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cbc22201/13/02/27/2324

A FORTNIGHT AFTER UTTARAKHAND LAW Assam hits the road to UCC, ends Muslim marriage law

CM links it to child marriage, says this move will help prohibit the practice

SUKRITA BARUAH
GUWAHATI, FEBRUARY 23

THE ASSAM Cabinet decided Friday night to repeal the Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935, taking the first step towards a Uniform Civil Code in the state, a fortnight after the Uttarakhand Assembly

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EXPLAINED
E 34% of state population

became the first in the country to show the green light to the UCC.

Announcing the Assam Cabinet decision on doing away with what he called a "colonial Act", Minister Jayanta Malla Baruah said it was "a very important step in the journey towards a Uniform Civil Code" in the state.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

MUSLIMS CONSTITUTE 34% of Assam's total population. A total of 94 registrars were empowered under the Act to register a marriage or divorce. The Assam government says the Special Marriage Act will now apply.

In Varanasi, PM slams Rahul: He called Kashi, UP youths addicts

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, FEBRUARY 23

TARGETING RAHUL Gandhi without naming him, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Friday that the "Congress keshavi

"parivar ke yuvraj" (crown prince of the Congress royal family) had insulted the youth of Kashi and Uttar Pradesh by describing them as "nasheri" (addicts).

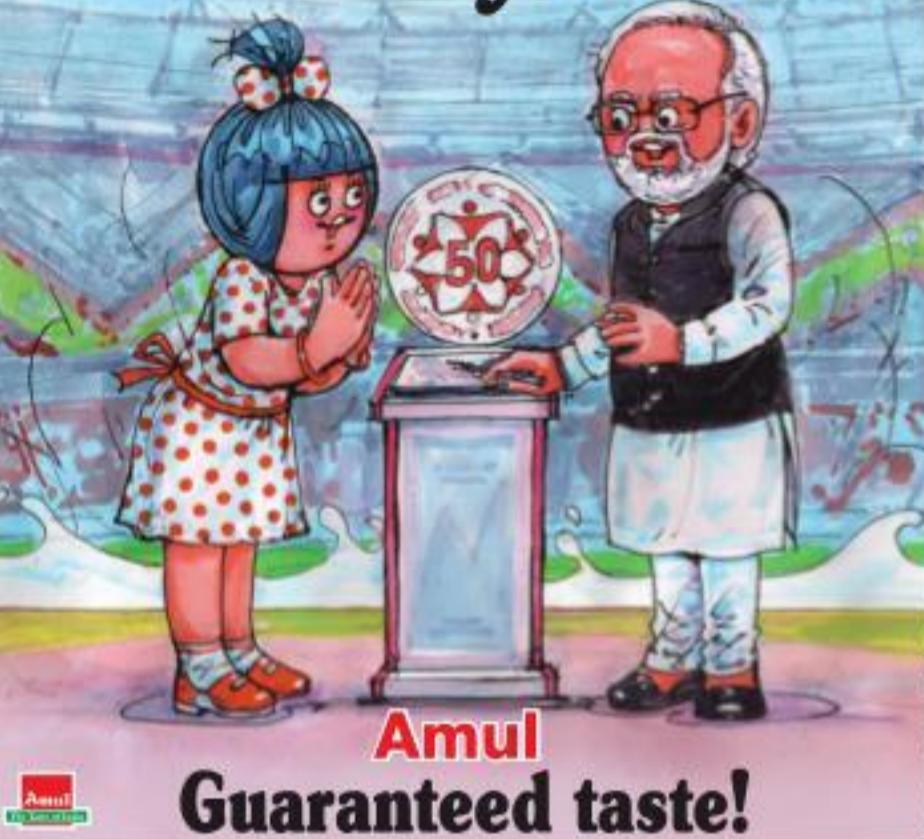
Addressing a public meeting in his Lok Sabha constituency Varanasi where he inaugurated

and laid the foundation of projects worth more than Rs 13,000 crore, Modi said, "Those who are not in 'hosh' (senses) themselves are calling the youths 'nasheri'."

He was responding to a remark by Rahul Gandhi who,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Pradhanyawaad!



daCunha/AB/934

Rejection of final EPF claims sees surge in 5 yrs, up from 13% to 34%

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 23

■ KP Sivaraman, a retired employee of a tyre manufacturing company, made multiple visits over the last nine years to the Kochi office of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

(EPFO) to get his final PF dues. Earlier this month, he died by suicide after consuming poison inside the EPFO office. The PF amount due to him had been rejected because of a mismatch in the identification details in his PF records and his official documents.

■ Mumbai-based EPF retiree's

PF FINAL SETTLEMENT CLAIMS UNDER EPFO

■ Rejection rate (as % of claim applications)



CONVERSATION WITH SANDEL
Political philosopher Professor Michael J Sandel in conversation with Anant Goenka, Executive Director, The Indian Express Group, and Aakash Joshi, Deputy Associate Editor, The Indian Express, at the Adda, Friday. Renuka Puri

UKRAINE CONFLICT, 2 YEARS ON

PAGES 16, 17



Akash Deep's dream debut:
Couldn't do anything while
father was alive, it's for him

SANDIP G
RANCHI, FEBRUARY 23

IN THE most glorious hour of his career, pacer Akash Deep decided to roll back the years. The day that had started with him claiming three England wickets in his first six overs in Tests would end with him talking

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

With his mother after being handed India cap. Sportspics

BUSINESS AS USUAL

BY UNNY



Must probe. How can an ex-governor acquire a disproportionate free speech balloon?

MANOHAR JOSHI,
FORMER SPEAKER &
CM, DIES AT 86 P6

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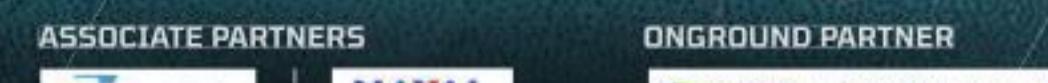
RAJNATH SINGH
Defence Minister,
India



MEENAKSHI
LEKHI
Minister of State
for External Affairs,
India



SPEAKERS



Toddler falls into bucket of hot water, dies

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
GURGAON, FEBRUARY 23

A TWO-YEAR-OLD boy died of burn injuries that he sustained after allegedly falling into a bucket of hot water in Gurgaon's Sohna, police said.

According to police officers, the incident took place in

Damdam Dhani on Monday. The toddler died during treatment at Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital on Thursday afternoon, they said.

According to police, it appears that the child was in the bathroom unattended and he got into the bucket as his mother had stepped away briefly.

The child sustained serious

The boy died during treatment at Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital on Thursday afternoon, police said.

burn injuries and was referred to Safdarjung from a local hos-

pital.

Police said at Safdarjung Hospital, he was administered medicines and sent home.

However, his condition deteriorated and the family rushed him back to the hospital.

An officer said that they recorded the family's statement under Code of Criminal Procedure Section 174.

Contractual staff across Delhi govt depts, bodies may be replaced soon

GAYATHRI MANI
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 23

SEVERAL CONTRACTUAL and outsourced employees posted across Delhi government departments, autonomous bodies, and educational institutions may be replaced soon. The Services department – following directions of Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar – directed all departments to submit information about such individuals so they can be replaced with regular employees.

A senior official said Kumar had issued the directions at a review meeting last month. "... The Chief Secretary... in a review meeting held on 24.1.2024 has said that information regarding the engagement of contractual or outsourced employees presently working in all departments/local/autonomous bodies under government... be sought from various departments, so that the posts occupied by these appointees could be replaced with regular employees..." the Services department stated in an order later.

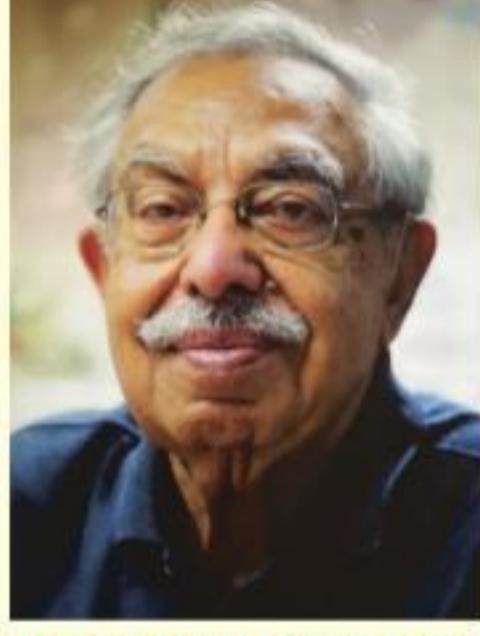
It sought data of the status of contractual appointment as on February 1, 2024, including details of employees, level of posts, the number of sanctioned posts and vacancies among others. All departments concerned were directed to submit the data latest by February 5, which they are yet to do, officials said.

"A reminder has been sent to all departments again as several of them are yet to collect and submit the data... Once details are in, the Services department will start the process to appoint regular employees," said a senior official.

In July 2023, following directions from the L-G, services of more than 400 "private staffers" deployed as fellows, associate fellows, and advisors in different departments on contract basis without the L-G's approval were discontinued.

PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH	
(Advt. No. 01/24/CET)	
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SR.NO.	NAME OF ENTRANCE TEST
1	PU-B.A/B.Com LL.B. (Hons.) (5 years) Integrated Course
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3	PUTHAT
4	PU - CET (P.G.)
5	PUMEET
6	PULEET
7	PU - LL.B. (3 Years)
8	B.A./B.Com LL.B. (Hons.) 5 Years Integrated Course Migration Test
9	LL.B. 3 Year Course Migration Test
10	B.Ed.
11	MBA
12	Ph.D.
DATES OF TESTS FOR - 2024	
1	28-04-2024 (Sunday) 10:00 A.M. - 11:30 A.M.
2	12-05-2024 (Sunday)
3	17-05-2024 (Friday) 10:00 A.M. - 11:30 A.M.
4	15-06-2024 & 16-06-2024 (Saturday & Sunday)
5	22-06-2024 (Saturday) 10:00 A.M. - 11:40 A.M.
6	22-06-2024 (Saturday) 02:00 P.M. - 3:40 P.M.
7	23-06-2024 (Sunday) 10:00 A.M. - 11:30 A.M.
8	07-07-2024 (Sunday) As per Syndicate dated 25-03-2023
9	14-07-2024 (Sunday) As per Syndicate dated 25-03-2023
10	21-07-2024 (Sunday)
11	28-07-2024 (Sunday) 10:00 A.M. - 12:00 Noon
12	25-08-2024 (Sunday)
Information about all the entrance tests would be available on the University Website https://admissions.puchd.ac.in from time to time.	
Sd/- Controller of Examinations	

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READINESS OF AGRI INPUT Industry for Ensuring

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Additional Secretary
Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and
Managing Director Small Farmers Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC)

Shri Minhaj Alam (IAS)
Additional Secretary, MOPFI
Govt. of India

Dr. Sudhanshu
Secretary
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Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)

Mr. Vijay Sardana
Technological Expert, Advocate
Supreme Court of India
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Dr. K C Ravi
Chairman
CropLife India

Technical Session 1: Readiness of Crop Nutrition Industry for Ensuring Food Security by 2047

Technical Session 2: Readiness of Seed Nutrition Industry for Ensuring Food Security by 2047

Technical Session 3: Readiness of Crop Protection for Ensuring Food Security by 2047

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NARENDRA MODI
PRIME MINISTER



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Mahashivratri- 8 March



Shri Vishnu Deo Sai
Honorable Chief Minister

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A GOOD REPORT CARD

New study points to welcome trend: Combination of steady growth momentum and moderate inflation continues

A REPORT ON the state of the economy, prepared by economists at the RBI, presents an optimistic assessment about India's growth prospects. Based on high frequency indicators, it says that the economic momentum observed in the first half of the year is likely to have continued in the months thereafter. Growth for the third quarter (October-December) has been pegged at 7 per cent. This is higher than assessments by some analysts. Considering that the National Statistical Office has projected growth at 7.3 per cent for the full year, this would imply a growth of around 7 per cent in the ongoing quarter (January-March) as well. The report is also optimistic on the inflation front, terming recent developments as "favourable". Retail inflation moderated in January, after being elevated in November and December. This continuing combination of steady growth momentum and moderate inflation is welcome news on the macroeconomic front.

On growth, there are several notable points. While some analysts continue to express concerns over the state of the rural economy, the NielsenIQ data cited in the report shows that the gap between rural and urban areas is narrowing — FMCG companies observed a 5.8 per cent growth in rural volumes and a 6.8 per cent growth in urban areas in the third quarter. Other indicators of private consumption such as passenger vehicles and two-wheelers are also showing healthy growth in both urban and rural areas. Alongside, real estate and construction continue to witness robust growth driven by household investments in residential real estate and public sector capital expenditure. The report expects investments by the private corporate sector to pick up and "fuel the next round of growth". In his comments in the recent monetary policy committee meeting, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has also expressed optimism about private investments, noting that the "private capex cycle has turned up". However, so far, investment activity has picked up only in a few sectors, and questions over more productive forms of job creation remain.

There is reason for optimism on inflation. In January, retail inflation fell to 5.1 per cent, down from 5.69 per cent in December. While there are upside risks to food inflation, Skymet, the private weather forecaster, has predicted a normal south-west monsoon. Economists at the RBI believe that "inflation expectations may stabilise and edge down." As per the RBI's own forecasts, inflation is expected at around 4.5 per cent in 2024-25. Jayanth Varma, member MPC, notes that these inflation projections translate to a real interest rate of 2 per cent, which may be considered high at the current juncture. However, Governor Das, and other members of the MPC, believe that the "job on the inflation front" is not over. Over the coming months, if inflation falls in line with the central bank's projections, it could open up space for policy to pivot.



D B VENKATESH VARMA

EARLIER THIS MONTH, Russian forces captured Avdiivka, a key city on the Ukrainian defensive line in the Donetsk region. With the stalemated Russia-Ukraine conflict now entering its third year, this breakthrough comes against the background of a steady turn in the tide of the war in Russia's favour. It's too early to predict a decisive outcome, but sometimes change comes gradually and then all at once.

A war of manoeuvre in its first year, it's now a war of attrition (Also see 'The Putin pursuit', IE, February 24, 2023, and 'Changing battlefields', IE, July 10, 2023). Exhaustion of the opponent's political will, economic strength and military capacity is its main objective. This works to Russia's advantage, being the larger country with superior resources. A patient Russian leadership and its General Staff have crafted a military strategy that is grinding down Ukrainian capabilities. The Russian military has adapted its battlefield tactics; an expanded defence industry has provided the necessary tools to make it a success.

Wars are messy and prolonged wars, especially so. Russia's military advantage is not irreversible, yet. Ukraine's military potential remains substantial. More fighting units are dug at the next line of defence — around Kramatorsk and on the route towards Zaporizhzhia. The Russian Black Sea fleet has stayed put in port to avoid unmanned marine vehicle attacks. Ukraine continues to get substantial NATO support; more may be coming, not only in the form of long-range missiles but also in terms of air defence and electronic warfare, areas in which Russia is slowly gaining the upper hand. This conflict has valuable lessons to offer. These must not be ignored.

As compared to the slow-moving battlefields, the international context has undergone rapid changes. Critically dependent on external support, Ukraine's position has weakened progressively. Ukraine is learning the hard way that in conflicts involving the big powers, the risk of partners being treated as proxies is a real one. While the EU voted in

a \$54 billion multi-year assistance package, a \$60 billion assistance package for Ukraine has been held up in the US Congress. The debate has laid bare deep domestic divisions on America's international priorities. Ukraine enjoyed an uncontested top spot in 2022; now it shares the space with Israel, Gaza, Taiwan and the securing of the US's southern border. There is a growing sentiment in Washington that Europe should grow up and learn to stand on its two feet.

Stalemate on the battlefield, military leadership changes, and a more pervasive Ukraine fatigue have added to the sense of gloom in Western capitals. However, the public rhetoric on war aims has remained consistently shrill — invasion of Ukrainian territory, reparations, and accountability for alleged war crimes. Though it is not winning the war, Ukraine's war aims are based on the expectation that it will do so. Whether this is a well-grounded premise or an illusion, only time will tell. Russia's Avdiivka advantage perhaps points to the latter.

Sensing the shifting winds in western capitals, especially in Washington, President Putin timed his widely watched interview with the American journalist Tucker Carlson to once again set out Russia's historic as well as current perspectives on the Ukraine conflict. Russian war aims may not be opened but a peace settlement on Ukraine will not be limited to Ukraine. Putin's gambit is not for now, or for this year, but for the next US administration. Putin is playing the long game — his eventual goal is a new modus vivendi with the US, for which a decisive breaking of Ukrainian resistance is seen as a prerequisite.

Sharp gaps in NATO defence stockpiles and industrial capacities have come to the fore which will take time to fill. The defence spending of NATO states remains uneven. For Ukraine, this provides no relief as its requirements are more immediate. As a sop, the UK, Germany and France have concluded agreements committing security support in case of future Russian aggression — not dissimilar to medical insurance packages that don't apply to current maladies.

Though this began as a European conflict, it has not remained in Europe. Global energy, food and financial linkages have been impacted. In retaliation for support for Ukraine, Russia has undercut French influence in the Sahel region of Africa. Russia-North Korea relations have rebounded almost entirely in response to the Ukraine conflict. North Korea is now an open and aggressive nuclear power. Overshadowed by other more immediate crises in the region, Iran's proto-nuclear capability is left unaddressed. With Russia de-ratifying the CTBT, and with traditional arms control almost dead, it will not be long before the malaise infects the broader non-proliferation regime. US talks with China on arms control are but small raindrops in an otherwise parched sky. A new dark age of unbridled arms competition looms on the horizon.

With the West locked into a semi-permanent conflict with Russia, and the fraying deterrence equations between the big powers, the consequent disequilibrium on the Eurasian continent is a matter of deep concern. It works primarily to China's advantage as it benefits from the confusion at the heart of America's global strategy on priorities and sequencing in the allocation of resources. A prolonged Russia-Ukraine conflict is not in India's interests — it weakens Russia, undercuts European security, and immeasurably complicates US global rebalancing.

Partial battlefield gains can only provide partial gains at the negotiating table. This applies to Russia as it does to the US and its European allies who should pull back from the brink and find a way of reconstructing European security that includes Russia, for there can be no lasting settlement without Russia. Trans-Atlantic security cannot be built on the ashes of global insecurity. To get out of this awful mess, if competence on matters of grand strategy is asking for too much, then common sense should do the job.

The writer is a former ambassador to Russia



AVIJIT PATHAK

WE ARE IN a time when the virus of rote learning, the pathology of MCQ-centric standardised tests, the "success manuals" sold by coaching factories and the psychology of fear associated with board examinations have polluted the entire culture of school education. In this context, the fact that the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is experimenting with the possibility of "open-book" examinations (OBE) in order to resist this rot, and encourage "higher-order thinking" among students is welcome. It is a refreshing idea, particularly in an environment in which board examinations in many parts of the country cannot be imagined without the use of the surveillance machinery amid fears of mass copying, or leaked question papers. Reports suggest that the CBSE, to begin with, intends to experiment with OBEs in select schools for classes IX to XII, particularly for subjects like English, Science, Mathematics and Biology. Although there is no immediate plan to adopt the OBE format for the Board examination, the experiment is a step forward.

We can orient young minds for OBEs only if we succeed in revolutionising the ethos of the classroom — from the pedagogic practice to the mode of teacher-student engagement. In this context, I wish to stress three points.

First, we need to take the spirit of critical pedagogy with absolute seriousness. This is possible only when children are encouraged to realise and trust their potential, and teachers, far from just "completing" the official syllabus, engage in a meaningful dialogue with young students. This is like walking together, seeing beyond the burden of

BEST OF LUCK, CBSE

Open-book examination experiment bodes well for the classroom

bookish knowledge, overcoming the dead weight of ready-made "facts, definitions and theories", asking new questions, and thinking creatively.

We need to take the spirit of critical pedagogy with absolute seriousness. This is possible only when children are encouraged to realise and trust their potential, and teachers, far from just "completing" the official syllabus, engage in a meaningful dialogue with young students. This is like walking together, seeing beyond the burden of bookish knowledge, overcoming the dead weight of ready-made "facts, definitions and theories", asking new questions, and thinking creatively.

ask these students to write a note on the state of farmers' protest in the context of the constitutional ideal of "fundamental rights"?

In other words, we need to educate educators, encourage them to evolve and grow every day, and teach freely and creatively without fear. Yes, creative and critical thinking requires the spirit of freedom — to see beyond the officially sanctioned textbook, and accept that there can be multiple ways of seeing a phenomenon.

Second, OBEs demand qualitatively different kinds of questions and riddles to arouse and activate the critical faculty and creative imagination of young students. What teachers ought to realise is that if the answers to the questions they formulate are already available in the textbooks, the idea of OBE will be reduced to a joke. Hence, those who design the question papers have to work hard, learn and unlearn simultaneously, and transform the task of framing questions into a delicate art.

Let me give a couple of illustrations. If you ask Class XII students to write the exact date and time of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the answer is already available in the textbook. But then, if you ask them to write a paragraph on the implications of Gandhi's assassination on contemporary Indian politics, no guidebook, no coaching centre manual will help them. They need to think. And this is possible only when the spirit of dialogue and critical pedagogy in the classroom encourages "higher order" or innovative thinking. Or, for that matter, is it possible to

ask these students to write a note on the state of farmers' protest in the context of the constitutional ideal of "fundamental rights"?

In other words, we need to educate educators, encourage them to evolve and grow every day, and teach freely and creatively without fear. Yes, creative and critical thinking requires the spirit of freedom — to see beyond the officially sanctioned textbook, and accept that there can be multiple ways of seeing a phenomenon.

Third, we need to realise that the most challenging examination is the OBE. Yes, it is challenging for the teachers — you cannot ask the same questions year after year; you must constantly activate your mind and experiment with ideas. This task cannot be accomplished by the machinery called the National Testing Agency. Likewise, it is challenging for young students. There is no ready-made answer in textbooks or other "success manuals"; they need to sharpen their analytical thinking, creative imagination and style of writing.

In my teaching career of more than three decades, I have always asked my students to bring their books, or any other reading material, and celebrate their exams with the ecstasy of learning and unlearning. In this process, many of them evolved creatively, and emerged as good teachers and researchers. Let examinations be a celebration of creative learning, not a toxic moment of doubt, cheating, fear and surveillance.

Good luck to the CBSE!

The writer taught sociology at JNU



FEBRUARY 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PRESIDENT'S WARNING

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH has called upon all citizens to cooperate with the government in putting down divisive forces in the country. Addressing the Parliament on the opening day of the budget session, Zail Singh said in the present complex international situation, it was essential to intensify vigilance for preserving economic and political independence. The country could achieve sustained progress only in a climate of harmony.

PUNJAB BOMB BLAST

FOUR PEOPLE WERE killed in three districts

of Punjab in shooting and bomb blast incidents in the continuing wave of terrorist violence. Two people were shot dead by terrorists at Siriguharsahay in Firozpur district and one each killed in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. A police inspector's brother was shot dead and a bomb blast wounded nine persons at Batala in Gurdaspur district. The fresh spurt of violence has claimed 25 lives so far.

NDA'S BOYCOTT

THE LOK DAL and the BJP, partners of the National Democratic Alliance, boycotted the joint session of Parliament. Later, Charan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee led a procession of

55 members of Parliament to lodge their protest against the government's failure to maintain law and order and to protect the lives of innocent people in Punjab.

ISRAELI PLANE ATTACK

ISRAELI WARPLANES POUNDED targets in the rebel-held mountains east of Beirut for the third time this week as the Lebanese Army troops patrolled West Beirut, which was crippled by a general strike. Sporadic clashes continued along the green line separating Muslim West Beirut from the Christian eastern sector after a night of heavy shelling in which at least 15 persons were killed and 70 wounded.



Design of a subsidy

Targeted and upfront refill subsidy can help increase LPG usage in low-income households — a critical component of India's energy transition



FARZANA AFRIDI AND PRABHAT BARNWAL

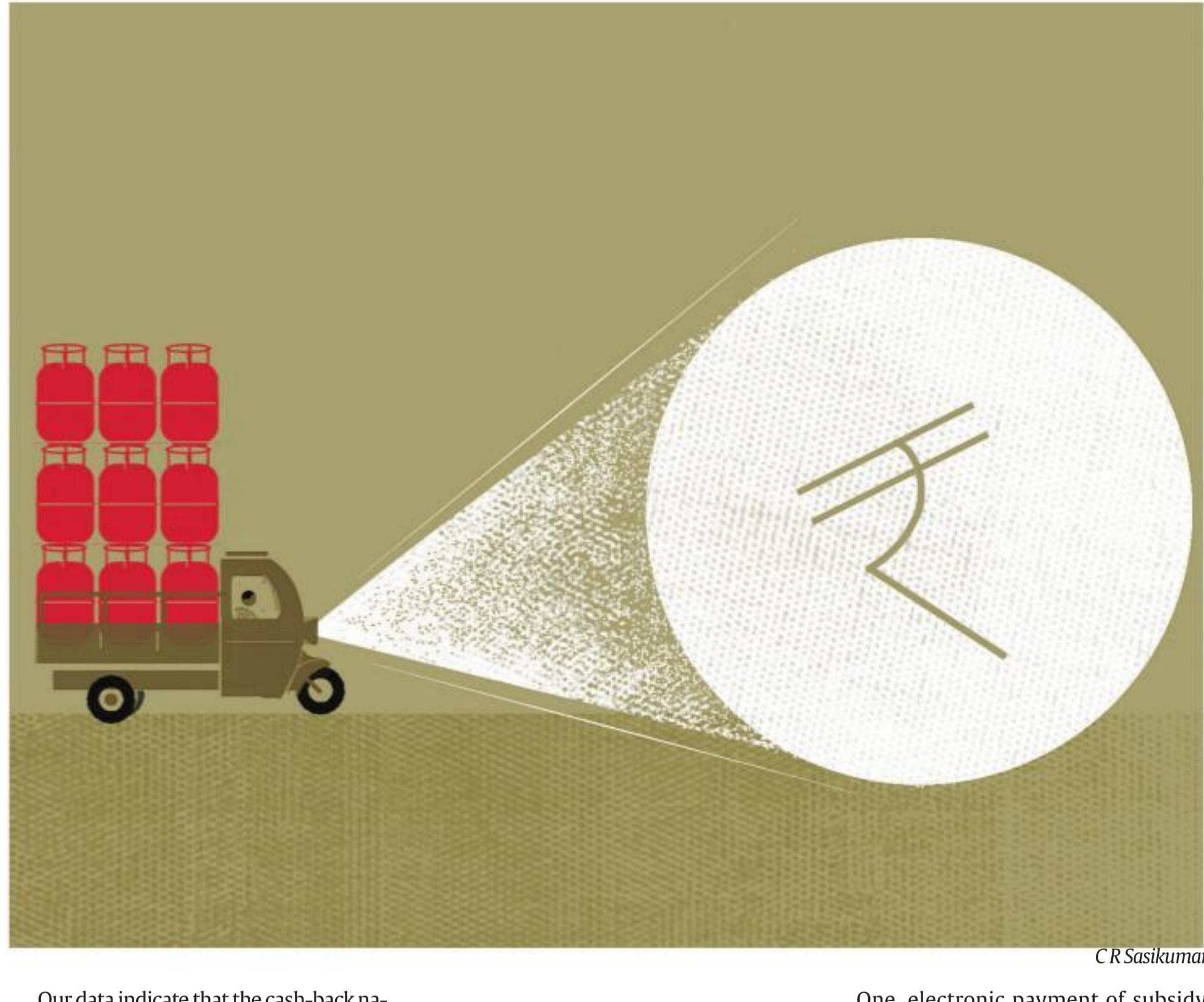
INCREASING LPG USAGE of low-income households is central to India's energy transition. A revised version of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), launched in August 2021, aimed to provide LPG access to an additional 10 million low-income households with one-time subsidies for a cooking stove and gas refill. The government has marked this programme as a flagship but it has also recognised that poor households are not using as much gas as expected. Before PMUY, 87 per cent of rural households used biomass to cook since biomass fuels like wood, charcoal, or dung are cheap or free. Since 2016, this proportion has come down significantly, but most rural households are still using biomass. Specifically, usage of LPG refills in PMUY families is only about half of that in non-PMUY homes.

India's LPG refill subsidy policy has evolved rapidly: From a universal subsidy pegged to the market price pre-Covid, followed by no LPG refill subsidy in 2021, to a reintroduction of a fixed refill subsidy for only PMUY households in May 2022. The Pratyaksh Hansthantrit Labh (PAHAL) scheme for direct benefit transfer helped reduce the leakage of subsidised gas cylinders to the black market that had occurred when all households were eligible for heavy subsidies and diversion was rampant. However, when it comes to increasing the LPG refill take-up of low-income, PMUY households, the current design of PAHAL may not be adequate. Particularly, paying the full refill price (unsubsidised price) upfront makes it difficult for PMUY consumers, who face a "liquidity constraint", to purchase refills regularly.

Can the design of the existing LPG refill subsidy programme be altered to provide LPG subsidies more effectively and yet be fiscally neutral?

Using the LPG refill consumption data of all three oil marketing companies for two years (2018 and 2019), when the LPG refill subsidy was universal and pegged to the market price, keeping the subsidised price constant for the entire Indore district, we find that PMUY and non-PMUY consumers respond differently to the refill market prices. An increase in LPG refill MRP (unsubsidised market price) should not reduce refill purchase when the subsidy is deposited in the customer's bank account later through PAHAL, but this is not true for PMUY consumers. Hence, even when the bank-deposited refill subsidy increases in tandem with the market price (until early 2020), the refill purchases of PMUY consumers falls.

The data show that low-income households are sensitive to the amount and timing of refill subsidy, even when the post-subsidy price of gas does not change. A Rs 100 increase in the per refill subsidy decreases monthly refill consumption by about 25 per cent for PMUY consumers. The likely reason is the liquidity constraint — if the subsidy is high, this means that there is a large gap between what the household has to pay upfront and the net price after the delayed refill subsidy transfer (after five-seven days of refill purchase).



CR Sasikumar

Our data indicate that the cash-back nature of the refill subsidy is a key factor behind low refill purchases by liquidity and credit-constrained PMUY households. In addition, households are not well informed about the timing and logistics of receiving subsidy transfers. Further, credit constraint, especially since PMUY consumers are more likely to earn their living on a daily or weekly basis, results in binding liquidity constraints.

It is, therefore, not only imperative to provide a substantive, targeted refill subsidy to PMUY households but also consider alternative designs of LPG refill subsidy that reduce the immediate cost of purchasing the refill. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) is a case in point. The programme provided up to three free LPG refills to PMUY beneficiaries in 2020, between April 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020. PMUY beneficiaries were credited with the advance (upfront subsidy) for buying LPG refills. Our analysis shows a spike in PMUY average refills consumption in April 2020. At the same time, there was no change in non-PMUY consumption — almost wiping out the gap in refill consumption between PMUY and non-PMUY consumers. Moreover, we observe a 20 per cent increase in LPG usage among PMUY households even after this upfront subsidy ends in December 2020. This suggests that a substantive targeted and upfront subsidy may lead to habit formation and thereby a permanent increase in clean fuel take-up, thus allowing for quicker phasing out of the LPG refill subsidy programme.

How can we shift to an on-time subsidy transfer without leakage of benefits away from the intended beneficiary? There are two possible fin-tech-based solutions for reducing the temporary financial burden of the purchase of LPG refill and ensuring that low-income consumers do not have to pay the subsidy amount out of pocket.

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One, electronic payment of subsidy amount to the dealer/deliveryman at the point of refill purchase by PMUY consumer. A step for obtaining the consumer's consent for this subsidy transfer can be embedded (for example, using an automated text or voice message over the phone). Upon confirmation of the subsidy transfer, both the delivery agent and consumer should receive a message notifying it, so that the delivery agent can't charge more than the subsidised price.

Two, use digital rupee (e-RUPI). The recently launched, purpose-specific digital currency by the RBI fits particularly well, where a digital voucher worth the subsidy amount can be provided to PMUY users beforehand via SMS or QR code. At the time of refill purchase, the consumer will provide the digital voucher to the dealer/delivery man. Since the e-RUPI voucher can be restricted to the specific type of merchant (that is, OMC distributors) it addresses concerns about diversion of the subsidy by households. Alternatively, a RUPAY debit card (issued with Jan Dhan accounts) can be used for advance transfer of the refill subsidy.

Given that an upfront subsidy transfer can increase the demand for LPG refills significantly, it becomes important that the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and Ministry of Finance combine digital technology with PAHAL and PMUY targeting. Considering the health and time-saving benefits, particularly for the women and children in low-income families, the benefits of removing the delay in subsidy transfer are likely to be huge, even without any increase in the fiscal burden.

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THIERRY MATHOU AND PHILIPP ACKERMANN

TWO YEARS AGO, to the day, President Vladimir Putin launched an unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine with far-reaching, dramatic consequences. Consequences for the Ukrainian people who have been valiantly resisting the invasion and facing Russia's indiscriminate attacks against civilian targets. Consequences also for the rest of the world. As underscored in the France-India Joint Statement of January 26, the entire world has to endure the economic and food security impact of the war, with developing and least developed countries suffering the most. Why must poorer countries pay the price of Russia's misguided invasion?

Two years ago, President Putin thought he could march into Kyiv and take Ukraine by force, in pursuit of his imperialist vision. Two years later, it is increasingly obvious that Russia has already suffered defeats in many ways. It has failed to prevail over a smaller and weaker country. European and Euro-Atlantic alliances have only grown stronger, with Sweden and Finland joining NATO.

Both Germany and France have recently underscored their strong bilateral support for Ukraine. On February 16, both Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron signed security agreements with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Two years on, elusive peace

Only one side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is committed to finding a solution

THIERRY MATHOU AND PHILIPP ACKERMANN

for the next 10 years, with very significant announcements of additional military aid in 2024. The European Union has opened accession negotiations with Ukraine. At the United Nations, 143 countries have condemned Russia's war. The human, military, economic, and diplomatic toll for Russia keeps mounting.

France and Germany, together with their European partners and the EU, will continue to provide unwavering support to the Ukrainian people's right to self-defence. We are clear-sighted on what is at stake in Ukraine, and that is why our support will not falter. Taking place in Europe, this conflict is obviously crucial for European security. But its repercussions matter well beyond Europe. What is at stake on the battlefields of Ukraine is a simple question: Can a powerful country annex its weaker neighbour by force? The answer to this question will define international peace and security in this century. It will determine whether we plunge into an "era of war". A Russian victory in Ukraine would only encourage imperialist appetites across the world. It would mean greater insecurity in every region.

No responsible nation wishes to live in a world where might makes right and where a stronger neighbour can violate interna-

tional borders by force. It is the opposite of a world where international law obeys a set of fundamental principles. Germany and France are determined to uphold the basic principles of the United Nations Charter wherever they are undermined: We defend them as forcefully in Europe as we do in the Indo-Pacific. And we do so together with key strategic partners such as India. India is a major, responsible power that has both the capacity and the willingness to step up in defence of the rule of law. The world needs India's voice to carry louder.

That is why France and Germany supported the Indian G20 Presidency's push for ambitious language on the conditions for peace in Ukraine. As stated in the New Delhi G20 Leaders' Declaration, peace in Ukraine must be "comprehensive, just, and durable" and "uphold all the purposes and principles of the UN Charter". Only if these principles are respected, can peace in Ukraine keep the spectre of an "era of war" away.

Unfortunately, that is not Russia's position so far. What Moscow calls "negotiation" is actually a maximalist call for Ukraine's surrender and the annexation of its territories, in complete contradiction to the principles of international law. This is because President Vladimir Putin, in his own words, fundamen-

tally denies the very right of Ukraine to exist as an independent nation. This is no path to negotiation and peace.

In contrast, Kyiv has put forward a 10-point peace plan, based on the principles of the UN Charter, to bring about a just and durable end to the war. And Ukraine has strived to associate as many countries as possible to chart a way to peace: From Copenhagen to Jeddah, Malta, and, more recently, Davos, there are now more than 80 countries from all continents, including India, involved in these talks. Ukraine has also made it possible to ensure a grain corridor out of its ports in the Black Sea, thus mitigating the global food security impact, despite Russia cancelling the Black Sea Grain Initiative. It is clear on which side the real commitment to peace and diplomacy lies. Russia, however, seems to have chosen to slide further towards a dead end, although it is in Moscow's hands to end its invasion. The situation is difficult. But two years after the Russian aggression, we must more than ever support all efforts to find a pathway to peace.

Mathou is Ambassador of France to India and Ackermann is Ambassador of Germany to India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As the Russia-Ukraine conflict approaches its second anniversary, need for peace talks becomes more urgent, and the international community should make every effort to end this bloody conflict... US and the West, who escalated this tragedy... must make greater efforts to bring about its end." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Big Uncle Xi

With no one in party or government to differ with him, Xi's self-absorption may precipitate an economic collapse in China



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

2028, it is stuck in the spiral of deflation, shrinking markets, dwindling exports, and staggering bad debts.

Many experts blame Xi for this debacle. His paranoia about an imminent conflict with the West drove him to prioritise national security over the economy. A heady cocktail of economic inexperience and ideological overdrive resulted in reckless actions against big-tech companies, both domestic and international. Episodes involving real estate giant China Evergrande Group and Jack Ma of the successful Alibaba Group are examples of Xi's malicious ways of functioning.

Premier Li Qiang, who led a big delegation to Davos earlier this month, claimed that China's economy was growing at 5.2 percent. But the situation on the streets of Shanghai, Beijing and other cities tells a different story. Shops and business establishments are empty as fears about economic downturn led to the world's largest and most prosperous middle class shying away from domestic spending. Tens of thousands of employees heading home for the Spring Festival were told by their employers not to return. Unemployment rates are at an all-time high. All these indicate that the actual GDP growth may not be more than 1.2–1.5 per cent.

As the economic woes grow, Xi appears to be turning increasingly to Mao. When things were not going right, Mao decided to experiment with fanciful ideas like the Great Leap Forward in 1958, followed eight years later by the Cultural Revolution, resulting in disastrous consequences for the economy and humongous human suffering. As people suffer from the economic decline, Xi too is resorting to clumsy rhetoric.

"We have more deeply realised that building a strong country and realising national rejuvenation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernisation is not only a bright road for the Chinese people to pursue a better and happy life but also a just way to promote world peace and development," he pontificated.

Xi is doing one thing right though — continuing his iron grip over the party and the country. The Soviet communist leader Vladimir Lenin had once advised that "for the centre to actually direct the orchestra, it needs to know who plays the violin and where, who plays a false note and why". Xi has gained such absolute control — the kind that never happened, even during Mao's era. All the seven members of the Chinese Communist Party's Standing Committee are loyalists of the leader.

A study conducted during Xi's second year in office found that he was appearing in papers more than twice as often as his predecessors. The state news agency Xinhua, adopted a nickname for the leader: "Xi Dada" — Big Uncle Xi. Thousands of art students applying to the Beijing University of Technology had been judged on their ability to sketch Xi's portrait.

Xi assumes that all this is his strength. But tragically, it could be his weakness too. With no leader in the party and government to differ with him and offer valuable suggestions, this self-absorption may precipitate an economic collapse, leading to the same disastrous consequences that Mao had inflicted on the hapless citizens in the form of famines, plagues and purges seven decades ago.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNEASY COALITION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Crown of thorns' (IE, February 23). Manipulating an election outcome is not something new for the army generals in Pakistan. But what is different this time is the army's attempts to counter Imran Khan's popularity through devious means. That the second and third runner-ups of the race have decided to bury their differences and come together to keep the winner out is likely to have repercussions. Somehow back in power, Shehbaz Sharif and his government have to tackle wide-ranging problems. Whether he, as the head of an uneasy coalition, can do it is anybody's guess.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Crown of thorns' (IE, February 23). Pakistan's election has produced a peculiar situation. After prolonged parleys, Shehbaz Sharif of PML-N will be the prime minister with only 75 seats and PPP with 54 seats will extend support from outside. This coalition is not a guarantee of a stable government. Pakistan is in a precarious economic state with heavy debt. Peace is elusive at the borders with Afghanistan, Iran and India. Under these circumstances, the Pakistan PM must endeavour to establish peace within the country and on the borders. Only in a peaceful environment is economic progress possible.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

VOICE OF A NATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Like a friend' (IE, February 22). Songs were pivotal to the success of films in those days and Ameen Sayani's shows gave them a platform. His voice was the sole reason for the show's longevity for 42 years, and the free-flowing style of conversation is what we eagerly waited for every week. He hosted over 54,000 radio shows and 19,000 commercial spots in his six-decade-long career. At the peak of his stardom, he would get 65,000 letters per week. The 1977 film *Kirna*'s song 'Meri awaz hi pehchaan hai' is as much related to the late Lata Ji as it would be to Ameen Sayani sahab.

Bal Govind, Noida

COURT'S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Along institutional road' (IE, February 23). It is a shame that it needed the highest court in the land to point out the brazenness of the Chandigarh mayoral polls episode. But what else can be expected when toppling elected governments is applauded and touted as Chanakyaneeti rather than a subversion of democracy. One looks up to the SC to uphold the spirit of democracy, beyond just maintaining a facade which suits the political order. It would also be great to see a judicial restraint on the rampant use of government agencies.

Rahul Gaur, Gurgaon

Schopman exit: mixed results, attacking gains

Not qualifying for Paris Olympics was a setback, but the former World and Olympic champion brought a forward-thinking verve to a young team

VINAYAK MOHANARANGAN
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 23

JANNEKE SCHOPMAN'S voice choked with emotion midway through what would now be one of her last interactions with the media. The Olympic qualifiers saw the Indian women's hockey team fall short of accomplishing their goal; after famously finishing fourth in Tokyo, they wouldn't even be playing at the 2024 Olympics.

"Very hard. Because, you know..." she paused when asked about the challenges she faced. "I come from a culture where women are respected and valued. I don't feel that here." She would also say she felt 'alone a lot'. For a coach who spoke at every opportunity about growing as a team, the parting words couldn't have been more anti-climactic.

After the FIH Pro League leg in Odisha, Schopman's tenure as head coach officially ended on Friday night. And as it often does in Indian hockey, not on the best of terms. The first-ever female to take up the role – and among the very few international female head coaches at the top level – Schopman bowed out calling out the disrespect she felt she was

at the receiving end of, based on her gender. "Coming from the Netherlands, having worked in the USA, this country is extremely difficult as a woman, coming from a culture where you can have an opinion and it's valued."

At the highest level of any sport, coaches are ultimately judged for results. The team's best outcomes in major events in the last few years have come at the FIH Nations Cup (winners, promoted to Pro League), Commonwealth Games (bronze), Asian Games (bronze), Asian Champions Trophy (winners), Junior Asia Cup (winners, for the first time). The lows, however, were sharp too. The ninth place at the 2022 World Cup was below par, but the biggest disappointment came in Ranchi during the Olympic qualifiers where they missed two chances to win a quota for Paris Games. But beyond results, Schopman changed the Indian team's identity. A former world and Olympic champion who grew up in the world of Dutch hockey where attacking, fast gameplay is paramount to success, she made Indian players embrace speed. She put together a squad that had exciting young attacking players, something her adversaries acknowledged repeatedly.

The biggest critique of Schopman – even



Janneke Schopman recently spoke about how she was disrespected by some Hockey India officials. Hockey India

by Schopman – would be the inability to convert this attacking verve into more goals in the big games. She ruled the lack of penalty corner specialists across the Indian system, but couldn't address it fully herself. It is also in this aspect that leaving out Rani Rampal raised more questions. She defended that by saying Rani didn't fit into the system she wanted to play, but perhaps reaching a middle ground could have helped all parties. In the years preceding Tokyo, Indian women were largely underdogs, but she tried to turn the tables around. The change in India's philosophy can even be seen through the lens of three India vs Australia matches. The famous one in Tokyo, where India scored early and defended with their lives. Then the semifinal in Birmingham at the CWG where the tables had turned on the Hockeyroos, with India constantly going forward in search of an equaliser that they eventually found, before a shootout heartbreak. Then more recently, perhaps a consolatory reward to mark the end of Schopman's time, a well-deserved 1-0 win at the Pro League where the two teams were evenly matched.

Unequal treatment

Schopman also felt there was differential

treatment between the men's and women's teams, precipitated by the home Hockey World Cup defeat. Her request for a mental conditioning coach early last year didn't come through in time for Asian Games, and she found assistance only late last year. At Asian Games too, the men's team had 11 members on the support staff while the women had 5. That the women played fewer top-level matches at the beginning of last year also didn't sit well with her.

She kept fighting, as her team often did for her. She jumped with joy when her team delivered, she cried on the sidelines and behind closed doors when things didn't go their way, she helped players off the field to understand mindfulness. On a break day during ACT in Ranchi last year, the 46-year-old spent an entire morning with the two goalkeepers, where she took shootouts herself. In a regular training session, she often matched players for their energy levels. The most repeated phrase of Schopman's tenure was: 'I just want my team to play good hockey.' She lived and bowed out on that mantra: full of intensity, riding emotional rollercoasters with the players, notwithstanding criticism for results not going her way, but ultimately, with plenty of care for the group of

INDIA UNDER SCHOPMAN*

Tournament	Pos
World Cup	9th
Olympic Qualifiers	4th*
Pro League	3rd
Nations Cup	1st
Commonwealth Games	3rd
Asian Games	3rd
Asian Champions Trophy	1st
Junior Asia Cup	1st

*missed Paris quota; *key matches

women she tried hard to improve.

In Rani's absence, Schopman tried splitting the goalscoring load amongst younger forwards with the group in Ranchi having five attackers below the age of 22. The average age of the squad is just above 24 as well, as she placed her faith in youth over experience, perhaps needing more time for the unit to click.

Given India still have an exciting young group of players, perhaps history might be kinder on the Janneke Schopman era.

Harmanpreet returns to form in WPL opening night thriller

NAMIT KUMAR
FEBRUARY 23

THE INAUGURAL day of the second edition of the Women's Premier League (WPL) was as narrative-rich as it gets. In a game that went down to the wire, there was a first-ball six from a league debutant to round out the tricky chase for the Mumbai Indians.

But the fact that the driver of the run chase was their skipper, Harmanpreet Kaur, came as much-needed relief for a batter whose barren run had become a cause for concern.

In a game that saw momentum ebb from one side to the other at several different junctures, Sajana Sajeevan's heave over long on from the last ball, as Mumbai needed 5 runs to win, will be the memorable moment of the match. But it was the culmination of a base set up by half-centuries from Yastika Bhatia and Harmanpreet, whose calm, well-paced 34-ball 55 allowed the chase to never be out of reach for her side.

Ismail, the veteran South African speedster who was Mumbai's marquee signing, was finding movement off the pitch with the new ball making both openers struggle. But ultimately, it was the tentativeness of Shafali Varma that gave Mumbai the breakthrough.

Shafali was caught off balance after a premeditated shift in her stance, swinging a wild cross-bat shot, losing her middle stump to Ismail's cutter. It was the kind of shot that would cause further scrutiny into her ability to play match situations or bat at any pace other than all-out attack.

Shafali's recklessness was further compounded by Capsey and Lanning's caution early on. But aided by some sloppy fielding, Capsey kept the scoreboard ticking with constant boundaries (including back-to-back sixes in the 12th over) and skillful manipulation of the field in her 53-ball 75.

Despite a slow start, Lanning was able to feed off Capsey's strokeplay, and Rodrigues continued in the same vein after settling in, rattling off four boundaries and two sixes from her last 14 balls for a 24-ball 42. In-form Marizanne Kapp added a final flourish to make sure Delhi went past 170.

The total felt sufficient, but combined with loose bowling at the death - it was Capsey herself who bowled the final over and conceded a six from the final ball - the start ended up hurting Delhi in a winnable opening encounter.

BRIEF SCORES: Delhi Capitals 171/5 (Capsey 75, Jemima 42; Sciver-Brunt 2-33) lost to Mumbai Indians 172/6 (Yastika 57, Harmanpreet 55; Reddy 2-27) by four wickets with no balls remaining.

"I wanted to take a break and



Harmanpreet Kaur scored 55 from 34 balls before Sajana hit a last-ball six to seal the win. Sportzpics

GURUGRAM MARATHON
MY CITY MY RUN

25 February, 2024

Leisure Valley,
Sector 29, Gurugram

FULL MARATHON (42.2 KM) **10 KM RUN**
FUN RUN (5 KM) **HALF MARATHON (21.1 KM)**

Chief Guest
Sh. Manohar Lal
Chief Minister, Haryana

OPEN CATEGORY

	Full Marathon	Half Marathon	10 Kms
1st	₹1.5 Lakh	₹1 Lakh	₹50,000
2nd	₹1 Lakh	₹75,000	₹30,000
3rd	₹75,000	₹50,000	₹20,000

MASTERS CATEGORY

	Full Marathon	Half Marathon
	₹50,000	₹50,000

AMBASSADOR
SHIKHAR DHAWAN

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