising Rashtriya Rifles and Central Armed Police Forces personnel — based on the intelligence gained from local informers and other means. Action is also taken against terrorist sympathisers and sleeper cells. But since the intruders enjoy some local support, they manage to carry out some attacks. The Indian authorities are fully aware that terrorism or insurgency cannot sustain without local support. Persistent efforts have been made to win over the hearts of locals and create an intelligence network. Considerable development has taken place in the region, and tourism is booming. However, Pakistan has



**UPPING THE ANTE:** Pakistan has dared to transform the armed insurgency/terrorist movement into a low-intensity war — ambushing and killing soldiers and attacking military units. PTI

dared to transform the armed insurgency/terrorist movement into a low-intensity war — ambushing and killing soldiers, attacking military units and headquarters, including the strategic Pathankot Air Force base in Punjab and targeting civilians. If this is not war, what is it? However, India still deals with it as terrorism, not a war. No war, whether it is a low-intensity or full-scale one, can be won by defensive actions. This is a basic principle of war and

geopolitics. Top decision-makers, both civil and military, need to realise this. In case what Pakistan is doing in J&K is considered to be just terrorism and not a low-intensity war, the paramilitary forces should handle it under the Minister of Home. And the Army should do its primary job of guarding the IB/LoC. But if the realisation dawns that a low-intensity war is indeed being waged, the Army should be directed to take the action necessary in the event of a war.

The Indian authorities are fully aware that terrorism or insurgency cannot sustain without local support.

## People ignore shared heritage at their own peril



**NEERA CHANDHOKE**  
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

**T**HE Uttar Pradesh Government's order (now stayed by the Supreme Court) that eateries along the route taken by *kanwariyas* display the names of owners is yet another instance of a deeply flawed understanding of our shared traditions that constitute culture; it is another example of how the BJP is capitalising on mischievous colonial readings of Islamic rule. According to historian Richard M Eaton, much of the contemporary evidence of temple desecration is to be found in Persian material translated and published during the period of British rule. The eight-volume *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* was edited and published by Prof John Dowson (from the papers of Sir Henry Elliot) between 1867 and 1877. Elliot was keen to contrast the justice and efficiency of the British rule with the cruelty and despotism of Muslim rulers. He cherry-picked facts from history.

Noted historian Mohammed Habib, in his inaugural address to the 1947 Indian History Congress, stated that according to colonialists, the peaceful Indian Mussalman, descended beyond doubt from Hindu ancestors, was dressed up in the garb of a foreign barbarian, as a breaker of temples, as an eater of beef, and declared to be a military colonialist in a land in which he had had lived for millennia. Elliot, he alleged, had selectively used pre-modern Persian chronicles. This was not only unethical but also designed to harm social relations in plural society. Pluralism implies that when we walk through the garden of religions and their cultures in India — Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity — we become conscious that our cultural contexts are shaped by the poetry of Mirza Ghalib and Sahir Ludhianvi as well as the insightful writings of Guru Gobind Singh and Premchand. Consider the advantages of living and breathing a plural culture. We do not need a fixed identity marker or a hook we desperately cling to for security. We do not look for an unbreakable anchor that connects us to land, because we tremble in fear at the stormy waters of the



**DIVERSITY:** Consider the advantages of living and breathing a plural culture. We do not need a fixed identity marker or a hook we desperately cling to for security. PTI

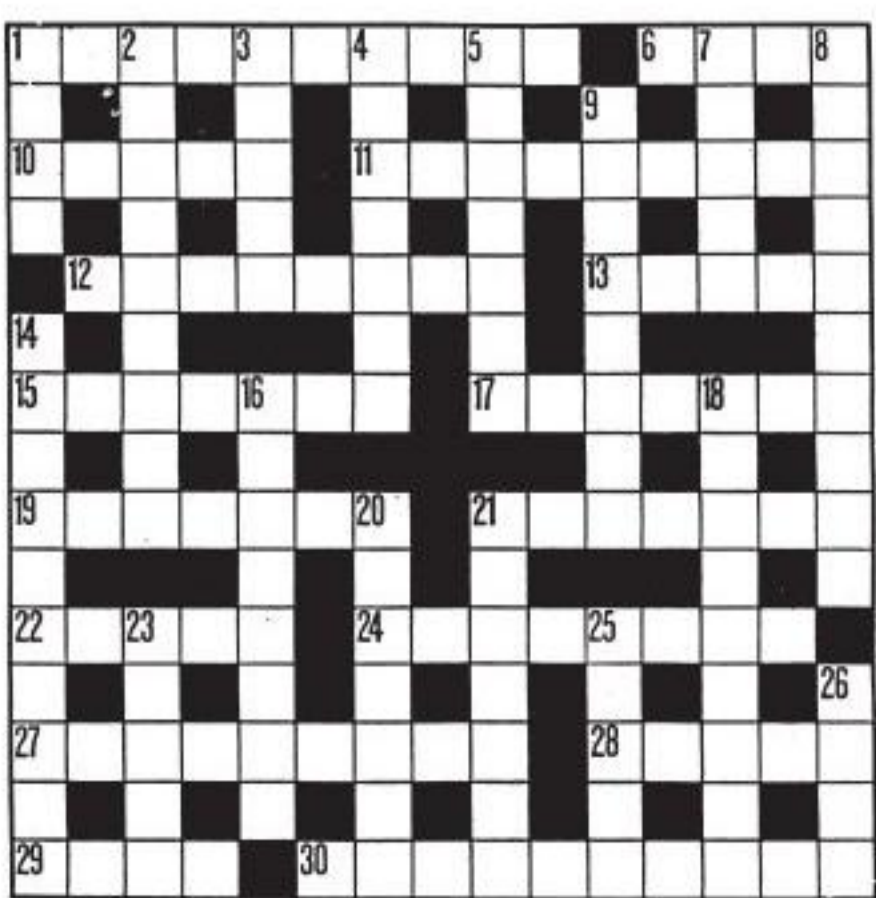
sea. We are free. As Sufi saint Bulle Shah memorably said: "Bulla ki jaana main kaun... na mein bhed mazhab de paya/Na mein aadam hawwa jaya/Na koi apna naam dharaya (Bulle, how do I know who I am? I have not fathomed the mysteries of religion/ I was not born to Adam and Eve/ I have no fixed name)." Alternatively, we think of ourselves as the product of many cultures. Young Urdu poet Hussain Haidry

Think of how rich, how creative our life becomes once we recognise and appreciate our *Sanjhi Virasat*.

Sao Paulo exhibition. One whole section of the gallery was devoted to his illustrations from the *Mahabharata*. When asked whether he was a Muslim, he replied, "Yes, but I am an Indian and my roots are deeper and older than Islam". This sensibility is part of our shared legacy, for which the evocative Hindi/Punjabi phrase is *Sanjhi Virasat*. It is this *Sanjhi Virasat* we can recover by once again interpreting our history not as wholly conflictual but also marked by co-existence of shared traditions. How can we think creatively, unless we do so in a context that offers us ideas and ideals we can draw upon? This shared culture is ours, it forms the context of our lives and our consciousness. As far as amoral politicians go, Jigar Moradabadi gave an answer back in 1960: "Unka jo farz hai, woh *ahl-e-siyasat* jaamein/mera paigam mohabbat hai, jahan tak pahunche (Let the politicians do their job, my message is that of love, wherever it reaches)." The phrase 'Sanjhi Virasat' brings to mind a tapestry woven in different hues that interweave to create amazingly spectacular pictures. The moment we turn over the tapestry, different strands

stand out as distinct, and yet as a part of an intricate process of coming together. We borrow from each other and lend to each other, but this does not imply the obliteration of our own identity. We speak in many tongues and each language is distinctive in its own right, but we also speak languages that are in common with others. This shared tradition constitutes our culture that guides our relationships to each other in contemporary society. People ignore the history of fusion at their own peril. Think of how rich, how creative our life becomes once we recognise and appreciate our *Sanjhi Virasat*. To quote Haidry again: "*Mujhme Gita ka saar bhi hai/Ek Urdu ka akhbar bhi hai/Mera ek mahina Ramzan bhi hai/Maine kiya toh Ganga snaan bhi hai... Mandir ki chaukhat meri hai/Masjid ke Qible mere hain/Gurdwara ka darbaar mera/Yeshe ke girje mere hain* (I carry within me the essence of the Gita but also an Urdu newspaper, the month of Ramzan is mine, I have also bathed in the Ganga, the threshold of a temple is mine, the minarets of the mosque are mine, the darbaar of the gurdwara is mine, and the church is mine)." This is *Sanjhi Virasat*.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Unyielding (10)
- Bitter feeling (4)
- Smaller-scale replica (5)
- Take no account of (3,6)
- Leadership (8)
- Relay runners' stick (5)
- In particular (7)
- Speak ill of (7)
- Frightful (7)
- Spread out (7)
- Finnish dry-heat bath (5)
- South American country (8)
- Vegetable allied to the thistle (9)
- Judicial examination (5)
- Be entitled to (4)
- Behaving as expected (4,2,4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Panther, 5 Fraud, 8 Ill humour, 9 Tub, 10 True, 12 Generous, 14 Cravat, 15 Uppity, 17 In a panic, 18 Type, 21 Pin, 22 Lethargic, 24 Extol, 25 Minimal.  
Down: 1 Point, 2 Nil, 3 Haul, 4 Rooted, 5 For keeps, 6 Authority, 7 Debussy, 11 Up against, 13 Parallel, 14 Cripple, 16 Victim, 19 Excel, 20 Pain, 23 Gem.

DOWN

- Be in suppressed rage (4)
- Indubitable (9)
- Uninterrupted (5)
- Seemingly supernatural (7)
- Place of seclusion (7)
- Overhead (5)
- Second largest US city (3,7)
- Sheath for sword (8)
- In the theatrical profession (2,3,5)
- Resilience (8)
- Agreement among all present (9)
- Assistance in time of need (7)
- Mitigate monotony of (7)
- Pronounce (5)
- Maxim as rule of conduct (5)
- Useful piece of evidence (4)

SU DO KU

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

HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JULY 27, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Shravan Shaka 5
- Shravan Parvishte 12
- Hijari 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 7, up to 9.20 pm
- Dhriti Yoga up to 10.44 pm
- Revti Nakshatra up to 1.00 pm
- Moon enters Aries sign 1.00 pm
- Panchak ended 1.00 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	27
New Delhi	34	26
Amritsar	37	27
Bathinda	38	30
Jalandhar	37	30
Ludhiana	36	28
Bhivani	37	30
Hisar	36	29
Sirsa	39	30
Dharamsala	28	23
Manaali	29	14
Shimla	25	17
Srinagar	35	21
Jammu	34	25
Kargil	32	18
Leh	30	15
Dehradun	31	23
Mussoorie	21	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Honouring the heroes

Kargil Vijay Diwas marks India's triumph over adversity and the enduring spirit of its armed forces

Twenty-five years ago, India won a war that was thrust upon it. The war with Pakistan was won by some exemplary soldiers who fought valiantly and many laid their lives for the honour of the country. Kargil Vijay Diwas, commemorating the victory in the Kargil War against Pakistan in 1999 is celebrated on July 26. Prime Minister Modi paid rich tributes to the martyrs on the Vijay Diwas at Kargil Memorial. This year is special as the nation celebrates the silver jubilee of the victory. Prime Minister Modi visited the Kargil War Memorial in Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, to pay homage to the brave soldiers. However, the Indian borders are still far from secure. Terrorist activities are on the rise. So the big question is where do we stand today? Have we learnt our lessons? The Kargil War took place in the months of May and July 1999 and was a result of Pakistan's infiltration into the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistani soldiers, disguised as militants, occupied strategic heights in the Kargil sector of Jammu and Kashmir.



This unexpected intrusion led to Operation Vijay; a historic military campaign launched by India to reclaim the occupied territories. Despite the adverse circumstances, the Indian Armed Forces displayed unparalleled bravery and strategic acumen. The conflict culminated on July 26, 1999, with India successfully regaining control over the occupied regions. The Kargil expedition of Pakistan was indeed an eye-opener. India came to know of it rather late and that too from the locals who reported suspicious activity in the hills.

This was indeed a glaring intelligence failure that cost more than five hundred lives of soldiers. The war underscored the need for better intelligence and surveillance. India has since fortified its intelligence network and improved border security to prevent such infiltrations. The Kargil War also highlighted the importance of modern weaponry and equipment. In response, India has made significant investments in modernising its military capabilities. But the biggest lesson learnt by the Indian army was to prepare itself for high-altitude warfare. The conflict emphasised the need for specialised training for high-altitude warfare. The Indian Army has since established dedicated training programs and infrastructure to prepare soldiers for such challenging environments. The war also showcased the significance of international diplomacy. India effectively garnered global support against Pakistan's actions, leading to increased diplomatic pressure on Islamabad. The lessons learnt from the conflict have led to significant advancements in military strategy, technology, and international relations. However, we have a long way to go as the strained relations with two neighbours — Pakistan and China — can anytime erupt into a war. Indeed, Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Kargil War Memorial serves as a reminder of the nation's gratitude and respect for its armed forces. It also reinforces the commitment to safeguarding the nation's integrity and sovereignty. Jai Hind!

### PICTALK



A soldier pays homage at the Kargil War Memorial on the 'Kargil Vijay Diwas', in Drass

PTI

# Urban violence: Human nature vs city life



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Urban violence and crime persist globally, often blamed on policing and socio-economic factors. However, the deeper cause is the conflict between urban life and human nature

Urban violence and crime have been matters of continuing global concern. While the quality and adequacy of policing, and some social and economic factors, have been discussed in this context, the basic, underlying cause has escaped sufficient attention. It is the conflict between the very character of urban life and the orientation of the human ethos as it has evolved. The matter has been dwelt upon comprehensively by Desmond Morris in The Human Zoo. His focus has not been on crime but on the wider consequences of the conflict in terms of the future of human beings. His observations, however, have implications which no serious researcher in urban violence and crime can ignore. The primary cause of conflict between urban life and human ethos, according to Morris, is overcrowding caused by population growth. He describes two vastly different scenarios at the very beginning of the book. In the first, people are members of a tribe, comprising a "compact group" of 60, living in a piece of land 20 miles long and 20 miles wide, which is forested and inhabited by "animals, small and large." In the second, they live in an area of the same dimensions but which is "civilized, inhabited by machines and buildings," and where there are a "compact group of six million human beings," a "hundred thousand individuals for every one in the first scene."

The change has taken place in the course of the past few thousand years, which, says Morris, is "almost instantaneous" in evolutionary terms. Human beings have adapted themselves so brilliantly to their new environment that they have come to believe this to have been a gradual process, and they are biologically fully equipped to deal with it. This is not the case. Biologically, humans remain the simple, rural animals described in scene one above. According to Morris, they "lived like that, not for a few centuries," but "for a million hard years." They "changed biologically" and



"evolved spectacularly" during this period when the pressures of survival, which were great, moulded them. The problem, according to Morris, is that humans had evolved as tribal animals and "the basic characteristic of the tribe is that it operates on a localized, inter-personal basis. To abandon this fundamental social pattern, so typical of the ancient human condition, was going to be against his grain." This, however, is precisely what humans had to do with the emergence of towns. Intercity coordination developed with the growth of agriculture and trade. The human being "became a citizen, a super tribes man, and the key difference was that as a super tribes man he no longer knew personally each member of his community." It was this change from the personal to the impersonal society, "that was going to cause the human animal the greatest agonies in the millennia ahead. As a species we were not biologically equipped to cope with a mass of strangers masquerading as members of our tribe. It was something we had to learn to do, but it was not easy we are still fighting against it in all kinds of hidden and ways—and some that are not so hidden." People have tried to satisfy



EVEN WITHOUT MOBS AND GANGS, TRIVIAL CAUSES SPARK VIOLENCE WHEN OVERCROWDING GRATES ON ONE'S NERVES. INSTANCES OF 'ROAD RAGE' ARE EXAMPLES OF THIS

their desire for cooperative personal relationships by forming tribe-sized "sub-groups or pseudo-tribes within the main body of super-tribes" with social or professional companions. This, however, has also meant viewing other sub-groups as being beyond the pale and enabling their members—even those personally known to one—to be treated as badly as members of an impersonal mob. This writer feels that criminal gangs constitute a form of such sub-groups or pseudo-tribes. These are small groups whose members can be compared to tribal hunters searching for prey, which, instead of animals, are the human victims of their crime. This is particularly so in instances of armed robberies or targeted mob violence. Gang leaders, like leaders of the earlier hunters, guide and protect gang members but also demand unquestioning obedience and treat mercilessly anyone who, they feel, have deserted or betrayed them. Mobs have been a part of urban life since the very beginning, and a proneness to violence and criminal activity is inherent in their dynamics. The anonymity it lends to members, hinders detection in cases of collec-

tive violence. Also, tussles for leadership lead to attempts to garner support by resorting to competitive encouragement of violence. Equally, individual members of mobs can try to stand out in a crowd by perpetrating or calling for singularly violent acts. Even without mobs and gangs, trivial causes spark violence when overcrowding grates on one's nerves. Instances of "road rage" are examples of this. Things are going to get worse as rising temperatures, cloudbursts, flash floods, cyclones, tornadoes and massive tidal waves, become increasingly frequent as a result of climate change—thereby severely affecting cities and towns. There has to be a serious global discourse on all aspects of urban life including law and order. There can doubtless be no question of reversing the course of history and returning to tribal life. One can, however, think of devising patterns of community existence which consciously addresses this problem, encouraging interpersonal contacts and diminishing the scope for sub-group conflicts. Unfortunately, no such effort is under way. (The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

## Exploring our bonds: From castes to communities

Our innate desire for connection spans from school rivalries to the unique structures within organisations revealing the deep-seated need for identity and bonding

Humans, as we are now, evolved around 700,000 years back. It took us millennia to be domesticated, seeking warmth and the safe environs of a family, community, caste, religion, faith, ideology, locality, city, and the country. One only has to travel in a train to understand these bonds. No sooner are you settled, when the friendly co-traveller wants to know the place that you belong to. The ice breaker is enough for complete strangers to explore more intimate details and search for relatives in case of a shared caste, or neighbours or even mutual friends otherwise. I remember a few interesting incidents. I was around 8, when our teacher asked us our castes. I was not aware and was tasked to inquire from my parents. The next day as I excitedly raised my hand to blurt out the response, the teacher stumped me with yet another googly - my sub caste. Almost three and a half decades later, my daughter was also asked the same question in her class. She was also unprepared. This time I



armed her not only with the caste, but the sub caste as well. Though, I am not sure if my ignorance was a reflection on inadequate feelings of belonging, or it was the grand sentiment of patriotism. I lived in a hostel in Japan for three months for a training. There were hundreds of men and women of different nationalities interacting with each other in the mess or during the entertainment programs over weekends. It was interesting to note people bonding with each other in a foreign land based on common language. We from the Indian subcontinent gravitated towards Hindi or Urdu speaking persons, irrespective of the nationalities.

Spanish speaking people from Europe to South America formed their own group. I also remember a train ride in Switzerland in 2005, when an advertisement caught my eye. An Indian movie star stared back at me, exhorting me to buy an expensive item. I did not have the money, but the pride of an Indian face on a Swiss train compensated for the lack of resources. During my professional life in the railways, there was a perennial debate about the utility of having different departments and officer level recruitment based on the same, which many thought led to a departmental bias. The Indian organization has now done away with the practice - it is now a unified management service. Efficacy of the change will be known only in future. I believe railway organisations across the world have department based cadres. It instils a sense of pride in belonging to the department, leading to more efficient working. I also remember our school days. Each of us were divided into Houses, which were usually named after different

colours or celebrity Indians. There was a healthy system of each House scoring points during the academic year, culminating into the grand finale - the annual sports. We would be cheering our House performers till our sore throats would permit. I never witnessed animosity or professional envy on the better performance of rivals. We tend to overlook a reality, probably because it is deeply ingrained in our psyche. Indian army has regiments based on communities. I have yet to come across any community biased incidents in the services. It might have something to do with the organization's resilience and strength of its leaders. Louie Schwartzberg, American director, producer, and cinematographer, aptly remarked, "I think we need to do some deep soul searching about what's important in our lives and renew our spirit and our spiritual thinking, whether it's through faith-based religion or just through loving nature or helping your fellow man." (The writer is an author; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

### SC MUST INTERVENE

Madam — At last, the Supreme Court of India has stepped in to play a crucial role in involving the state governments of Punjab and Haryana to find a positive solution to the ongoing farmer protests at the Sambhu border. The Court has suggested forming a committee of independent individuals to negotiate with the farmers. It is indeed frustrating that the farmers, the "annadata" (food providers) of our country, are back on the streets fighting for a legal guarantee of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops and other demands to reach the NDA government. Currently, the Centre, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seems to have turned a blind eye to the plight of farmers, particularly in Punjab and Haryana. The prolonged standoff between the Haryana government and protesting farmers, which began on February 13, has led to road blockades, disrupted public life, and traffic movement, compelling the Supreme Court to act. The Centre has yet to address or resolve the farmers' issues, leading to renewed protests with uncertainty. The Congress has only offered hollow assurances and remained a passive observer. It is hoped that the recent meeting between farmer leaders and Rahul Gandhi in Parliament, along with the Apex Court's efforts, will lead to a resolution of the issue without further delay.

Janga Bahadur Sunuwar | Jalpaiguri

### BUDGET: THE GOOD BAD AND THE UGLY

Madam — The Union Budget for 2024-25 can be viewed in three layers. The positive aspect is its focus on boosting economic activity and generating employment opportunities across various sectors, with significant support for MSMEs. However, the budget fails to address the needs of the salaried class, leaving them with unmet expectations. The most concerning aspect is the complete disregard for senior citizens,

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### SC stays nameplate diktat



This refers to the news article, "SC Stays Nameplate Diktat on Kanwar Yatra Path" (July 23).

The Honorable Supreme Court has taken a constitutional, legal, and practical stance by issuing an interim stay on the Yogi government's order regarding name plates along the Kanwar route. The order from the Yogi government appears to have been issued to protect the sentiments of Kanwar Yatri. However, there are differing opinions on this issue within society. Creating a false identity or concealing one's caste, religion, or creed can be considered condemnable, anti-social, and illegal. Currently, the matter is under review by the Honorable Supreme Court, and all related aspects will be examined, taking into account social, religious, and legal provisions.

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

as the Finance Minister has not increased savings interest rates or provided health support through government schemes. Despite Modi 3.0 winning with the support of young and senior citizens, the government seems to have prioritized coalition partners from Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, neglecting these crucial demographics. This budget highlights a troubling trend of prioritising political alliances over national interests. The government could have showed more concern to the marginalised groups and given them more concessions in the budget rather than pleasing its allies. The budget is supposed to be for the entire nation not for the political allies, so it should take care of all.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

### CONCERNS OVER PM POSHAN SCHEME

Madam — Lakhs of underprivileged schoolchildren struggling with anemia and malnutrition have benefited from the "PM POSHAN scheme," which addresses both hunger and education

challenges. India is among the few countries that provide schoolchildren with one nutritious meal a day. However, a scheme as extensive as POSHAN (formerly the midday meal scheme) is vulnerable to issues such as lethargy, corruption, and poor implementation. Reports of food adulteration and poisoning have surfaced, including a 2019 incident in Uttar Pradesh where a roti was served with just salt. Recently, a dead snake was found in a "dal-khichdi" packet served at an anganwadi government school in Maharashtra's Sangli district. The godown storing the food packets has been sealed, but more actions are needed, including holding contractors accountable for these lapses. It is crucial to ensure such incidents are prevented to restore trust in the midday meal program and ensure children feel safe consuming these meals.

Ganpat Bhat | Akola

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



### FIRST COLUMN

## THE GOD IS OMNIPRESENT

The intimate relation with God reflects in true peace; joy stem from a deep connection with the divine



AJIT KUMAR **BISHNOI**

God is omnipresent. Therefore, His company is available everywhere all the time. However, if someone is very keen on the company of God, He manifests in a 'murti' (idol). This is mostly true for temples, where God is worshipped routinely in a prescribed manner. But God even manifests in murtis kept in home or a photo of God, if He decides that someone deserves this favour. Many sadhus, genuine ones, carry their worshipable God in some form with them. I had the privilege of seeing a sadhu in a park take out His Lord's photo and he worshipped Him before eating his meal. Lord Krishna has stated, "For the conqueror of self, who is blissfully peaceful in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain as well as in honor and dishonor also, he is accompanied by God." (The Bhagavad-Geeta 6.7)

Before I go any further, let us understand our relationship with God. Lord Krishna states, "An eternal soul is my part only." (15.7) God is our Swami (Master) and we are His 'sevaks' (servants). God is prepared to give a lot to those who serve Him because He has so much to offer. But God is never attached to anyone. Lord Krishna says, "I am similarly inclined towards all beings, no one is hateful for Me; and no one is dear. However, those who worship Me with devotion, they are in Me, and I am also in them." (9.29)

God is not like a parent; we can only make a place in God's heart. Do you realize what this means? This is the only place where there is unmixed joy. What does a company of God feel like? God is watching us all the time. Obviously, His presence can be experienced subtly only, even though He may have manifested in a murti or a photo. Similarly, God communicates mainly in a subtle way except in a rarest or rare case like for a highly advanced devotee such as Sant Tulsidas. We get intuitions. How do we know that these are not our thoughts; the communication could only have come from God? For example, I pray for guidance and help in a medical matter. The answer comes, which could not have been known to me. My Lord has shown His 'kripa' (grace). Then, God uses mediums to communicate. These are people close to His devotees. They come forward and provide the needed information. In rare cases, God speaks



in dreams or when we are not in deep sleep, generally around 4 AM. The timing is a big indicator that it is God, who has spoken, not what we have imagined. Whatever God states will also be corroborated in a scripture like the Bhagavad-Geeta. All this happens because a devotee of God has taken the 'chintan' (meditation) option. What does God communicate or what benefits do we derive from such communications? First of all, we begin to become peaceful. Because without peace no enjoyment is possible. If our minds are disturbed, we cannot enjoy even in the most comfortable circumstances. As God is the only source of real peace, not freedom from noise, we become entitled to it. 'Sukha' or genuine happiness follows even in not-so-opulent surroundings. This feeling leads to unmixed joy as our connection with God is strengthened by sustained practice. Our prayers for guidance and help will be answered.

Progressively, God becomes the guiding light of our lives. Help, as needed, will become available, God finds mediums, who can provide such assistance. For example, a competent doctor will become available to treat us. It all sounds so easy; it is. Not only will we be healthy but the necessary energies of all kinds will be ours too. One will feel secure, comfortable, relaxed, good, etc. The best emotions like hope, satisfaction, patience and tolerance will become parts of our psyche. Our consciousness will become better, i.e. spiritual over some time. In short, life will become highly enjoyable. Worrying, sadness, depression and anxiety will be gradually replaced by superior emotions. It is up to us to choose between chintan about God or 'chintan' (worry) about material objects, goals, etc. God is the owner of whatever there is.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher and guide; views are personal)

# Israel and Palestine seek solutions amid global strife



NILANTHA **ILANGAMUWA**

China's growing role as a mediator in international conflicts hints at a shifting power dynamic, challenging the traditional Western dominance in international diplomacy

He flew to Washington; they went to Beijing. While leaders soar through the skies, ordinary civilians are engulfed in the flames of war. Their children scream not for the luxury of education, but for the sheer will to survive amid the relentless rains of bombs. Famine devastates their lives, and in Gaza and beyond, people are not just yearning for food but for the basic necessity of drinking water. This grim reality highlights the stark polarization in the global order, as non-Western nations struggle with age-old problems made worse by those wielding power. Harvard-educated former combat soldier of Sayeret Matkal in the IDF, Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, commonly known by his nom-de-guerre Bibi, flew to the United States to address Congress, followed by a meeting with President Joe Biden, who, battling COVID-19 for the third time, was expected to announce his inability to run for a second term officially. Amidst thousands of protesters and a boycott by dozens of Congress members, Netanyahu addressed Congress. Meanwhile, representatives from fourteen Palestinian organisations flew to Beijing to sign a peace agreement. The presence of fourteen organisations for a population of just over 5 million highlights the profound divisions within this land, once a nation-state ravaged by intricate schemes. Following the horrific October 7 attack, where thousands of Israelis were brutally killed and many more kidnapped by Hamas, the region's conflict landscape has been irrevocably altered.

This incident has significantly hampered Israel's efforts to normalise relationships with neighbouring countries. In response, China swiftly intervened, brokering an unprecedented rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This diplomatic achievement was monumental during Ebrahim Raisi's presidency, although tragically overshadowed by the helicopter crash that claimed the lives of Raisi and his dynamic Foreign Minister while returning from a joint irrigation project inauguration in Azerbaijan province. In his record-breaking address to Congress, Prime Minister Netanyahu outlined his vision for peace, affirming that he would not cease fire until victory was achieved—a notion that seems illusory given the ground realities.

Ironically, before the speech, his entourage hinted that he would present "a vision" for the future of Gaza and the region. Ultimately, that vision consisted of "a demilitarized and deradicalized" Gaza. Netanyahu, who struggles to convince his ultra-Orthodox partners to teach their children basic math, now claims to plan on educating "a new generation that must be taught not to hate Jews." This plan remains unclear, but he quickly shifted to slogans about an "Abraham Alliance" between Israel and "moderate" Arab nations, conveniently ignoring his coalition's refusal to even utter the words "two-state solution," the very foundation for this alliance. "Following our victory, with the help of regional partners, the demilitarisation and deradicalisation of Gaza can lead to a future of security, prosperity, and peace. That's my vision for Gaza," he proclaimed to Congress.

He continued, "A new generation of Palestinians must no longer be taught to hate Jews but to live in peace with us. Those



PALESTINE'S WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE WITH CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES OFFERS A HOPEFUL PATHWAY TOWARDS RECONCILIATION AND PEACE, REMINISCENT OF SUN TZU'S ASSERTION THAT 'THE SUPREME ART OF WAR IS TO SUBDUCE THE ENEMY WITHOUT FIGHTING'

twin concepts, demilitarisation and deradicalisation, were applied to Germany and Japan after World War II, leading to decades of peace, prosperity, and security. Despite his lofty words, Netanyahu's visit was not about peace but about expanding the war towards Iran, a country he mentioned twenty-seven times in his 52-minute, record-breaking fourth address. Tragically, there was not even the slightest hint of how he plans to extricate Israel from the tragic impasse it is trapped in under his watch. Israeli analysts expose these hyperboles, stating, "The goal of Benjamin Netanyahu's trip to Washington, including his appearance before the U.S. Congress, is not and never was to advance a diplomatic agreement to bring home the Israeli hostages safely and to end the fighting and suffering. Rather, it is designed to enlist domestic American support to keep waging the war." Another analyst remarked, "Netanyahu may have won 52 standing ovations from the rapturous, majority-Republican audience, but his rhetoric, which so impressed Washington, offered nothing for Israelis watching back home." Meanwhile, in Beijing, 14 Palestinian groups, including Hamas and Fatah, signed the Beijing Declaration.

This rare display of unity, facilitated by China, marks a significant shift towards reconciliation among Palestinian factions—a unity long deemed unattainable due to numerous internal and external challenges. The persistent disunity has exacerbated the Palestinians' suffering beyond Israeli oppression. Therefore, the recent declaration offers a glimmer of hope for a more cohesive and effective Palestinian political movement, provided the commitments are genuine and actionable. The Beijing Declaration signifies a remarkable step towards Palestinian unity and sovereignty. The declaration's commitment to post-war governance in Gaza and the establishment of a temporary national reconciliation government underscores a unified vision for Palestinian self-governance

and independence. The significance of the Beijing Declaration is profound, echoing ancient and contemporary sentiments on diplomacy and conflict resolution. Chinese scholar Zhu Weilie aptly noted, "The Beijing Declaration represents the mainstream opinions of various Palestinian factions," marking a critical step toward Palestinian statehood. Historical divisions between factions like Fatah and Hamas, ongoing since the late Yasser Arafat's era, have long impeded progress. The success of this meeting, which saw all factions in attendance for the first time, symbolizes a breakthrough in Palestinian unity and reflects the global south's emerging solidarity and cooperation. The strength of a nation derives from the integrity of the home. The impact of the Beijing Declaration extends beyond Palestinian internal politics. It poses significant implications for the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Palestine moves towards internal unity, Israel's political trajectory appears increasingly extreme and radical.

The continuous violence and rising death toll highlight the urgent need for a ceasefire and renewed peace efforts. Yet, Israel's alignment with U.S. interests and electoral politics hinders progress. In contrast, Palestine's willingness to engage with China's diplomatic initiatives offers a hopeful pathway towards reconciliation and peace, reminiscent of Sun Tzu's assertion that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." China's role as a mediator and leader in global conflicts is likely to expand. The successful reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran under China's mediation last year, followed by the current Palestinian unity efforts, signals a shift in West Asian diplomacy. China's "active actions," characterized by leadership and initiative, have garnered widespread acceptance and support from various countries in the region. Concurrently, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, during his visit to Beijing this week, informed China's Foreign Minister

that "Ukraine is ready and willing to engage in dialogue and negotiations with Russia" aimed at a permanent settlement. Kuleba is in China to secure their assistance in future negotiations with Russia. He emphasised that the negotiations should be rational and lead to lasting peace. There is no mention of NATO, the US, or the UK being involved, but they cannot be pleased with the prospect of peace in Europe being facilitated by China.

This could drive President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to rethink his approach to destructive promises he was given by his "masters" behind the screen. These developments indicate that Beijing is emerging as a new pivotal key player in global conflicts, advocating its strategic ambitions. As regional powerhouses in Asia, both India and China have the potential to elevate the Global South to new heights. Not only Beijing but also Delhi, with Prime Minister Modi's first foreign visit to Russia after his third election, shares this strategic vision. In this context, it is important to consider the words of Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs: "It is also obvious that the United States is trying to drag India into its anti-China project. Both China and India are much more deeply involved in the Western system of globalisation in terms of the volume of financial, investment, and trade agreements and many other things. But the fact is that just like us (Russia), China and India are fully aware of the discriminatory nature of what the West is doing." Transcending political affiliations and beliefs, the most noble and imperative pursuit, as Albert Camus profoundly stated, is the fight for peace. Humanity prevails when, at such critical moments, we forge a united front against the relentless forces of conflict and injustice. Humanity triumphs when, at pivotal moments, we unite resolutely against manufactured conflicts and unyielding forces of injustice, setting aside political differences to stand together.

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

# Empowering India's youth: Skills as a compass for their future

Bridging the skills gap through targeted initiatives can not only enhance employability but also drive economic growth and social stability

Few would believe that a 26-year-old Kevin Dahima - a young, successful entrepreneur from coastal Gujarat - was once unemployed. Today he himself employs his thriving niche. Kickstarting his business in 2021 and providing a 24-hour service, Kelvin brings home over Rs. 55,000 per month. Having trained as a Hospital Assistant.



PEARL **TIWARI**

he is helping people in their hour of need, whilst building something for the future. And his journey to success all began when he signed up for skill training. One doesn't have to look too far to see the social impact of high levels of youth unemployment. In South Africa, where youth unemployment has hit a high of 59.7%, unemployment is considered to be the root cause of many problems the country faces today -

including crime, poverty and suicide. Closer to home, the epidemic of drug use in Punjab has been fuelled by social and economic factors including high unemployment, and underemployment; and pressing national issues like youth suicide are compounded by youth unemployment. Never has it been more important for our young people to have opportunities for bright and productive futures. Around the world, youth unemployment and underemployment are significant problems in many societies, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness and frustration - which can often fuel social unrest. Over the next decade, the World Bank estimates one billion young people will try to

enter the job market, but less than half of them will find formal jobs. This will leave the majority of young people, many in minority and marginalized groups, unemployed or experiencing working poverty. With the largest youth population in the world (with 66% of the total population under the age of 35), and the latest data from CMIE (a think tank) claiming youth unemployment could be as high as 45.5% - among the highest in the world - it is important that India takes note here. There is a lot we can do to ensure we take a preventive approach to these issues to secure productive futures for our many young people. In a country with a gaping skills gap, this presents a major



opportunity - to invest in skills collaboratively to meet the needs of both youth and industry. According to recent studies, India's employable population is far too low to meet the demands of the skilled labour market.

Two-thirds of the country's workforce aren't qualified for current job openings. With such a shortage of qualified workers, businesses are struggling to fill positions creating a significant challenge. It's not just the quantity of skilled

labour that's lacking. The quality of available talent is also wanting. Recent research shows that only 33% of workers in India possess the skills employers seek most. The need of the hour to tackle issues at both ends of the spectrum lies in skill training. Whilst the India Skills Mission abandoned its goal of training 500 million youth by 2022, there is still a clear need for corporates, skill training providers and civil society to step into the breach. Rural youth, in particular, need greater access to quality skill training providers who also support placement, whilst also requiring help to convince families that skills are indeed the way to go - a route often in conflict with the white-collar aspirations of both youth

and their families. Sadly, half of all graduates in India are unemployed due to a lack of industry-relevant skills. The world faces a multitude of challenges today, many of which affect our youth. Conflicts that disrupt education and stability, a polarized online environment that fosters negativity, and economic inequality that limits opportunities. These issues threaten not only individual futures but the overall stability of communities. It is therefore crucial to equip youth with the necessary skills to become productive citizens and create a more sustainable future for all.

(The writer is CEO, of Ambuja Foundation; views are personal)