## NEET and States

Governor should not delay assent to TN's Bill for exemption from mandatory admission test

With the Tamil Nadu Assembly passing once again its earlier Bill seeking to exempt government seats in undergraduate medical and dental courses from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), the ball is once again in the court of Governor R.N. Ravi. The Governor had chosen to return to the House for reconsideration the Bill that was passed in September 2021, questioning the tenability of the Justice A.K. Rajan Committee Report that had given its findings in favour of the the passage of such a law. The DMK regime has thrown down the gauntlet as the Constitution is clear as far as the Governor's course of action is concerned. If the Bill is presented to him again, Mr. Ravi is constitutionally bound to grant assent. It is a matter of speculation whether the Bill will obtain presidential nod, but the episode raises a question whether the Governor could not have avoided the current situation by reserving the Bill for the President instead of returning it. After all, this is clearly a Bill that requires the President's acceptance – the exemption from NEET is in conflict with the central law that makes it mandatory and, therefore, can only be saved by the President's assent. Regardless of the Bill's merits, the Governor should delay the matter no further. The original intent of the Constitution makers was that the Governor, under Article 200, ought to have no discretion, save in the case of a law that undermines the position of the High Court, which he is bound to reserve for the President's consideration. However, the Governor's rare use of discretion to question the desirability or validity of a Bill, and ask for reconsideration is now a matter of constitutional practice.

Some parts of the Governor's communication to the Legislative Assembly Speaker seem to suggest that Mr. Ravi disagrees with the basis for the Bill, even though he is not wrong in highlighting a Supreme Court decision in favour of NEET. It is not generally desirable for the Governor to seek to match wits with the legislature's wisdom on social inputs that inform policy. It will be useful to recall that the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State relations observed that the Governor should not act contrary to the advice of the Council of Ministers merely because he did not like the policy embodied in the Bill. The attention will now be on whether the NEET Exemption Bill will pass muster. For one thing, the exemption may not be a solution to the problem of government school students not making it to MBBS courses in sufficient numbers. The situation prior to the introduction of NEET was no better. However, the issue of NEET being a barrier to access is genuine. There is no doubt that the mandatory nature of NEET on a pan-India basis undermines the role of State governments in medical education. As the main deliverers of public health, the States cannot be denied a say in who joins medical courses in government colleges.

## Football and nations

The best football is seen between heavyweight European clubs, but nationalism adds an edge

Senegal holding its nerve to beat Egypt via a penalty shoot-out (4-2) on Sunday at the Stade d'Olembe in Yaounde, Cameroon, to clinch its maiden Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) brought the curtains down on a drama-filled, and at the same time tumultuous, tournament. Egypt, led by the Liverpool talisman Mohamed Salah, came into the final with big-match pedigree, having won the title a record seven times. The North African heavyweight had also won its last six shoot-outs and had seen off fancied sides such as Ivory Coast, Morocco and the host Cameroon earlier in the competition. Senegal, on the other hand, had lost twice in the final, but found a hero in Sadio Mane, another of Liverpool's effervescent stars, who scored the decisive penalty. It was a redemption of sorts for the 29-year-old, for he had fluffed a spot-kick as early as the sixth minute. But the night ended in glory, capped by a celebratory lap of honour with his nation's flag draped around his shoulders. So it did for coach Aliou Cisse, who had missed the all-important penalty when Senegal first reached the final in 2002 and was the coach during the 2019 final defeat to Algeria. The quality of football in the final was largely dire and was marked by incessant fouling. But the lasting impression will be that of delirious Senegalese fans celebrating the moment their nation's name was etched in the history book.

But the tournament will forever be punctuated by unsavoury happenings off the field. The most tragic of these was the trampling to death of at least eight Cameroonians on January 24 at the Stade d'Olembe. COVID-19, which had already led to the postponement of the event by a year, played spoilsport again, scuppering many a side's best-laid plans and preparation time. It also did not help that certain European clubs and coaches were reluctant to release their players in the middle of their club seasons, with Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp even terming AFCON a "little tournament". It is true that European football currently occupies an exalted position, with its crown jewel, the quadrennial tournament Euros, next only to the FIFA World Cup. But to deny other continental competitions their due would be a severe disservice. One just needs to look at what last year's Copa America win meant to Lionel Messi. Despite having won every trophy and every award at club level, the Argentine legend coveted success with the national team the most. It was a similar quest for Mane and Senegal, of overcoming doubts and barriers, to experience the purest form of sporting joy there is. Mane called it the best day of his life and it is impossible to disagree.

# 'NEET is discriminatory, against social justice'

The NEET Exemption Bill not only defends the right to education and social rights but also upholds Tamil Nadu's rights

M.K. STALIN

Hon'ble Speaker of the House. Elections were held in the Province of Madras when the electoral system was first established in India to elect people's representatives by the people. The Justice Party, pioneer of the Dravidian movement, formed the government in the first general election in 1920, when the country was under British rule.

All those who travelled to India from England to observe the working of the Madras Provincial Assembly remarked that the Madras Province is the only province in India governed by the rule of law and administrative protocols.

This is a significant day in the history of this House, which established such democratic values. We have assembled here to defend democracy, to preserve democracy's dignity, to uphold the principle of federalism, and to secure the right to education.

### To defend federal philosophy

We are not only getting together to talk about the NEET Exam [the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test]. We have gathered to preserve the Tamil Nadu Legislature's sovereignty and rights. Federalism is a fundamental idea that truly safeguards the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent! We have come together to ensure that the great federal philosophy remains intact.

I stand in this Assembly that has laid the foundation for success in upholding social justice, legal justice, oppressed people's rights, the greatness of Tamil ethnic community and its language. And I speak with the confidence that this Assembly can and will definitely eliminate the social injustice of NEET. Today, we are here in this Special Assembly to propose a policy of social justice in education for the entire country, having been trained in the footsteps of our leader Anna. To quench students' passion for medical education, we have all come together to work in solidarity and promote social justice.

NEET is not a system established by the Constitution. It was not made a part of the Constitution. The Medical Council of India mandated the creation of NEET. When such an examination was proposed in 2010, Muthamizharinar Kalaignar, the then-Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, vehemently opposed it.

### Much opposed

It was also opposed by a number of Indian States. This examination has been challenged in 115 cases across India. Tamil Nadu is the State that is leading the charge in this direction. All of these cases were heard by the Supreme Court.

NEET was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court itself on July 18, 2013. The Chief Justice of India delivered the judgment. The exam was subsequently abolished across the Indian subcontinent.

However, after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the election and formed the government, a private training institute reopened the issue. The Supreme Court heard the case of NEET. "Judgment is recalled" and "Hear this case afresh," the Supreme Court said on May 24, 2016 after hearing the case. On this basis, the BJP-led Union government issued an ordinance on April 11, 2016, which quickly implemented NEET across the country.

Private training institutes benefit from NEET. The NEET Exemption Bill is being introduced for the benefit of those who cannot afford to pay so much for training. NEET is an impediment to the entitlement of poor and needy children to education. In their dream of becoming doctors, a barrier wall has been placed in the name of NEET. "You can't be a doctor," says NEET. "You don't deserve it," it says, halting one's progress. That is why the NEET Exemption Bill has been introduced. I do not think I need to go into great detail about the abnormalities in that exam at this assembly.

So, to summarise, NEET is not a holy cow. It attempts to marginalise students from low-income families in the guise of merit. As a result, we oppose the examination and demand an exemption.

The question I would want to address in this forum is whether NEET, which has sent some students to the graveyard and others to jail, is really required. This is a question that has been raised by

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the entire student community as well as parents.

### A detailed review

On June 19, 2021, a committee led by retired High Court judge A.K. Rajan was formed to investigate the issues and submit a report on the effects of NEET on poor and backward students. The public was consulted. On July 14, 2021, the Committee submitted a 193-page report to the Government based on those comments. They claimed that Government school students were unable to follow their dreams of pursuing a medical education.

I have formed a committee under the leadership of the Chief Secretary to provide detailed recommendations on this report. After careful consideration, the Bill exempting Tamil Nadu from NEET was enacted by this Assembly. We did a lot of study and were able to pass this Bill, supported with factual information.

The NEET Exemption Bill was passed with the support of all members of this House, with the exception of four BJP members. The Bill reflected not only the sentiments of Tamil Nadu as a whole, but also the Assembly's notion of its sovereignty.

It had to be approved by the Hon'ble Governor, and he should have sent it to the Hon'ble President for his approval. Instead, he kept it pending for 142 days before reaching a decision – despite our numerous requests – and then returned it to us. In this Assembly, I must state unequivocally that the reasons he cited for rejecting the Bill were incorrect.

On June 10, 2021, the Justice A.K. Rajan Committee was set up under G.O. No.283, Department of Health and Family Welfare. The committee was made up of academics and government officials. The study's terms of reference were also made public by this high-level group.

The public was asked to provide feedback to the committee. Hundreds of thousands of people had expressed their opinions to the Commission by email, mail, and petition boxes put in various locations.

According to the recommendation, NEET has limited the diversity of community representation in MBBS and higher medical courses by impeding the desire of those underprivileged of receiving medical education and favouring the socio-economically rich sections. The statistics for this can be found in the report as well. According to the survey, government schoolchildren, those whose parents' annual income is less than ₹2.5 lakh, the backward (BC), the most backward (MBC), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are the most affected.

The Governor criticised the study for claiming that NEET is "against merit". It is worth noting that the report of the Justice A.K. Rajan committee includes proven facts rejecting this. Among those chosen so far, rural poor students have been affected. According to the research, those who studied in the Tamil medium in government schools are also harmed. At this point, I strongly advise that no one mistakenly counts those who benefit from the Government of Tamil Nadu's 7.5% reservation as having profited from NEET.

### The power to legislate

A five-judge Supreme Court Bench heard the matter of *Modern Dental College vs Madhya Pradesh government*. The Supreme Court verdict was clear: The State government has the power to legislate on student admissions to higher education institutions.

In a separate judgment delivered by Justice Banumathi in the same case, she also ruled that the law regulating student admission was within the jurisdiction of the State government. We passed the Bill against NEET solely using the legislative power of the State legislature.

The Governor has urged that NEET be made mandatory by the Constitution. According to the Constitution, any legal provision can be made, but only for the rights of the socially and economically disadvantaged. We are bringing this NEET Exemption Bill back on that basis. The Constitution is anti-discriminatory. However, NEET is inherently discriminatory. Social justice is emphasised in constitutional law. NEET, on the other hand, is opposed to social justice. The term "justice of the law" is used in constitutional law. But NEET favours the rich. The Indian Constitution is built on the principle of equality. NEET, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of equality. NEET is opposed to all of the Constitution's fundamental rights. That is why we are requesting NEET exemption.

My pain stems from having to debate for so long about a dreadful exam that disproportionately impacts poor and rural students.

The return of this Bill has also put into doubt the right of our State of Tamil Nadu. This legislature's sovereignty has been brought into question. The autonomy of States has been questioned. That is what concerns me. What will happen to the constitutionally mandated relationship between the Union and State governments? What are the rights and responsibilities of people of various races, languages, and cultures?

We passed a Bill on September 13, 2021 to exempt students from NEET based on the power we have. The Governor is required by law to reserve it to the President for approval. I expect the Governor to carry out his responsibilities correctly. That is the Governor's responsibility, which is limited by the legislative power of the legislature, which is elected by the people.

I hope that the Governor will respect the sentiments of the people of Tamil Nadu and act in the best interests of the students of Tamil Nadu by sending the NEET Exemption Bill to the President without delay, which will be reconsidered and passed under the power conferred on the people elected by the Legislature by the Constitution. I urge everyone to support this Bill in order to defend the right to education, which has been denied for a long time, as well as the State rights of Tamil Nadu and the social rights of Scheduled Castes, tribals, backward/most backward/the oppressed/the poor/the marginalised/and rural peoples.

Hail Tamil Nadu!

*M.K. Stalin is the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and President of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). This article is an edited version of the Chief Minister's speech*

# Step up agri-spending, boost farm incomes

India's poor AOI is a stark reminder of the need to attain a key sustainable development goal of higher agri-growth

POORNIMA VARMA

While the overall budgetary allocation towards the agricultural sector has marginally increased by 4.4% in the Union Budget 2022-23, the rate of increase is lower than the current inflation rate of 5.5%-6%. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) report for 2001 to 2019 shows that, globally, India is among the top 10 countries in terms of government spending in agriculture, constituting a share of around 7.3% of its total government expenditure. However, India lags behind several low-income countries such as Malawi (18%), Mali (12.4%), Bhutan (12%), Nepal (8%), as well as upper middle-income countries such as Guyana (10.3%) and China (9.6%).

### India is ranked low

The picture changes and rather looks disappointing when we look at the Agriculture Orientation Index (AOI) – an index which was developed as part of the Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 emphasises an increase in investment in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, development of technology to enhance agricultural productivity and eradication of poverty in middle- and lower-income countries. The AOI is calculated by dividing the agriculture share of government expenditure by the agriculture value added share of GDP. In other words, it measures the ratio between government spending towards the agricultural sector and the sector's contribution to GDP. India's index is one of the lowest, reflecting that the spending towards the agricultural sector is not commensurate with the sector's contribution towards GDP.

### A comparison with Asia

Although the AOI has shown an improvement since the mid-2000s, as part of the general revival that took place in several middle-income countries, India's AOI (https://bit.ly/3rBSorH) is one of the lowest in Asia and among several other middle-income and upper-income countries. Asia as a whole performs much better, with a relatively higher performance by Eastern Asian countries. China has been doing remarkably well with an index steadily improving and crossing one.

Similarly, in countries such as the Republic of Korea, the value of AOI has been greater than one and greater than two since 2005-06 respectively. Even lower income African countries such as Zambia, have commendable spending in the agricultural sector despite being a landlocked country. India holds only the 38th rank in the world, despite being an agrarian

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economy wherein a huge population is dependent on the agricultural sector for its livelihood, and despite being among the largest producers of several crops produced and consumed in the world.

The enormous spending on the agricultural sector by East Asian countries is also reflected in their higher crop yield. For example, the total cereal yield in India is only around 3,282 kilograms per hectare compared to 4,225 kg per hectare in Asia. Within the Asian region, Eastern Asia has the highest cereal yield of 6,237 kg per hectare. In China, even with an average land holding size of 0.6 hectares, which is much lower than India's average land holding size, the performance of the sector in terms of crop yield is much higher than India. For example, the cereal yield is 6,296 kg per hectare, pulses yield is 1,815 kg per hectare and vegetable crops yield is 25,546 kg per hectare in China; the corresponding figures for India are 3,282 kg, 704 kg, and 15,451 kg, respectively. Both India and China are among the world's largest producers of wheat, rice, cotton and maize.

A closer look at the budgetary allocation towards the agricultural sector shows that there has been a drastic slashing of funds toward important schemes such as crop insurance and minimum support price (MSP). Even with an overall increase in budgetary outlays, the allocation towards Market Intervention Scheme and Price Support Scheme (MIS-PSS) was only ₹1,500 crore. This is 62% less than the previous allocation of ₹3,959.61 crore in revised estimates (RE) of FY 2021-22.

### Other significant reductions

Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay SanraksHan Abhiyan (PM-AASHA) experienced a significant reduction to only one crore as against the allocation of ₹400 crore in 2021-22. It was allocated just ₹1 crore for the year as against an expenditure of ₹400 crore in 2021-22. Both schemes are pertinent to ensure MSP-based procurement operations in the country, especially for pulses and oil seeds. Furthermore, the distribution of pulses to States for welfare schemes has also been reduced to ₹9 crore as compared to the ₹50 crore of FY 2021-22 (revised estimates) and the allocated amount of ₹300 crore in the year 2021-22. Additionally, there is an overall reduction in ₹718.8 crore in total central schemes/projects, which may have serious implications for the performance of the sector.

While one can still argue that the capital investment in the agricultural sector is more crucial than price support programmes, there has not been any considerable and commensurate increase in the allocation towards capital investment, especially for promotion of rural infrastructure and marketing facilities. Allocation for rural development was 5.59% in the previous Budget and it has been reduced to 5.23%. The allocation of funds towards schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM KISAN), Pradhan Mantri Kisan Maandhan Yojana, though desirable, will not result in long run asset generation.

### Measures to implement

The intensification in government spending towards the agricultural sector is the key to attain the sustainable development goals of higher agricultural growth and farm income. The focus on development of irrigation facilities, urban infrastructure and development of national highways must be complemented with an emphasis on the development of rural infrastructure and rural transportation facilities, along with an increase in the number of markets, as suggested by the National Commission on Farmers. These measures will play a crucial role in enhancing farmers' access to markets and integrating small and marginal farmers into the agricultural supply chain to a greater extent.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Counter point

It is amusing that the nearly 100 minute long reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks for the President's Address in the Lok Sabha accuses the Opposition Congress party of promoting division in the country in addition to labelling it as the leader of '*tukde tukde* [break-up]' gang (Page 1, February 8). It is the Bharatiya Janata Party that is dividing the country on the basis of religion and language and pursuing divisive policies. It is the BJP government that is initiating steps to destroy the federal and democratic set-up of India. It would be pertinent to mention the speech made by Congress leader Anand Sharma in the Rajya Sabha: "... the country belongs to all". (Inside pages, February 8).

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

■ The objective of the nearly 100 minute long speech seems to prove the age-old maxim of giving someone a bad name. From that exalted position that he holds, and in the 'Temple of Democracy', it does not behove the stature of a tall leader to 'pick and choose' extracts from Nehru's speeches out of context and try to make justifications. He should have refrained from stooping so low.

K. NEHRU PATNAIK,
Visakhapatnam

■ The pointed remarks against the Congress Party's subversive attempts in trying to capitalise on national woes for its survival are apt. The Congress must learn to take the Prime Minister's comments in the right spirit.

B. GURUMURTHY,
Madurai

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# Rights of the weak, duties of the powerful

## A complaint of undue emphasis on rights creates the suspicion that citizens are being disempowered

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

ISTOCK

Rights and duties are conceptually linked to one another. There are no rights without duties. If a person has the right to something, it necessarily implies that someone else has a corresponding duty to ensure that it is not violated. For example, if an individual has a right to free speech, then it is the duty of the state to prevent its infringement. Or take the right to religious freedom of, say, American Hindus. Other groups, regardless of numbers or social power, have a duty not to infringe it. If they ever fall short of space for worship, the government should help fix that problem, facilitate its possession or use by Hindus. Isn't it a shame then that in Gurugram only the Sikhs felt duty-bound to help ordinary Muslims offer namaz?

If I have rights which impose duties on others, then others also have rights that enforce duties on me. Individuals have as many duties as rights. Any individual who demands a right and expects others to allow or facilitate its exercise must also expect that she is equally duty-bound to reciprocate. This is so simply because, like her, all others have rights too. We are all rights- as well as duties-bearing individuals.

I hope it is abundantly clear that rights entail duties, that rights cannot be exercised without the simultaneous performance of duties. Because of their grounding in rights, these (rights-based) duties cannot be pitted against rights. No opposition between them exists. To say here that we must focus on duties *rather than* on rights makes no sense. What then could be meant by the proposition that we must move away from a rights-based to a duty-based perspective?

### Duties against rights

It should be obvious that the framework of rights and duties discussed above is grounded in egalitarian assumptions. However, the moment we drop this assumption, this whole picture of rights and duties is transformed. To be sure, the conceptual relation between rights and duties remains unbroken. Rights continue to entail duties, but in deeply hierarchical, inegalitarian societies, only a few people have rights, while the many have duties to ensure the proper exercise of the rights of these few.

In patriarchal families, the father alone has the right to take decisions. This puts all other members under a duty to abide by his decision. Remember Amrish Puri in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*? He decides, without consultation, that Simran, played by Kajol, is to be married to the son of his friend in a Punjabi village. And Simran has no choice but to obey, to leave her home in London and settle in India. The mother, sympathetic to Simran, is also duty-bound not to object to the father's decision.

Much the same is true of caste-ridden societies. It is a misconception that the ancient Hindu *Varna Vyavastha* has only duties and no rights. The duties of Shudras and Ati-shudras to serve people of higher rank flow from rights possessed exclusively by upper castes. A hierarchical caste system distributes rights and duties unequally. Only a few have the most important rights – the right to be served, for instance; the larger population has corresponding duties to ensure that these rights are exercised without hindrance. Any infringement on the rights of the upper caste, especially the Brahmin, brings heavy penalties to the violator, sometimes even death. Similarly, in many Islamic societies, rights and duties are gender-specific, and unequal. It is the right of men to have their testimony in the court weigh twice as much as that of women who are duty-bound to comply.

In absolute monarchies, the King has unrestricted rights and all others have corresponding duties which increase as we go down the ladder of political hierarchy. Those at the bottom have the maximum number of duties towards the maximum number of people, all ranked higher than them. Talk of priority of duties over rights is rampant in inegalitarian societies. When people are asked to forget about rights and think more about duties, the subtext is that they should forget about caring for their *own* rights and concentrate on their duties to the few. In hierarchical, inegalitarian societies, where power is unevenly distributed, duties are often seen in opposition to rights.

Careful attention to the structure of rights and duties in inegalitarian societies reveals its deep connection to social and political power. Those in power have rights; those without it have duties. A transformation from a hierarchical to an egalitarian order does not produce a power-free order. Instead, at least in principle, such change generates a democratic distribution of power. It is this equality of power that ensures a system of equal rights and duties. Indeed, in egalitarian polities, more power means more duties. The powerless have rights, the powerful have duties. For example, it is the duty of the state to ensure that there is no poverty, disease or unemployment. In this context, any move to shift focus from rights to duties, to complain of undue emphasis on rights breeds the suspicion that democracy is being undermined and hierarchy reintroduced through the backdoor.

### Duties beyond rights

However, one cannot altogether deny the importance of a moral discourse that asks people to attend to duties. For, quite simply, duties that do not oppose rights exist and they do not flow from rights but go beyond them. Let us take an example. A surgeon performs an operation. He does his job efficiently and believes that once done, he is under no obligation to be present in the hospital or talk to the family of the patient. Now, consider another surgeon who after performing the operation feels compelled to interact with the patient, placate the anxieties of his family. Abandoning an impersonal stance, he brings warmth to his interaction. His act flows from duties that are integral to his character, to the goodness of his heart, to his personal virtues, to his commitment to warm social relationships, and *does not flow from any right* of the patient. To be sure, the patient and the family have the right to the surgeon's full attention when he is performing the operation. A failure to do so would mean an obvious violation of the patient's right. But no right of the patient or his family is violated if the surgeon does not go that extra mile to personally reassure the patient and his family.

A society with people who take such virtue-based, solidarity-infused duties seriously is much better than one where such duties are not valued. If that is the case, it is good to ask people to go beyond rights and to think also of their duties to others, and more generally to society. We all have a duty to build a tolerant society, or to remain vigilant against potential wrongs of our elected rulers. These duties are not antagonistic to rights; they are moral, non-justiciable. Many such duties are mentioned in our Constitution: to preserve composite culture, not destroy natural environment, develop scientific temper, safeguard public property, protect India's sovereignty and integrity. None of them are legally enforceable but they impose an obligation on all citizens, especially on those who occupy public office, to go beyond the call of rights-based duties.

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# Tax incentives for philanthropy

## A systematic study of the impact of tax incentives on charitable donations is the need of the hour

PRIYADARSHINI SINGH

Do people donate money to charity to get a tax rebate? The answer for most donors is 'no'. They donate because they believe in the causes they support, or the quality of work that some NGOs are doing, or because they are committed citizens. Why then are tax incentives needed for the charity sector? Why should the government forgo revenue it can generate from taxing charitable donations? Do tax incentives have any impact on charitable donations? We don't know the answer to the last question, as a study on tax incentives across 12 countries, including India, by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP) at Ashoka University, in research partnership with the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, highlights. This is because the impact of tax incentives on charitable donations has not been systematically studied in the Indian context. The only publicly accessible study uses data from the 1970s-80s, when tax incentives for philanthropy were more appealing than they are now because the overall tax rates were much higher.

### A poorly studied area

Raising taxes is a core attribute of statehood. But remarkably, tax incentives for charity also have a long history. They go all the way back to the 19th century in some of the countries studied, and are also provided in countries such as Brazil which have a restrictive tax incentives regime for civil society. Despite this, the role of tax incentives in supporting civil society is poorly studied in most countries, The best studies are from the U.S. and the U.K. These are primarily econometric studies which measure the increase (or decrease) in charitable donations due to changes in the tax incentives provisions. These studies depend on the availability of tax and donor data to researchers. But in these countries too, the non-monetary impact of tax incentives is not deeply examined. For example, does the legal relationship that tax incentives create between the state and the civil society as a sector impact its financial health and stability?

It does appear that in India, financial flows coming through tax incentives are not the mainstay of civil society (CSIP, 2021). However, given the overall nature of the sector, they may still be very critical. Many NGOs in India are small and operate with budgets of less than ₹15 lakh a year (CSIP, 2019). The distribution of NGOs is also skewed: they are concentrated in States like Uttar Pradesh (MOSPI, 2012). Most NGOs work in the areas of health and education. For small NGOs in remote areas or those working on areas that are less recognised, the tax incentives status may still be important for establishing legal recognition with the community, government entities and donors.

When examined from the perspective of the government, civil society organisations have historically played an irreplaceable role in social development. Many government programmes have emerged due to a harmonious relationship with NGOs that have implemented an innovative idea. Governments have provided the scale and state support while the NGOs have provided the ideational energy and community experience. The activity-based learning approach developed by Rishi Valley in Tamil Nadu during the early 2000s is an example.

### The signalling effect

The most important role of tax incentives as the regulatory and legal link between the state and the civil society is that of the 'signalling effect'. It denotes that the state supports philanthropic activity and through its revenue forgone, actively encourages private actors to engage with public problems.

A systematic study of the impact of tax incentives is the need of the hour, particularly one on the various provisions in supporting philanthropic activity which highlight the many ways in which India's tax incentives regime can be made more responsive. For example, countries like France have a credit-based system, which is more equitable than the deduction-based system followed by India which privileges high-income donors. Studies in the U.S. and the U.K. suggest that high-income donors are more sensitive to tax incentives, and a carefully crafted regime can be used to target this category of donors. We also need to take a re-look at reinstating other categories of taxes such as wealth and inheritance tax so that charity-focused tax incentives can benefit the non-profit sector.

Our new tax regime dilutes the state-civil society relationship by giving donors the option to opt out of incentives for lower tax rates. Saving the revenue forgone from tax incentives may not increase the government coffers significantly, but this will impact the perception of the NGO sector for an average donor. And if this gets done, here's hoping that it is supported by research and rationale.

*Priyadarshini Singh is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the CSIP at Ashoka University and Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research*

STATE OF PLAY

# An extreme proposition

## Chandrasekhar Rao's idea of floating a new Constitution is not the solution to Centre-State issues

RAVI REDDY

Hours after the Budget was presented, Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao raised a heated debate by floating the idea of rewriting the Constitution. Mr. Rao has been angry at what he perceives to be "step-motherly" treatment meted out by the Centre to the States. He floated the idea of introducing a new Constitution to remedy the situation as the existing Constitution, according to him, has been unable to do so.

Addressing an unusually lengthy press conference, he said there is a Union List, State List, and Concurrent List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. But the party in power at the Centre, whether the Congress or the BJP, is trying to usurp the rights guaranteed to the States.

As expected, the idea attracted a lot of criticism. Mr. Rao's comments gave enough ammunition to the Opposition to project the TRS president and his party as "anti-Dalit". BJP and Congress leaders held separate demonstrations in support of the Constitution drafted by B.R. Ambedkar. BJP State President Bandi Sanjay Kumar said charges of sedition should be filed against the Chief Minister as his remarks had the potential of creating "social disorder". Telangana Congress President and MP A. Revanth Reddy said there seemed to be a nexus between the TRS and the BJP as the latter too has been working to change the Constitution for quite some time. There was scope for amending the Constitution, but the proposal to introduce an altogether new one showed Mr. Rao's disrespect for Ambedkar and the sections whose cause he championed, he said. BSP Telangana unit in-charge R.S. Praveen Kumar called the statement irresponsible. He said the formation of Telangana was possible only thanks to the Constitution.

The TRS leaders hit back at the Opposition claiming that the thinking was not new. State Planning Board vice-chairman B. Vinod Kumar said that former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had appointed a commission to review the Constitution. Commissions have been formed in the past to examine certain provisions of the Constitution, he said.

Former Central Information Commissioner Madabhushi Sridhar Acharyulu said there was nothing wrong with Mr. Rao's idea. Referring to the original draft of the Constitution, he said Ambedkar had made it clear that every Article can be replaced, added or amended. The Constitution drafted by Ambedkar has lost its shape as it has been amended many times. The Centre has been consistently trying to usurp the powers of the State, especially in the last seven years, he said. The gazette notifications issued by the Centre notifying the jurisdiction of the Godavari and Krishna rivers without consulting the riparian States is an example of how the Centre is trying to have its say in the State's affairs, he said.

Notwithstanding Mr. Rao's apparent anguish at what he perceives to be overreach by the Centre, it is hardly infrequent to witness Centre-State conflicts of this sort. In recent years, issues such as the 15th Finance Commission, the GST, land acquisition policies and more have emerged as flashpoints between the Centre and States ruled by Opposition parties.

The reality is that the Constitution has provided a mechanism for remedy of such conflicts in the form of Article 131, which accords to the Supreme Court original jurisdiction to deal with disputes between the Centre and any States. The application of Article 131 relates to the situation where the rights and power of a State or the Centre are in question.

Before reaching for profoundly deep-rooted reform proposals such as the re-writing of the Consititution, Mr. Rao may find it more politically expedient to apply for legal recourse already made available to his government under existing laws.

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DATA POINT

# Opposition missing from parliamentary committees

**The Data Point titled 'Poor turnout in parliamentary committees' published on Monday (February 7, 2022) showed that the attendance of MPs barely crossed 50% in parliamentary committees. Here we look at attendance data across political parties and States. While attendance was more than 50% for members of the BJP, it was only 30% for members of the Trinamool Congress. Among the States with the most representatives in parliamentary committees, members from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had the highest attendance at 50%, whereas members from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal had the least. In the analysis, one 'possible member-sitting' is defined as one member attending one sitting of a committee. The % of actual member-sittings recorded is also listed. Only sittings in 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 (till Jan. 10) are considered. By Jasmin Nihalani**

**PARTY-WISE ATTENDANCE** | The table lists the total number of possible member-sittings and the % share of attendance among parties. For instance, if all members of the BJP had attended all the sittings, there would be 9,061 member-sittings during the period considered. However, only 4,736 (52%) member-sittings were recorded

| Groups | Party | Possible member-sittings | % of actual member-sittings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sittings > 800 | Bharatiya Janata Party | 9,061 | 52 |
| | Indian National Congress | 2,276 | 44 |
| | All India Trinamool Congress | 801 | 30 |
| Sittings between 400 and 800 | Biju Janata Dal | 489 | 49 |
| | Janata Dal-United | 481 | 49 |
| | Shiv Sena | 479 | 45 |
| | Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 667 | 42 |
| | Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Cong. Party | 716 | 42 |
| Sittings between 100 and 400 | Bahujan Samaj Party | 356 | 51 |
| | Telugu Desam Party | 131 | 44 |
| | Telangana Rashtra Samithi | 362 | 43 |
| | All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 276 | 40 |
| | Communist Party of India (Marxist) | 304 | 38 |
| | Lok Janshakti Party | 113 | 36 |
| | Shiromani Akali Dal | 131 | 36 |
| | Rashtriya Janata Dal | 152 | 35 |
| | Samajwadi Party | 353 | 27 |
| | Nationalist Congress Party | 186 | 25 |
| | Indian Union Muslim League | 108 | 20 |
| Sittings below 100 | Kerala Congress (M) | 33 | 73 |
| | Aam Aadmi Party | 97 | 72 |
| | Revolutionary Socialist Party | 58 | 66 |
| | Peoples Democratic Party | 50 | 40 |
| | Naga People's Front | 62 | 39 |
| | All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen | 33 | 36 |
| | Apna Dal (Sonelal) | 68 | 35 |
| | Janata Dal (Secular) | 57 | 33 |
| | Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi | 31 | 32 |
| | Mizo National Front | 54 | 28 |
| | National People's Party | 56 | 27 |
| | Jharkhand Mukti Morcha | 62 | 24 |
| | Jammu and Kashmir National Conference | 80 | 23 |
| | Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party | 33 | 21 |
| | Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 48 | 19 |
| | Communist Party of India | 61 | 15 |

**STATE-WISE ATTENDANCE** | The table lists the number of possible member-sittings and the % share of attendance among the States.
For instance, if all the members of Tamil Nadu had attended all the sittings, there would be 1,381 member-sittings. However, only 568 (41%) member-sittings were recorded

| Groups | State | Possible member-sittings | % of actual member-sittings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sittings >1,000 | Bihar | 1,188 | 53 |
| | Uttar Pradesh | 2,737 | 50 |
| | Karnataka | 1,120 | 45 |
| | Maharashtra | 1538 | 43 |
| | Tamil Nadu | 1,381 | 41 |
| | West Bengal | 1,297 | 34 |
| Sittings between 500 and 1,000 | Rajasthan | 953 | 63 |
| | Odisha | 691 | 50 |
| | M.P. | 860 | 48 |
| | Gujarat | 839 | 45 |
| | Kerala | 718 | 44 |
| | A.P. | 987 | 43 |
| | Telangana | 558 | 42 |
| | Punjab | 516 | 42 |
| | Assam | 534 | 32 |
| Sittings between 100 and 500 | Uttarakhand | 144 | 61 |
| | Delhi | 334 | 58 |
| | Haryana | 369 | 58 |
| | Chhattisgarh | 430 | 55 |
| | Jharkhand | 451 | 49 |
| | Tripura | 119 | 45 |
| | Himachal | 136 | 39 |
| | J&K | 209 | 32 |
| Sittings below 100 | Manipur | 65 | 57 |
| | Puducherry | 54 | 43 |
| | Mizoram | 77 | 35 |
| | Sikkim | 26 | 35 |
| | Arunachal | 59 | 27 |
| | Meghalaya | 56 | 27 |
| | Nagaland | 62 | 16 |

WITH INPUTS FROM VIGNESH RADHAKRISHNAN
SOURCE: LOK SABHA

The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 9, 1972

### Sir Alec on the region's security

New Delhi, Feb. 8: The British Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home said to-day that, as the most powerful nation in this part of the world, India could become the sort of "foundation and basis" for a collective security system in the Indian Ocean region. Addressing a crowded press conference, he expressed the view that with its increased authority and influence, India was now in a position to play such a role in this sensitive region to ensure that no power had the monopoly of the Indian Ocean. But this was entirely a matter for India to decide whether this concept of collective security in the Indian Ocean area was something that it could usefully undertake in the future. For the time being, the whole idea seemed a long way ahead, in spite of the fact that India was obviously interested in the security of the seas which border the sub-continent. The Soviet Union, he said, had doubled its naval power in the Indian Ocean in the last one year, while Britain had been progressively reducing its strength to the point that now it had only a minimal presence there. Though it was possible to avoid a naval arms race through an agreed balance of forces by the Big Powers in this region, the question of verification would be a difficult, if not an insuperable, problem in dealing with the Soviet Union, especially when it was known that it was in the midst of a mammoth naval expansion programme.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 9, 1922

### Maharajah's speech

After the loyal toast the Maharajah in proposing the health of the Prince of Wales said his visit to Gwalior was an auspicious and unique event. The banqueting hall where they sat tonight was haloed with great traditions, for in the same room where the Prince sat tonight the revered father, the august father, and the Duke of Connaught once graced with their presence and the House in which the Prince was living to-day, His Majesty once made this abode. The Maharajah was happy to think that the relations between his House and that of the Emperor were no longer of a political nature, but had domestic complexion. He named his son and daughter after Their Majesties and the Maharajah was grateful for this touching Royal favour. This gracious act on Their Majesties' part made him (Scindhia) feel that he belonged to the Royal domestic House.

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THE HINDU

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2022

# Text & Context

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## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### Bank frauds

**1,45,309** The number of fraud complaints registered by the RBI under the various ombudsman schemes in 2020-21. In FY20, 1,35,448 complaints were recorded, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman informed the Rajya Sabha. She said that the RBI stated that on comparing the complaints against ATM/debit cards, credit cards, and mobile/electronic banking of these two periods, there is a decline of 13% with regard to complaints in ATM/debit cards while there is an increase of 12% and 53% with regard to mobile/electronic banking and credit cards. PTI

### Severe hunger in Africa

**13** In million, the number of people facing severe hunger in the Horn of Africa due to drought conditions, according to the United Nations World Food Programme ( WFP). Countries in the region, including Somalia and Kenya, face the driest conditions recorded since 1981, the agency reported on Tuesday, calling for immediate assistance to forestall a major humanitarian crisis. The WFP said it needs $327 million over the next six months for the urgent needs of 4.5 million people and to help communities become more resilient to extreme climate shocks. PTI

### Airtel's revenue rise

**12.60** Is the percentage rise in the third-quarter revenue reported by Indian telecom operator Bharti Airtel owing to the recent tariff hikes and subscriber additions. The company's consolidated revenue from operations for the quarter climbed to ₹298.67 billion ($4 billion) from ₹265.18 billion a year ago. The tariff hikes by telecom operators in November played a significant role in increasing the average revenue per user. This is a measure of how much an average consumer on the network spends in a month. REUTERS

### Insurance coverage paid

**808** In ₹ crore, the amount paid to the families of 1,616 deceased healthcare workers in India who were involved in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya informed the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday. Mandaviya complemented all doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers for doing exemplary work during the pandemic. He said the Government launched the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package (PMGKP) scheme to provide an insurance cover of ₹50 lakh to eligible beneficiaries. PTI

### Criminal candidates

**26** In percent, the share of candidates contesting the Goa Assembly elections with criminal cases against them. About 8% have been booked for serious crimes. The figures were part of a report released by the Association of Democratic Reforms on Tuesday. The highest number of candidates with criminal cases are with the Congress, followed by the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party and the BJP. Of the total 301 candidates contesting the polls, 77 have declared in their affidavits that criminal cases are pending against them. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

EXPLAINER

# The Governor's role in approving a Bill

Can the Governor over-ride the decision of the Legislative Houses? Under what circumstances does the President step in?

## THE GIST

- The Tamil Nadu Assembly has once again adopted a Bill on the exemption of the NEET exams that was earlier returned by Governor R.N. Ravi. The Governor returned the bill stating that it was against the interests of rural and poor students.
- The Governor will now have to grant his assent to the Bill as mandated by Article 200 of the Constitution. The first proviso of the article enables the Governor to return a Bill for reconsideration. If the Bill is passed again and presented for assent, "the Governor shall not withhold assent therefrom".
- The Governor does not have discretion on matters of the Assembly and is bound to follow the advice of the ministerial Council even on matters where he/she might be withholding assent.

K. VENKATRAMANAN

**The story so far:** The Tamil Nadu Assembly has once again adopted a Bill that was earlier returned by Governor R.N. Ravi. The Bill seeks to grant exemption from the mandatory National Entrance-cum-Eligibility Test (NEET) for seats allotted by the Government in undergraduate medical and dental courses in Tamil Nadu. Last week, the Governor returned the Bill, contending that it was against the interests of rural and poor students.

**What comes next?**
There is no doubt that the Governor will now have to grant his assent to the Bill. Under Article 200 of the Constitution, which deals with grant of assent to Bills passed by the Assembly, the first proviso enables the Governor to return a Bill, that is not a Money Bill, with a message requesting the House, or Houses, if there is an upper chamber, to reconsider the Bill, or any provisions, and also consider introducing amendments he may recommend. The House will have to reconsider as suggested. If the Bill is passed again, with or without changes, and presented for assent, "the Governor shall not withhold assent therefrom".

**In the present case, the Bill will have to be sent to the President for his assent, as it is enacted under an entry in the Concurrent List on a subject that is covered by a central law**

In the present case, the Bill will have to be sent to the President for his assent, as it is enacted under an entry in the Concurrent List on a subject that is covered by a central law. NEET is mandatory under Section 10D of the Indian Medical Council of India Act, an amendment introduced in 2016. Therefore, the State law can be in force only if the President grants his assent. This will cure the 'repugnancy' between the central and State laws.

**What is the Governor's function in passing a Bill?**
Under Article 200, the Governor may (a) grant assent (b) withhold assent (c) return for reconsideration by the Legislature or (b) reserve for the consideration of the President any Bill passed by the State legislature and presented to him for assent.

There is no timeframe fixed in the Constitution for any of these functions. The Constitution makes it mandatory that the Governor should reserve for the President's consideration if, in his opinion (a phrase that means he exercises his own discretion in this), a Bill that "so derogates from the powers of the High Court as to endanger the position which that Court is by this Constitution designed to fill". In other words, any Bill that seems to clip the wings of the High Court or undermine its functioning will not become law without the President's assent.

**What happens when the President considers the Bill?**
Once again, there is no timeframe. Article 201 says when a Bill is reserved by a Governor for his consideration, "the President shall declare either that he assents to the Bill, or that he withholds assent therefrom". He may also direct the Governor to return the Bill, if it is not a Money Bill, to the Legislature along with a message. The House or Houses will have to reconsider the Bill within a period of six months from receiving it. It may pass the Bill again with or without any change. The Bill shall again be presented to the President for his consideration. The article ends with that. This means that the Bill will become law if the assent is given, but nothing can be done if the Bill is denied assent by the President or if he makes no decision.

**Does the Governor have any discretion in this regard?**
Section 75 of the Government of India Act, 1935, contained the words 'in his discretion' while referring to the Governor's grant of assent to Bills. The phrase was consciously omitted when Article 175 in the draft Constitution (later renumbered as the present Article 200) was enacted. Commentators generally agree that the Governor, who normally functions on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, is bound to go by the advice in the matter of granting assent. It may seem unusual to say the Governor should act on ministerial advice even when withholding assent and returning a Bill for reconsideration. However, a reading of the Constituent Assembly debates shows that this was indeed what the framers of the Constitution intended. It was explained on behalf of the drafting committee that there may be a situation when the Council of Ministers feels that a Bill has been hastily adopted or that it requires changes.

In such a situation, the Constitution must provide for the possibility that the Council may want to recall its Bill, and accordingly advise the Governor to return it.

While analysing the provision, the Sarkaria Commission on Union-State Relations points out that the Constitutional Adviser's note said there could be occasions for even withholding assent on the advice of the Ministers.

For instance, if after a Bill is passed the Ministers resign before the Bill gets the Governor's assent, the new Ministry may not want to go ahead with the Bill and might advise against assent being given. These examples suggest that no discretion was ever envisaged for the Governor in dealing with Bills.

**Pass the Bill:** Students hold placards as they stage a protest against Tamil Nadu Governor's stand on the anti-NEET Bill, at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on February 8, 2022. PTI

EXPLAINER

# Renewing Indo-Lanka relations after a period of strain

What were the causes of tension between the two neighbouring countries?

MEERA SRINIVASAN

**The story so far:** Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister G.L. Peiris on Monday met his counterpart S. Jaishankar in New Delhi, as part of the ongoing high-level, and increasingly frequent, bilateral engagement between the neighbours. New Delhi's economic assistance to Colombo in recent weeks has made a "world of difference", he told The Hindu in an interview. After a year marked by strain and a trust deficit, recent developments signal a "fresh energy" in Indo-Lanka ties, according to Mr. Peiris.

**How is India helping?**
Beginning January 2022, India has been providing crucial economic support to the island nation in the grip of a severe dollar crisis that, many fear, might lead to a sovereign default, and a severe shortage of essentials in the import-reliant country.

The relief extended by India from the beginning of this year totals over $1.4 billion –a $400 currency swap, a $500 loan deferment and a $500 Line of Credit for fuel imports. Sri Lanka is further negotiating a $1 billion assistance from India to help the near 22 million-strong country as it faces an unprecedented economic crisis.

A container vessel is offloaded at the East Terminal of the Colombo port. AFP

**Why India?**
Before the pandemic struck, and soon after, it was India that the ruling Rajapaksas first approached with requests for a debt freeze and currency swap. However, for about two years there was no response from Delhi. Meanwhile, Colombo also sought and obtained financial assistance from China through the pandemic years, by way of new loans and a currency swap. China also provided about 80% of the vaccines administered by Sri Lanka, where about 65% of the population is fully vaccinated. Colombo also received some assistance from other countries, such as Bangladesh.

**Is there a shift?**
The last year saw a dramatic turn in Indo-Lanka relations, beginning with Colombo's sudden decision in February 2021, to unilaterally cancel a 2019 agreement to jointly develop a strategic port (East Container) terminal in Colombo with India and Japan.

New Delhi and Tokyo were shocked. They expressed their displeasure at the Rajapaksa government's decision unambiguously. However, Colombo soon offered what it called a "compromise deal" to India, roping in the Adani Group as the main investor in a neighbouring, West Container Terminal.

India quickly took the offer but its concerns over a long-pending agreement on the joint development of the World War II-era oil tanks in the strategically located, eastern Trincomalee district remained. It was a key talking point during Sri Lankan Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa's visit to New Delhi end of last year, when he discussed a "four-pronged" approach with India to address Sri Lanka's food and energy security. Mr. Basil sort emergency assistance from India when Sri Lanka's foreign reserves dropped to $1.6 billion in November 2021, leaving no dollars for importing essentials, or meeting debt obligations.

New Delhi's assistance, diplomatic sources indicated, was contingent on Colombo firming up the Trincomalee project agreement. Sure enough, Sri Lanka soon announced that it would sign the Trincomalee oil tank farm deal with India. On January 6, 2022, the two sides inked the agreement, marking a major milestone in the long-dragging project. A week later, India confirmed a $400 million currency swap for Sri Lanka, while deferring another $500 million due for settlement to the Asian Clearing Union (ACU). On February 2, 2022, the Export Import Bank (EXIM) of India and the Government of Sri Lanka signed a $500- million Line of Credit agreement to ease Sri Lanka's fuel imports.

**Are there other sources of tension?**
Yes. The Palk Bay fisheries conflict, involving fishermen of Tamil Nadu and their counterparts in war-affected northern Sri Lanka has escalated in recent weeks, following mid-sea clashes between fishermen from both sides.

Two fishermen from Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna district were found dead after one such clash, triggering massive protests. The Sri Lankan fishermen protested Indian fishermen's use of the destructive bottom trawling fishing method along their coast, despite their voicing concern over its impact on marine resources and their post-war livelihoods for years now. Bilateral talks between governments and fisher leaders have proved unsuccessful so far, with Tamil Nadu fishermen reluctant to move away from the practice of bottom trawling that yields high profits.

Another aspect in bilateral engagement is the pending political solution to Sri Lanka's Tamil question. Arguably, India's emphasis on the rights of Tamils has come down in recent years, with a growing China pre-occupation dominating its Sri Lanka policy.

India and Sri Lanka's Tamil leadership continue to engage on this aspect. Prominent Tamil leaders recently wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking India's intervention in ensuring a durable political solution to Sri Lanka's historic ethnic question. However, it remains to be seen if India has the leverage to influence the Rajapaksa administration to decisively address the Tamils' long-pending concerns, in the new Constitution promised by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

## THE GIST

- India from the beginning of this year has given Sri Lanka economic relief worth over $1.4 billion. Sri Lanka is further negotiating a $1 billion assistance from India as it faces an unprecedented economic crisis.
- The main sources of tension between the countries include the sudden cancellation of the 2019 agreement to jointly develop the East Container terminal in Colombo along with Japan as well as the the Palk Bay fisheries conflict and the Tamil question.
- India extended generous financial assistance to the island nation following the latter's announcement of signing the Trincomalee oil tank farm deal with India.

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**For dignity:** Hijab clad women staging a protest in Raichur on Monday against the 'dress codes' being imposed in schools and colleges of coastal Karnataka. ▪ SANTOSH SAGAR

FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Coasting towards trouble

## The communalism being mounted in coastal Karnataka attempts to sever ties between communities

VALERIAN RODRIGUES

### THE GIST

■ The social and ideological communalism in coastal Karnataka attempts to sever communities from all social ties and employs every possible resource to subserve this end. At the same time, such communalism operates in a context of growing sociality. It marks off a people from the rest by invoking religious divide as its justification.

■ Coastal Karnataka has always been peripheral to the larger dynamics at work in the rest of of the State. Several developments in the 1970s and '80s led to a distinct dynamics in this region. The oil boom after 1973 gave a boost to migration of Muslims and Christians to the Gulf region while sections of Brahmins and backward castes along the coast came under the influence of the RSS and the Sangh Parivar.

■ Communal riots in this region began to assume a mass character in the 1980s. Following the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992, communal riots have constantly erupted in this region, a major one being at Surathkal in 1998. While in recent years, communal riots tend to be localised there is a new pattern that has become common, i.e. killing a political activist belonging to one of the militant communal groups and drawing political mileage out of it. It serves the interests of those who want to benefit from generalised social interactions without considering the bond of fellow-feeling cutting across communities.

*This piece by Valerian Rodrigues dated August 3, 2017, gives us a history of the communally sensitive regions of coastal Karnataka which is now witnessing escalating tensions over the hijab row wherein Muslim women wearing the headscarf are not allowed entry into colleges and other educational institutions.*

The regional media in Karnataka has resorted to highly suggestive terms to describe the recurrent pattern of communal outburst in coastal Karnataka, particularly in the outlying areas of Mangaluru city, in recent months. One such term is the 'Republic of coastal Karnataka', where communal bands rule the roost and the State enjoys little clout as sovereign, in the same way as in the 'Republic of Bellary' where, a few years ago, the writ of the mining barons ran. While such an analogy may not capture the everyday social dynamics of coastal Karnataka, the term does indicate an emerging social sensibility in the region where wanton and brutal killing of an ideological adversary is increasingly seen as normal and displayed as a public spectacle to reinforce community boundaries.

It is important to distinguish between ideological and social communalism mounted in coastal Karnataka on the one hand and political communalism elsewhere in the State, largely occasioned by the electoral calculations at work, on the other. Political communalism employs an event, a monument, a syncretic space or a social cleavage to pit a large group of people against the other. It does not sever all ties of people forged around social division of labour, linguistic affinities, folklore. But social and ideological communalism as in coastal Karnataka attempts to sever communities from all social ties and employs every possible resource to subserve this end. At the same time, such communalism operates in a context of growing sociality. It marks off a people from the rest when their adherents are akin to one another by invoking religious divide as its justification.

### Community enclosures

Coastal Karnataka, comprising Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and a large part of Uttara Kannada district, has always been peripheral to the larger dynamics at work in the rest of Karnataka. During the national movement, a numerically significant section of Brahmins from this region aligned itself with sections of backward castes to form the main plank of the Congress, while the local landed gentry and Muslims tended to favour the non-Brahmin movement. There were other castes and communities such as Billavas and Christians who devoted themselves primarily to self-help and self-improvement. Following Independence, electoral politics drew the landed gentry, Muslims, Christians and a little later the Billavas into the Congress fold. Communists and socialists too became an important political presence in the region with their social base among the tile, cashew, beedi and handloom workers as well as the tenants. Communal skirmishes have always erupted in this region from the late 1940s and were also employed to target the radical politics of socialists and communists. However, such conflicts remained primarily local.

Several developments in the 1970s and '80s led to a distinct dynamics in this region. The oil boom after 1973 gave a boost to migration of Muslims and Christians to the Gulf region. The Catholic Church, with 8% of the local population as its adherents, regrouped itself, following Vatican Council II, by embracing Konkani as its ritual language. The access to West Asia helped Muslims of the region as a whole, including communities with old roots such as the Bearys and the Navayats, to augment their entrepreneurial abilities and explore new avenues of employment, while bringing them face to face with the chilling developments in the Islamic world, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

**In recent years, given the economic toll that communal riots exact in the context of thick social interactions, they tend to be localised or erupt for a day or two before they subside, as reconnaissance exercises.**

Diverse Brahmin castes, that form about 10% of the local population, have always enjoyed wider contacts across India particularly given the legacies of association with the Advaita and Dwaita traditions, as represented by Sringeri and Udupi, respectively, and the age-old hold of Gaud-Saraswats on trade in the western coast. While sections of Brahmins and backward castes along the coast came under the influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Sangh Parivar in this region early, it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that this influence was to prove decisive. Calls came to be issued from different platforms for Hindu unity and pitting this unity against that of the Christians and Muslims. At the same time, land reforms and preferential measures to Backward Classes initiated by Devaraj Urs in the 1970s made the landed gentry desert the Congress fold, while tenants and backward castes flocked to it in strength. It also led to the precipitous decline of the socialists and communists in this region.

This rupture of community affinities was accompanied by the expansion of private education in this region, particularly under the aegis of upper-caste entrepreneurs. Christians were already a strong presence in this field, and Muslim entrepreneurship too registered a steady advance in this sector from the 1980s. In certain other domains too such as land deals, construction, transport, and professions, there was a visible presence of members drawn from different communities. But such diversification of the market was invariably riven by religious belonging. While the goods and services sought were the same across the community divide, the associated members approached them as members of their respective communities.

### Communal flare-ups

Communal riots in this region began to assume a mass character in the 1980s. Following the demolition of Babri mosque in 1992, several parts of this region erupted and the Army had to be called in to Mangaluru to restore law and order. From the early 1990s, Bhatkal in Uttar Kannada district blazed a distinct trail of its own when a few youths of this town came under the influence of political Islam. After 1992 communal riots have constantly erupted in this region, a major one being at Surathkal on the outskirts of Mangaluru in 1998, which resulted in eight deaths. Following the Surathkal riot, social vigilantism became a major social phenomenon in the district, every community leader playing the role of disciplining its members while gangs in the streets enforced it. Local gangs in the name of Sri Ram Sene and Hindu Yuva Sene policed social intimacies, often beating up members of other communities, while similar gangs guarded the boundaries of their own communities.

Politics in the region has largely traversed the fault lines of community divide. However, in recent years, given the economic toll that communal riots exact in the context of thick social interactions, they tend to be localised or erupt for a day or two before they subside, as reconnaissance exercises. But there is a new pattern that has become common, i.e. killing a political activist belonging to one of the militant communal groups and taking over the streets either to condemn such killings or to draw political mileage out of it. It serves the interests of those who want to benefit from generalised social interactions without considering the bond of fellow-feeling cutting across communities.

The State government has largely followed a strategy of using the law and order machinery to deal with communal flare-ups in this region. Media reportage and local gossip tend to blame politicians for stoking communal passions for electoral gains. But the issue demands a much more complex response if a shared public life is to be enabled in the context of generalised social interactions deeply marked by community affiliations.

*Valerian Rodrigues is a former Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

THE DAILY QUIZ

## The Davis Cup, the premier international team event in men's tennis, was started on this date in 1900. A quiz on the 122-year-old competition.

**1** What was the name of the event when it started and which two countries competed for honours?

**2** We know the tournament is named after Dwight Davis, who led the champion team in 1900 and donated the trophy. But what is the lasting contribution of William Durgin and Rowland Rhodes to the event's history?

**3** Apart from the U.S. (32 titles) and Australia (28), which countries have won the event at least 10 times?

**4** India has been competing for many decades in the event and reached the title round/finals on three occasions (1966, 1974, and 1987). In 1974, this country became the fifth nation to triumph because India did not play. Which country and why did India do so?

**5** Name the Australian, holder of 28 Grand Slam titles, who was a member of a record eight Davis Cup-winning teams between 1959 and 1967?

**6** India's pride Leander Paes is the winningest doubles player in the competition with 45 wins across 58 ties. Name the European, who holds the mark for most singles and overall wins, whose record Paes overhauled?

**7** Asif Ismail, Karan Rastogi, and Mark Ferreira are the only three Indians to achieve what rare feat?

**8** Which World Cup champion in another sport is now part of the firm that runs the Davis Cup on behalf of the International Tennis Federation?

Compiled by: V.V. Ramanan

◄ Identify this Cup legend seen with R. Krishnan. What record does he hold? ▪ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Please send in your answers to the **dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in**

**Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. Rochester, Kent, 2. Blacking factory, 3. Boz, 4. Mark Twain, 5. *The Dark Knight Rises*, 6. *Barnaby Rudge*, 7. It is where the tombstone of his second son, Walter Landor Dickens, is located, 8. *David Copperfield*, 9. *A Christmas Carol*, an adaptation of Dicken's novel by the same name. It won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1972

**Early Birds:** Keerthi Purushothaman| Anna Krishna| Dipankar Baidya

BIBLIOGRAPHY

# Living, breathing Northeast

## Books which take us to a region often cut off from the mainland's imagination

ANUSUA MUKHERJEE

Achingmori. The name is on everybody's lips when Sahitya Akademi winning author Mamang Dai's latest novel, *Escaping the Land* (Speaking Tiger), begins. If it is an unfamiliar name for most readers, so it is for the characters of the novel, all of whom belong to Arunachal Pradesh, where the village of Achingmori is. But there was no Arunachal Pradesh in its present form when Achingmori hit the headlines back in the fifties. "In October 1953, a party of 165 men accompanied by an armed platoon of Assam Rifles had been attacked in a small village called Achingmori in the remote valley of the Subansiri river somewhere deep in the mountains beyond Assam. Forty-seven people including the commandant and twenty-seven Assam Rifles jawans had been killed." The massacre sets off a chain of events which will eventually lead to the formation of Arunachal Pradesh in 1987.

In *Escaping the Land*, some characters shape the course of history of the State, others are caught unwittingly in its turbulent waves. You are taken right inside their home and hearth so that by the end of the novel, you feel your perspective has subtly shifted - like the characters, you are looking at, say, Delhi, from Pasighat or Itanagar rather than the other way around. The hills of Arunachal Pradesh are no longer just a holiday destination but a place where real people lead real lives. Yes, it has magical forests but it also has moneyed timber merchants who are cutting off those forests and controlling political power. Some of them are in cahoots with insurgent groups, who make their presence felt through random acts of violence, which mar families forever. Like everywhere in the world, while kings and kingmakers fight over their own interests, common people pay the price with their lands, food reserves and lives.

*Escaping the Land* joins the ranks of novels which are making the northeastern States, including their gateway - North Bengal - living, breathing places riven with conflicts. Last year, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih's *Funeral Nights* (Context) took readers to the remote West Khasi Hills, which hum not just with ritualistic chants in the novel but also with the daily chitchat of resilient women, raconteurs, pranksters, drunkards, politicians, conmen and taxi-drivers. Nongkynrih, born and brought up in Sohra (or Cherrapunjee), Meghalaya, writes about felt realities, as does Dai, who lives in Itanagar. *Funeral Nights* is as much about corrupt officials who go to villages "only to loot" as it is about the many names Khasis have for rain.

Veio Pou, another writer from the Northeast who has now moved to Delhi, writes about the unending skirmishes between Naga underground organisations and the armed forces that leave common people in a quagmire in his 2020 novel, *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* (Speaking Tiger). In the introduction, Pou quotes Temsula Ao, one of Nagaland's most well-known writers: "Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome."

The tendency of revolutions to lose the plot midway is brought out startlingly in *Song of the Soil* (Rachna Books) by Chuden Kabimo, a Yuva Puraskar winning writer from Darjeeling, West Bengal. Translated from Nepali by Ajit Baral, this novel about the Gorkhaland agitation of the 80s, which claimed hundreds of lives and displaced thousands in the Darjeeling hills, is told chiefly from the point of view of adolescents, who join the rebellion without even realising what they are fighting for. But as they get separated from their families and witness dear ones die, they feel the consequences in their bones and shiver: "The fight with an enemy will come to an end, you will either win or lose. But can a war against your own people ever end? You neither win nor lose."

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**WORDLY WISE**

THE DOORS FLY OPEN WHEN YOU'RE A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE.

— DENNIS RODMAN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## MOTION OF ATTACK

**PM's speech in Parliament betrayed irritation over questions — and the Opposition**

WITH ELECTIONS IN five states beginning in days, grandstanding in Parliament, in these bitterly divided times, is par for the course. Some gloves will be off, some mud will fly. But Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches in the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha became an all-out attack on the Opposition, primarily the Congress, rather than a response to a range of concerns flagged across the aisle. His takedown of the Congress raised valid points, from its imperious past to its shrinking present, its ideological muddle over business and industry, and the hollow ring of its holier-than-thou sermons on federalism and freedom. Yet, in the manner in which he framed his attack, the Prime Minister's shrill tone betrayed anger, impatience, and irritation with criticism. He was right to say that *andhvirodh*, blind opposition, is *anaadar*, disrespect to democracy, but as disrespectful — and corrosive — is for the Government to frame all criticism by the Opposition in terms of an assault on the country and not engage with it.

So a complaint about the Centre not listening to states became a sinister plot to light a fire, Tamil Nadu's reservations over the national entrance test, got conflated with the tragic accidental death of India's Chief of Defence Staff, as the Prime Minister accused the Opposition of trying to divide the country (*vibhajankari maansikta*), called the principal opposition party the leader of the "*tukde-tukde gang*" and under the influence of "urban Naxals". Both these monikers, by the way, have been invented and weaponised by the BJP to name and shame its critics as seditious, anti-national actors. In his attempt to paint the Congress as a member of the extremist fringe, the PM, perhaps, forgot that his targets include Members of Parliament elected by people and sworn in on the Constitution. They are as much representatives of this nation as the PM and his MPs. To corner the Opposition, the PM offered a narrative on Covid management in the country which flies in the face of facts. He accused Opposition-run state governments of instigating migrant workers to leave the state and thus help spread Covid! The sudden lockdown which rendered many jobless, the lack of a financial safety net, the fear of the unknown, all worked together to set off a humanitarian crisis with migrants and their families hitting the road to trudge to the familiar assurances of their villages. Thousands of unemployed young men and women in election-bound UP and other states have faced the brunt of Covid distress. For the PM to tell them that the "Opposition's sin" is to blame for their plight is cynical politics and an attempt to brush the second-wave mismanagement under the rhetorical carpet. This, when the success of the vaccine programme is a formidable achievement by Centre and states working together, and the battle against Covid has been and is being fought by both — the PM himself made it a point to mention the 23 meetings he had with CMs.

At the end of his speech, the PM tried to reach out to the Opposition with a pitch to "move in harmony, speak in one voice, let minds be in agreement" (*samgacchadhwam samvadadhwam/sam vo manamsi janatam*). Eloquent words, but given the tone of what preceded them, they are unlikely to resonate beyond the thumping of desks in the Treasury benches.

## CURBS ON PRESS

**Threat of cancelling accreditation intrudes on rights of free press, attempts to shrink space for dissent. It must be withdrawn**

THE MINISTRY OF Information and Broadcasting is at it again — arrogating to itself the powers to play judge, jury and editor. A new policy announced by the government dangles the threat of cancelling the accreditation of journalists if they "act in a manner which is prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement of an offence". This is an intrusion on the rights of a free press on many counts. First, accreditation is not a favour by the Government; it is bound by democratic norms to provide access to journalists to do their job. Second, what's the definition of "morality and decency," and who will do the defining? These are vague, overbroad terms that, in the hands of a vindictive bureaucracy or a government, can easily be used to harass and silence journalists. This provision also appears to be intentionally blind to the place of journalism in a democracy — which exists to interrogate the state and its exercise of power.

This is not the first time that a government has attempted to walk down this path. In 2018, the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Smriti Irani had similarly threatened to cancel accreditation if a journalist was found to have spread "fake news", another catch-all term that is frequently used by the political class to deny unfavourable news. It was forced to withdraw such a rule after protests. In 1988, the Rajiv Gandhi government attempted a similar run on journalistic freedoms through the Defamation Bill, which broadened the definition of defamation and transferred the burden of proof on the accused. The uproar across the country eventually forced the government to withdraw the bill.

Today, technology and social media have not only empowered the political class's one-way communication with the people, but also mainstreamed a narrow hyper-nationalism that is intolerant to questioning and dissent, that is only in thrall to one story. When the government decides what a journalist can do or cannot, Article 19 is in peril. The provisions in the new accreditation policy can turn into weapons to be wielded against the media, and shrink the space for journalism. They must be withdrawn.

## BHEEM LIVES ON

**Praveen Kumar Sobti's athletic brilliance was overshadowed by the character he played. But that character was truly iconic**

THERE IS LITTLE doubt that Praveen Kumar Sobti, who died at 74 this week, was a more talented athlete than an actor. He won four Asian Games medals, including two golds, at the discus and hammer throw events, and participated in two Olympics. In the 1960s and '70s, though, athletes did not get either the recognition or reward they do now. With his acting career, beginning in the '80s, Sobti had perfect timing: He played Bheem, the second of the Pandavas, in B R Chopra's *Mahabharat*. And as with so many others who were involved with television as the medium spread across India, he became known more as his character than himself.

Like Dara Singh before him — who played Hanuman in Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* — Sobti was the ultimate strongman. Well-built and over six-and-a-half feet tall, he was the perfect Bheem — his thick Punjabi accent notwithstanding. For a generation of Indians, whose images of the mythic heroes of the Mahabharata were from oral traditions — stories told by parents and grandparents — the Doordarshan show became the first common, pan-Indian embodiment of arguably India's greatest story. Sobti played other characters too — notably, Saaboo in Chacha Chaudhary. But for much of the rest of his filmography, he was a "henchman", someone the hero could beat up to show his prowess.

It is easy to lament how Sobti the athlete was overshadowed by Bheem. Yet, as iconic characters go, it's hard to do better than he did on the small screen. Today, with multiple channels, reality shows, OTT platforms and the never-ending stream of content, it's easy to forget that for years, every Sunday, families gathered around to watch Sobti and his colleagues for India's original soap opera, action flick, religious drama and moral lesson all rolled into one. For those who do remember, Bheem lives on.

# An enabling environment

**Union budget has demonstrated commitment towards supply-side reforms, creating jobs sustained by growth**

SUSHIL KUMAR MODI

A CRISIS IS also a crucible of reform. The Union budget 2022-23 strives to enact economic reforms for the country that is recovering from the pandemic and pave the pathway for its robust rise in the coming years. It speaks of an outlook for India@100 in preparation for a post-Covid world order.

The thrust has been to nurture economic development with sustainable and wide-scale employment. To that extent, the budget has crafted a growth plan which is driven by investment policy levers. In an ambitious expansion plan, Rs 7.5 trillion as capital expenditure and Rs 10.7 trillion as effective capex have been earmarked to facilitate a virtuous cycle of jobs and growth.

Amid an economic environment where uncertainties still linger, the private expenditure component of GDP usually dithers. There is a need for an enabling milieu. It was therefore imperative that the government steps in and front-loads the economy through public expenditure. But an economy has a limited reservoir of policy resources hence public expenditure needs keen judgement, this budget demonstrates that.

A sizeable 35.4 per cent increase in capital expenditure compared to a mere 1 per cent increase in revenue expenditure marks a structural transformation in the expenditure approach. This increased devotion to capex is pertinent because of its multiplier effect and the facilitation of an environment that crowds in private investment. Studies analysing fiscal policy impacts conclude that Rs 100 spent on capex translate into Rs 245 of increased economic activity. Moreover, since the gains from capital expenditure are not just limited to one fiscal, over longer horizons, the cumulative incremental return is Rs 480. With this understanding, the budget strives to initiate a dynamic growth engine that shall sustain itself.

To catalyse overall investment, the budget has also incentivised state governments to spend on capex. It will extend Rs 1 lakh crore as 50-year interest-free loans to states besides their normal borrowings. States have also been granted a respite to raise their fiscal deficit to 4 per cent instead of the FRBM mandated 3 per cent.

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Leveraging these investment expenditures, the budget's outline seeks to enhance India's infrastructural base across the economic, social and digital dimensions because jobs creation is not done in silos.

Economic infrastructure will be fostered through synergies reaped from the multi-modal approach of PM Gati Shakti pertaining to India's seven growth engines: Roads, railways, airports, ports, mass transport, waterways and logistics infrastructure. Such an integrated approach to world-class infrastructure building shall create industry clusters and corridors thereby boosting productivity. Furthermore, works in these sectors are labour-intensive endeavours, thus budgetary allocations towards their expansion will generate mass employment.

Social infrastructure is enhanced through improved housing, drinking water and education. The budget ensures this through Rs 60,000 crore to provide 3.8 crore households with access to tap water, Rs 48,000 crore to complete 80 lakh houses and Rs 39,553 crore to improve learning outcomes. Such projects along with the Rs 19,000 crore PM Gramin Sadak will not only improve infrastructure but also boost India's rural economy.

Stimulating the digital infrastructure was a profound milestone for this budget. It is critical to ensure that India develops its technological ability and stands at the vanguard of this rapidly digitalising post-pandemic world. Efforts towards establishing a digital ecosystem for the economy is evinced by the projects being pioneered: The rollout of 5G, a national digital health ecosystem, a flagship digital university, e-passports, kisan drones, digital banks, 200 TV channels for supplementary education and broadband coverage to villages through Bharat-Net project.

The introduction of Central Bank Digital Currency is a testament to the digital readiness and will provide a further fillip to India's digital transaction economy. The RBI's Digital Payments Index has demonstrated significant growth, rising three times from March 2018 to September 2021. CBDC shall reduce cash management costs and boost efficiencies in payments settlement, cross-border transactions and direct benefit transfers.

To ensure the realisation of envisaged objectives, the budget also has some essential enablers and careful reforms ingrained.

The most significant enabler for reviving investment and generating jobs in manufacturing will be the production-linked incentive schemes across 14 critical sectors. Achieving the Atmanirbhar Bharat vision, PLIs shall foster India's manufacturing prowess and generate 6o lakh jobs and additional production worth Rs 30 lakh crore in the next five years. Supporting over 130 lakh MSMEs and by extension the numerous jobs created by them, the ECLGS lifeline has been extended alongside the facilitation of Rs 2 lakh crore additional credit through CGTMSE.

An essential enabler for investment growth is efficient capital mobilisation. In 2021, startup investments by venture capital and private equity exceeded Rs 5.5 lakh crore and India witnessed historically high IPOs. Forty-four startups achieved unicorn status in 2021 alone, the third-highest in the world, leading to a total tally of 83 unicorns valued at $ 277.8 billion. Encouraging this fledgling ecosystem, the budget has provided startups with tax incentives to nudge further investments.

2022-23 will herald a new era amid the rise of Web 3.0 and Metaverse. Animation, visual effects and gaming will be the new-age employment sector for youths, and the budget taps its potential by promoting this sector and related skills. Process reforms like One Nation One Registration, reduction of unnecessary compliances, e-billing for procurements, a single portal for all green clearances enhance transparency in the conduct of economic activity, shall fuel investment confidence.

Propping up the economy without an increase in taxation is an achievement and reflects fiscal fortitude and consistency despite challenges. The Union budget has demonstrated an earnest commitment towards supply-side reforms, leading demand with capex and creating jobs sustained by growth, laying the brickwork for India's Amrit Kal.

*The writer is a Rajya Sabha MP and former Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar*

# BAD ECONOMICS, BAD POLITICS

***At a time poor are in dire need of handholding, budget neglects social sector***

D RAJA

THE BUDGET for 2022-23 is a reiteration of the government's tilt towards corporates and big business houses. It gives a heavy impetus to the private sector and neglects the public and social sectors.

The state of agriculture is worsening with the Gross Value Added by it in 2021-22 coming down to 18.8 per cent from 20.2 per cent in 2020-21. For the smooth functioning of the rural economy and to ensure food security, it is necessary to invest in agriculture. However, no measure has been announced to deal with the agrarian crisis. The allocation for agriculture has come down to Rs 3,70,303 crore from Rs 4,74,750.47 crore (revised estimate of 2021-22). The amount reserved for the procurement of paddy and wheat has come down by more than Rs 10,000 crore compared to the previous year. The demands of the farmers' movement have not been fulfilled and the finance minister said nothing about a legal guarantee to MSP. The share of rural development has gone down to 5.23 per cent from 5.59 per cent in the budget.

MGNREGS shielded millions from destitution during the pandemic with the demand for work peaking in June 2021 at 4.59 crore persons. The situation has improved somewhat since then, but the unemployment figures are still staggering. Cutting the MGNREGS allocation is, therefore, not just bad economics, it's bad politics as well.

The recent Oxfam International report on inequality has red-flagged the widening gulf between the rich and the poor in the country. It noted that, "the number of Indian billionaires grew from 102 in 2020 to 142 in 2021, the worst year yet for India during the pandemic". The report proposed some tweaks to India's taxation policies to correct the situation. "A 4 per cent wealth tax on the 98 richest families in India can take care of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for more than two years, the mid-day meal programme of the country for 17 years or the Samagra Siksha Abhiyan for six years," it pointed out. Unfortunately, the government is so cautious of not hurting rich capitalists the slightest that these measures cannot be taken up, let alone far-reaching redistribution of wealth.

> Last year, health was dubbed as one of the six pillars of the budget. But this year, the overall budget of the Health and Family Welfare has increased by a mere 0.96 per cent and the research budget by 3.9 per cent. The budget for Covid vaccination has been cut down by 87 per cent, indicating the government's belief that we are out of the pandemic — that is far from the truth.

India's public health infrastructure imploded during the pandemic and exposed the pitfalls of excessive reliance on private healthcare services. But the government refuses to learn the lessons. Last year, health was dubbed as one of the six pillars of the budget. But this year, the overall budget of the Health and Family Welfare has increased by a mere 0.96 per cent and the research budget by 3.9 per cent. The budget for Covid vaccination has been cut down by 87 per cent, indicating the government's belief that we are out of the pandemic — that is far from the truth.

The country has fallen on all social indices, including hunger and nutrition, in the past eight years. Instead of tackling this, the allotment for mid-day meals in schools has seen a dip of 11 per cent. This cut is striking given the Annual Status of Education Report's (ASER) finding that children of age 6-14 years currently not enrolled in any school has increased from 2.5 per cent in 2018 to 4.6 per cent in 2021. The worst affected by the pandemic were casual and agricultural laborers — predominantly Dalits and members of other marginalised communities. They received no relief in this budget.

The government intends to invite foreign universities to open campuses in the country. The fee structure of these universities will most likely benefit the affluent and further hurt Dalits and other marginalised communities. There is no increase in allocations for the marginalised communities. The Ministries of Social Justice and Empowerment, Women and Child Development and Minority Affairs will have to make do with meagre allocations.

While the country is reeling under poverty, inequality, unemployment and disease, the government wants us to believe that "capex" is going to bring growth. The higher capex amount is largely due to paying the Air India debt and defence expenditures. The Air India case is a classic example of "nationalised losses and privatised profits". The Modi government has failed in creating the promised two crore jobs, but the FM has promised another 60 lakh jobs. The government has betrayed all sections of society.

*The writer is general secretary, CPI*

## FEBRUARY 9, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

16 categories of services brought under NSA

### NSA IMPOSED

THE UNION MINISTRY notified a list of 16 categories of services and supplies as essential to the community under the National Security Act. This empowers the government to detain any person with a view to preventing him from acting in any manner prejudicial to the maintenance of these essential supplies and services. A notification has been issued under Section 3 of the National Security Act to overcome any objection raised by the Supreme Court in its jurisdiction on three writ petitions challenging detentions under the Act. The Supreme Court had ruled that no person can be detained with a view to preventing him from acting in any manner prejudicial to the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the community, unless by a law or notification issued well in advance.

### US BARS CHAUHAN

US IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS have refused to grant permission to Jagjit Singh Chauhan, "Khalistan" leader, to enter the country because the Indian government had revoked his passport, the State Department said. An earlier visit to the US by Chauhan prompted a strong protest by the Indian government. A State Department spokesperson said US immigration authorities were unaware at the time of Chauhan's visit that India had revoked his passport.

### ASSAM IMPASSE

WHILE THE SECOND round of tripartite talks on the issue of illegal foreigners in Assam was postponed for a day, leaders of the movement insisted that they will not accept public documents like land records, ration cards and school certificates as valid documents of identification. They fear that acceptance of these records could lead to acceptance of lakhs of foreigners as Indian citizens.

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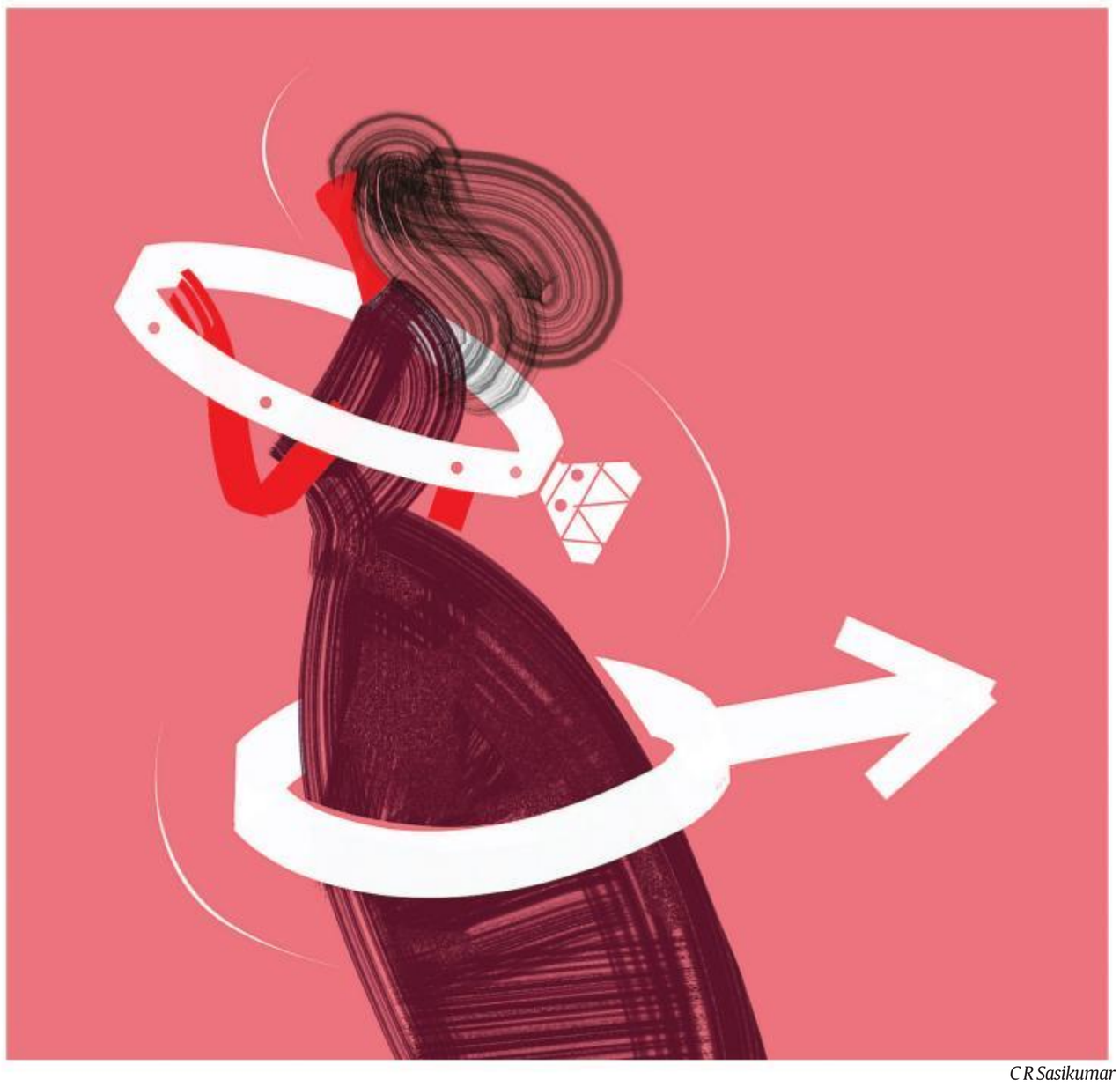
## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The online virtual reality experience that almost every tech giant today wishes to commercially exploit may not catch on." — THE GUARDIAN

# Controlling women's bodies

### Arguments in marital rape case speak of anxieties of the privileged, their fears of the unravelling of moral codes of patriarchy

RAMA SRINIVASAN



C R Sasikumar

IN RESPONSE TO arguments made in favour of criminalising marital rape, a former top law enforcement officer has speculated that this petition, which he termed anti-civilisation, could bring about the destruction of family and children. Due to his past role as the ex-CBI director, Nageswara Rao must be taken seriously when he appears to support sexual acts that may not be outlawed but are, at least, morally questionable. One of the two judges hearing the case in Delhi High Court has admitted to being sceptical about the legal ramifications of criminalising marital rape but neither appear to question the moral imperatives. Rao represents one extreme view of this complicated relationship.

Another, more prevalent, impulse is the fear of false accusations. The source of this anxiety is linked to both rape cases and dowry harassment ones. This piece will address them individually. Only a fraction of sexual crimes is reported, especially because those that make it to courts appear to put the complainant on trial. This was again evident in recent high-profile cases including that of Tarun Tejpal's and Franco Mulakkal. Even where the judges have been able to ascertain that an explicit "no" was expressed — as in the case of Mahmood Farooqui — the court has ruled for acquittal.

Litigation on sexual crimes draws from social and caste-based perceptions on what constitutes rape. These are, in turn, based on who is presumed to have access to women's bodies. These norms are not laid out in explicit terms but courts as well as social groups skirt around them. When BJP's Kuldeep Sengar was accused of rape in a case where the complainant's father and, later on, her lawyer have both died under suspicious circumstances, his constituents joined together for a demonstration in solidarity — with the accused. Their simple contention was that their representative was innocent.

Similarly, despite a documented history of predatory behaviour, several journalists who were accused of sexual harassment at workplace have denied any wrongdoing. Their colleagues, friends and families, at times, lend support to these refutations. In many ways, the denial has less to do with accusations themselves but, rather, societal perceptions of right and wrong. Men from privileged backgrounds are assumed to have access to bodies of women from all social backgrounds but access of marginalised men, even in cases of courtships and love affairs, is rigorously policed. This discrepancy may be exposed as hypocrisy but it suggests something more deep-seated.

Fears of false accusations are based on an uneasy relationship between law and morality, where sexual acts criminalised under the criminal code and those explicitly permitted under law are still in the zone of moral ambiguity. Criminalisation of acts that are deemed socially acceptable in certain circles brings with it the feeling of persecution by those automatically perceived as bad faith actors.

The only cases where a conversation on false accusations does not skirt around unspoken social norms are those of courtships gone wrong, where women retrospectively file complaints of sexual assaults. A study conducted by Rukmini S in 2013 revealed that 40 per cent of such complaints were cases of consensual sex "criminalised by parents." Men in such courtships are assumed to be guilty whether or not a conviction is possible.

The other source of anxiety here is the history of dowry harassment cases. My ethnographic interviews with lawyers in north India have often dwelled on the "problem" of false dowry cases. Gentle probing on this assumption revealed that the perception of fraud stems from the seemingly cynical timing — often after a marriage has irrevocably broken down — and presumed motivations of the complainant rather than the merits of the cases themselves. Dowry demands and exchanges are still prevalent in rural and urban areas, criminalised by law but, again, in the zone of moral ambiguity. They are taken seriously, if at all, when accompanied by cases of serious violence and harm.

Complaints of extortion and harassment by police officers aside, the claim of dowry harassment — most likely an authentic one — has become a necessary evil in some ways. Women seeking divorce have found that the inclusion of dowry harassment charges is often vital for the case since judges recommend mediation as a rule. The treatment of women within marriages is deemed an internal matter and to be negotiated within family settings. The fear of persecution via false cases stems from the lack of alignment between law and morality.

> The petition against marital rape has been an opportunity for the Indian mainstream to witness the unravelling of some of these unspoken norms on sexual crimes and marital relations. Powerful men such as Rao have explicitly laid out their view that sex against the wishes of their wives is not a crime, legal or moral, while others are in the mood for a marriage strike against what they perceive as a men's rights issue.

The petition against marital rape has been an opportunity for the Indian mainstream to witness the unravelling of some of these unspoken norms on sexual crimes and marital relations. Powerful men such as Rao have explicitly laid out their view that sex against the wishes of their wives is not a crime, legal or moral, while others are in the mood for a marriage strike against what they perceive as a men's rights issue.

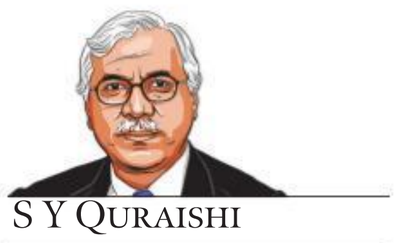
Criminalisation of marital rape opens up another frontier for a battle between law, which is ideally based on dignity and respect for all, and morality in narrower circles, based on unequal power relations within families.

In my December 2020 piece for *The Indian Express*, I had asked: Who is afraid of Indian women? The article had pointed out that for people who view patriarchy — in reality, a social construct — as a natural order, the fear that the edifice will crumble at any moment is very real. Lack of control over women's sexuality presents itself as a crisis that can lead to an unravelling of hierarchies that patriarchal agents are heavily invested in. This case against marital rape is perceived as a civilisational threat by some because it requires such agents to explicitly state these unspoken norms and end the situation of moral ambiguity.

*The writer is a Marie Curie postdoctoral Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the author of* Courting Desire: Litigating for Love in North India

# Undermining polls

### Despite EC's opposition, broad consensus among political parties, opinion and exit polls continue to be under-regulated



S Y QURAISHI

EVERY ELECTION SEASON, we find television channels flooded with opinion polls. Critics have often questioned their authenticity. All political parties too have opposed these polls, demanding a ban — except when they are shown as winning. The media, on the other hand, invariably opposes the idea of a ban as seat forecasts attract primetime viewership.

In most democracies, opinion and exit polls are common during elections. However, restrictions are also imposed in many countries, extending from two to 21 days prior to the poll — Canada, France, Italy, Poland, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, to name a few examples. The opposition to the ban in India is mainly on the ground that freedom of speech and expression is granted by the Constitution (Article 19). What is conveniently forgotten is that this freedom is not absolute and allows for "reasonable restrictions" in the same article. The Indian Penal Code and Representation of the People Act, 1951 do contain certain restrictions

While the Constitution allows for reasonable restrictions on freedom of expression, its mandate to the ECI for free and fair elections is absolute. The Supreme Court (SC), in a series of judgments, has emphasised this requirement: "Democracy cannot survive without free and fair elections" (*Union of India vs ADR*, 2003); "Free and fair elections is the basic structure of the Constitution" (*PUCL vs Union of India*, 2003; NOTA judgment, 2013); "The heart of the parliamentary system is free and fair elections" (*Mohinder Singh Gill vs CEC of India*, 1977).

Why does the ECI feel that opinion polls interfere with free and fair elections? Having seen "paid news" in action, it apprehends that some opinion polls may be sponsored, motivated and biased. Also, almost all polls are non-transparent, providing little information on the methodology. With such infirmities, many "polls" amount to disinformation that can result in "undue influence", which is an "electoral offence" under IPC Section 171 (C). It is a "corrupt practice" under section 123 (2) of the RP Act.

The demand for a ban on opinion polls is not new. At two all-party meetings called by the Election Commission in 1997 and 2004, there was unanimous demand for a ban. The difference of opinion was only on whether the ban should apply from the announcement of the poll schedule or the date of notification. In 1998, the ECI issued guidelines that were challenged in the SC. A five-judge Constitution Bench asked the ECI how it would enforce these decisions in the absence of a law. Realising its weakness, the ECI withdrew the guidelines till a law was made. Unfortunately, this left the constitutionality of the issue undecided.

The matter resurfaced in 2008 when many political parties came to the ECI demanding a ban on opinion and exit polls. The ECI advised them that they need to raise it in Parliament, as it required legislative amendment. The EC even vetted a draft of the proposed amendment. Surprisingly, Parliament banned exit polls but not opinion polls (126A, RP Act). It is not clear why the parties, who were unanimous in demanding the ban on both opinion and exit polls, did not pass it in Parliament in its entirety.

In 2013, the debate on banning opinion polls was revived when the law ministry advised the ECI to once again seek the view of all political parties. Fifteen political parties responded and all but one (BJP), supported a ban. It was interesting to watch the debate on the subject in the media. All the participants — media, pollsters and jurists — were heard supporting the opinion polls, yet admitting to the presence of serious flaws.

The ECI and political parties are not alone in doubting the integrity of opinion polls. The Press Council of India says, "This has become necessary to emphasise today, since the print media is sought to be exploited by interested individuals or groups to misguide and mislead the unwary voters by subtle and not so subtle propaganda on casteist, religious and ethnic basis as well as by the use of sophisticated means *like the alleged poll surveys*," (emphasis added).

In early 2014, a sting operation by a television news channel caused quite a stir. As many as 11 polling companies were caught red-handed fraudulently manipulating surveys. These polling agencies were willing to manipulate the margin of error, victory margin for candidates, seat projections for a party or hide negative findings. Unfortunately, this expose did not receive the attention it deserved.

What is the way forward? Ideally, an independent regulator, like the British Polling Council would be a viable option. All polling agencies must disclose for scrutiny the sponsor, besides sample size, methodology, time frame, quality of training of research staff, etc. India could set up its own professional body on the same lines. After the Bihar 2015 election, six leading agencies had spoken about the possibility of starting a self-regulatory body — the Indian Polling Council. Over six years later, there is no progress.

A related issue is exit polls, which were banned by amendment to the RP Act, in 2008, making both the conduct of the polls and their dissemination illegal. However, the media has regularly flouted the law by "conducting" exit polls on poll days, though airing the result only after the closure of the poll on the last day.

Surprisingly, the ECI continues to overlook this violation. In fact, the ECI order allows the dissemination of the exit poll results half an hour after the end of polling on the last poll day. It makes no mention of the ban on the conduct of the poll itself, which is expressly prohibited by the law. Thus, ECI's guidelines stand opposed to the provision of the law. This is creating confusion. Many young researchers have been arrested by the police for violating the law. This must stop.

*The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and author of* An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election

# Listening to Lata in Lahore

### Pakistanis claim her music as much as Indians own Mehdi Hasan, Farida Khanum

FARAH ZIA

IT WAS LATA'S birthday on September 29, 2021. I shared an old Urdu poem written by a poet-journalist friend Shiraz Raj, who was brought up in Lahore and now lives in Brussels. I recall that growing up in Lahore in the 1970s, around the same time as Raj, Lata Mangeshkar was a habit. She was a part of a collective routine, like getting up in the morning and going to your school or college or workplace.

Each morning, the medium wave-enabled radio sets in almost every household played Aap ki Farmaish on All India Radio's Urdu Service. The presenter would read out multiple names, from cities, towns and villages in Pakistan, requesting popular film songs. While my mother wove mine and my sister's long hair in neat braids, we heard terms like *Do-gana* (duet), and names like Majrooh Sultanpuri, Laxmikant-Pyarelal, Naushad, Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar and Asha Bhosle. As we stood on the roadside, waiting for the tonga to take us to school, the surrounding tea stalls all played Hindi filmi music. There was no escaping Lata, to the point that I started taking the name for granted.

The real introduction to the maestro came by and by — once I realised that it was not the glamorous Mala Sinha singing *Ye haryali aur yeh rasta* on the grainy black-and-white screen, it was *the* Lata Mangeshkar. I did feel somewhat cheated at the picture of a simple-looking singer, who was behind those timeless melodies picturised on the beautiful Hema Malini, Asha Parekh, Nutan, Mumtaz and many more.

The quest of knowing Lata Mangeshkar went on — to know excellence had nothing to do with looks; to know the worth of playback singers and their connections with music directors and lyricists; and to know some basic facts alongside, including that the two most familiar names of Hindi music, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle, were sisters. As a child, both Lata and Asha sounded the same to my untrained ears. Knowing the distinction between the two was a mark of growing up and becoming educated in music.

In the 1970s and '80s, we had already missed what became known as the golden period of Indian film music — the decades of 1950s and '60s. Thankfully, the music from that time was preserved and accessible. In Pakistan, it was widely available on radio (Radio Ceylon being a popular means for a long time), gramophone records and audio cassettes.

The political context of enmity between India and Pakistan is irrelevant when it comes to music. Indian films have faced more controls, forcing Pakistani viewers to move from cinemas to Doordarshan to VHS tapes to dish antennas and so on. Music, on the contrary, is thought of as common heritage. It is part of a collective memory that transcends Partition and unites people in strange ways. It came as no shock when Pakistanis mourned Mohammad Rafi's rather early death in 1980. A childhood memory is of the red swollen eyes of a lawyer from Mianwali, who lived next door and was a huge Rafi fan.

It was as if the ties never severed. Lata was a first-name acquaintance as was Rafi and all others. No Lata*ji* or Lata *didi* for us. Pakistanis have owned them as much as Indians have owned Farida Khanum, Mehdi Hasan, Ghulam Ali and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. These masters figure frequently in newspaper columns on culture on both sides, sometimes in fiction too. In his modernist short story *Teh Dar Teh*, Balraj Menra records a conversation between two friends named Intizar Husain and Balraj. In the story Intizar says: "*Yaar aik kaam karo… yaar Kashmir le lo, Lata Mangeshkar hamey de do… Hanso mutt! Subha jab hum dus crore Pakistanion ki aaankh khulti hai, Lata ki awaaz hamare kanon main parti hai.. Lata..*" (Friend, do me a favour…my friend why don't you keep Kashmir and give us Lata Mangeshkar. No, don't laugh! Every morning ten crore Pakistanis wake up to the voice of Lata in their ears…Lata..)"

Having accepted Lata as the undisputed melody queen, people on this side of the border kept abreast with all scandals and gossip, through film magazines that were easily available in the first few decades. I remember reading a petty squabble about who was the older of Noorjehan and Lata, also about a discord between Asha and Lata, and the famous fight between Lata and Rafi, all amicably resolved in the end — except perhaps in Pakistani households. The famous quote, celebrated since the day it was uttered, is about Lata praising Mehdi Hasan in these words: *Unn ke galey man bhagwan bolta hai*.

The music buffs of Lahore insist that ace music director, OP Nayyar, who had refused to work with Lata Mangeshkar, declared *Aaj phir jeene ki tamanna hai* sung by Lata as the greatest song ever. For them, music directors like Naushad, SD Burman, Madan Mohan and Shankar-Jaikishan had picked and made her the Lata Mangeshkar that we know, though there were others too.

Such is Lata's power and influence. She walked the tight rope, balancing greatness with popularity. She made music that one could enjoy and feel elevated about at the same time. This sense of fulfilment is where Lata Mangeshkar's true greatness lies.

*Zia has worked as a journalist and magazine editor for 25 years. She now works as director, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A COLLEGE FAILS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'In the name of secularism' (IE, February 8). The anti-hijab row in a Karnataka college does not just fly in the face of the constitutionally-mandated fundamental rights of education and to profess, practice and propagate one's religion. The college also snubs its commitments towards nation-building. A college where students' identity is questioned and made to follow sanitised, exclusionary and "secular" dressing, falls short of standing up to its very purpose. Educational institutions are places where values like equality, liberty, fraternity and secularism are taught. A course correction by the institution without judicial intervention could go a longer way in upholding the values of the republic — where individual agency is given a voice.

**Aishwarya Shetty,** *Mumbai*

### WITHOUT HER VOICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Our inner voice' (IE, February 8). To a multitude, Lata*ji* was her song. As such, nothing would have changed if not for the new pain of recalling the doyenne. One can imagine innumerable instances where her songs that appealed to our better instincts would have lifted spirits or even doused animosity, thus deterring violence. For generations of Eklavyas, Lata*ji* promises to be Drona. Though the news and we will move on, our society would do well to imbibe her perfection, magnanimity and love.

**M Yusuf Ghazali,** *Patna*

### HIJAB DIVERSION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Her right to learn' (IE, February 8). It is shameful that our government continues to polarise voters on the basis of religion and yet, time and again, the masses succumb. The Karnataka government's decision to ban hijab is reminiscent of the decision taken a few years ago in France, which led to widespread dissent. Diverting attention from mainstream failures by ratcheting up religious tensions each time there are elections has now become the trademark of the BJP. By turning against minorities, we are risking inviting unwanted attention. At a time when Saudi Arabia is taking rapid strides in women freedom, it would be better if India just followed it instead of getting mired in endless controversies.

**Gaurav Gupta,** *Pune*

### DETERIORATING TIES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Upsetting the balance' (IE, February 8). Centre-state relations face a deterioration due to the proposed changes in cadre rules. The changes are allegedly non-deliberative and non-objective. The smooth functioning of All-India Services requires both consultation and objectivity. The Centre needs to frame rules based on objective criteria for deputation. Measures like giving central deputation for officers with specific domain expertise after an initial 12 or 14 year period could be considered. Such logical steps can bolster Centre-State relations and secure non-partisanship of the All India Services.

**Anjali Bhavana,** *Thiruvananthapuram*

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

## TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

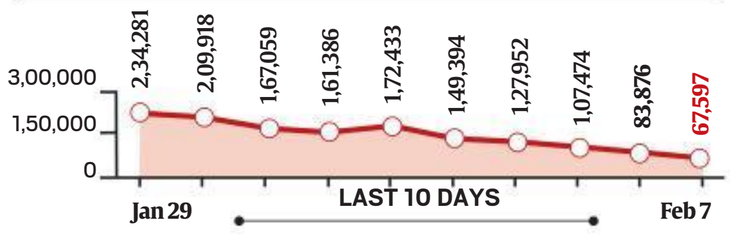
### DASHBOARD, AS ON FEB 7

**708** DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN

| New cases | Active cases | Deaths |
|---|---|---|
| 67,597 | 9,94,891 | 1,188 |

Weekly CFR: 0.36% | Overall CFR: 1.27% | Total deaths: 5,04,062

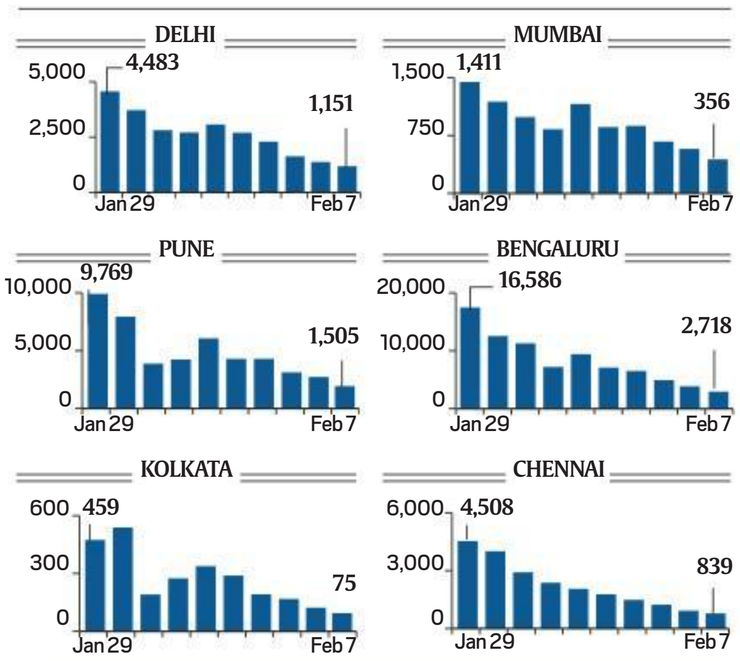
### NEW CASES, DAILY




### SURGE IN THE STATES

| State | ON FEBRUARY 7 | | | Weekly positivity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | New cases | Active cases | Deaths | |
| Kerala | 22,524 | 302,183 | 860 | 35.75% |
| Maharashtra | 6,436 | 106,059 | 30 | 8.68% |
| Karnataka | 6,151 | 87,114 | 49 | 10.16% |
| Tamil Nadu | 5,104 | 105,892 | 1 | 7.96% |
| Madhya Pradesh | 3,945 | 40,591 | 2 | 7.88% |

### CASES IN THE CITIES, LAST 10 DAYS

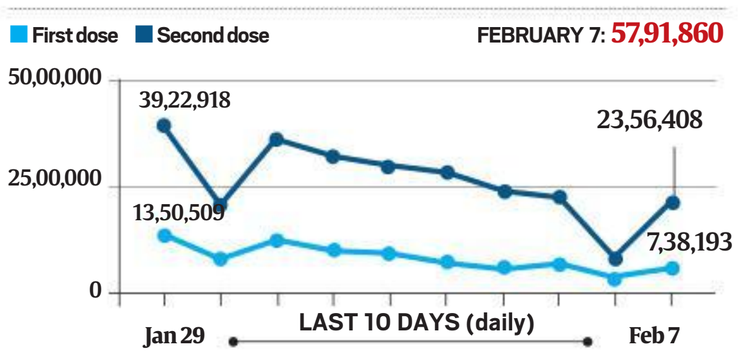


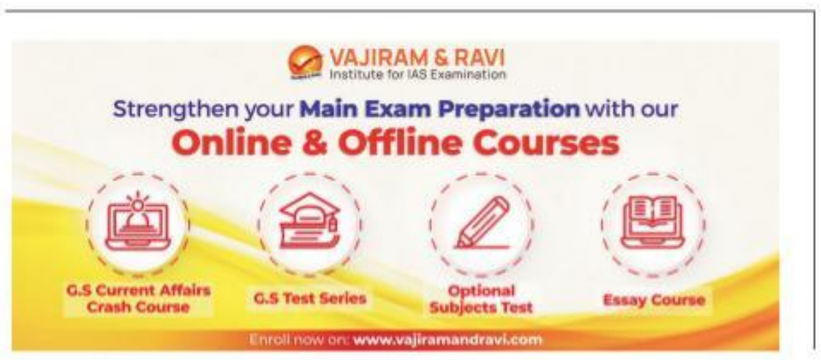

### TOTAL TESTS 74,29,08,121

| TESTS ON FEB 7 | WEEKLY POSITIVITY | OVERALL POSITIVITY |
|---|---|---|
| 13,46,534 | 7.13% | 5.70% |

### INDIA TOTAL DOSES 170,21,72,615

(Adults 1st dose: 90,09,24,138; 2nd: 72,83,43,993; 15-18 age group 1st dose: 4,99,87,314; 2nd: 75,90,456; precautionary: 1,53,26,714)




SIMPLY PUT

# The China-Russia relationship

Xi is seemingly with Putin against the US, but the relationship between their countries is complex; their interests do not always converge. The situation in Ukraine is fluid, and all parties are hedging their bets.

**NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN**
CHENNAI, FEBRUARY 8

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's show of strength with President Xi Jinping in Beijing last week amid the standoff with NATO on Ukraine was intended to demonstrate that Russia and China were on the same page on the "core interests" of upholding "international equity and justice" in the face of US "unilateralism", and supported each other against "external interference and regional security threats".

The joint statement issued after the summit — titled 'International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development' — hailed the "new inter-State relations between Russia and China [as] superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era", and said the friendship had "no limits" and no "forbidden areas of cooperation".

Despite being together in rejecting US unipolarity, the relationship between Russia and China is complex and layered. Each has its distinct worldview and specific interests in its geographical region, and its own battles to fight.

**Vladimir Putin with Xi Jinping in Beijing last week.** *Sputnik via Reuters*

### Mistrust to cooperation

Relations between China and the former Soviet Union were frosty, marked by mistrust and doctrinal differences for most of the Cold War decades. The change came in 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the first Soviet leader to land in Beijing since Nikita Khrushchev in 1958. The visit took place in the midst of the Tiananmen Square student protests, but Gorbachev held off from saying anything that would anger his hosts. Gorbachev and paramount leader Deng Xiaoping declared "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" as the basis of their bilateral relations.

A decade after the Soviet Union broke up, disappointed and humiliated by the way the West had downgraded it, and deep in economic crisis, Russia under Putin's first presidency turned to China under President Jiang Zemin. In 2001, the two countries signed the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, paving the way for expanding economic and trade ties, including sales of defence equipment and energy by Russia to China, and Russia's backing for China's position on Taiwan.

The George W Bush Administration was not perturbed — and said this was not an alliance against the US. Last June, the two countries extended the treaty at a virtual meeting between Putin and Xi. Putin told Xi that the "Russian-Chinese coordination plays a stabilizing role in world affairs", and China's President said their countries had "set an example for the formation of a new type of international relations".

### Together against US

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea in Ukraine led to a sharp downturn in Moscow's ties with the US, NATO, and Europe. This was also the turning point in Russia's ties with China, which revealed the possibilities, potential, and the limits of the relationship.

When the US, EU, and Australia imposed sanctions on Russia, Putin turned reflexively to Beijing. Over the next year, Russia opened its doors wide for Chinese investments, and struck a $400 billion deal for Gazprom, the Russian state monopoly gas exporter, to supply 38 billion cubic metres (bcm) annually to China for 30 years from 2025.

The Power of Siberia pipeline began operations in 2019, and sent 16.5 bcm of gas to China last year. During Putin's visit to Beijing last week, the two countries signed a deal for another pipeline, Power of Siberia 2, which will add 10 bcm of gas to the annual supply for 30 years.

Since 2016, trade between the two countries has gone from $ 50 bn to over $147 bn. China is now Russia's largest trading partner. Towards a modus vivendi in Central Asia, the two countries agreed to work towards speeding up the linking of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

With their ties closer than ever before, the crisis in Ukraine has been an opportunity for each country to express solidarity with the other's grievance against the US. Should the West impose financial and banking sanctions on Russia, Beijing is expected to assist Moscow, perhaps with alternative payment methods.

China said during Putin's visit that Russia's "reasonable security concerns should be recognised and resolved", an apparent reference to Ukraine's interest in joining NATO, and the joint statement backed the Russian opposition to any expansion of the Western military alliance in Europe.

Russia reaffirmed support for the One-China principle, and opposed any form of independence for Taiwan. The statement also hit out "against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region" and "the negative impact" of the US's Indo-Pacific strategy.

### Different interests

And yet, as several observers have pointed out, the China-Russia compact is not yet a formal security alliance against the West, nor is it an ideological partnership.

The joint statement referred to NATO's expansion, but did not mention Ukraine. Back in March 2014, in the vote on UN Security Council resolutions on the referendum in Crimea that was used by Putin as an excuse to annex the Black Sea peninsula, China had abstained — and despite the recent bonhomie, has not recognised Crimea's accession to Russia.

China's main security interests lie in Asia; Russia's are in Europe. From Putin's demands in ongoing negotiations with the West, it is clear that he is seeking the restructuring of European security — and if the US wants to link the crisis in eastern Europe with China, it was their problem, not his. Russia, which wants to be recognised as a great power once again, has positions independent of Beijing on many issues — including on the relationship with India.

As the smaller economy — its GDP is a tenth of China's — but with a strong memory of its lost superpower status, Russia is loath to become China's junior partner. Its experience with China in 2014 had brought home the reality that friend or not, Beijing drives a hard bargain. The negotiations on the pipeline and gas prices were fraught, and Russia is acutely conscious that its gas exports to Germany and the rest of Europe gets much more revenue — and that China anyway has other pipelines to tap. Also, despite talk of Russia-China co-operation in Central Asia, Moscow still sees the region as part of its sphere of influence.

For Beijing, war in Ukraine is the least suitable of options. It would take US military energies away from the South China Sea, but might also stall talks to resolve trade issues. China and the EU are each other's biggest trading partners — China's trade with Russia is small by comparison. Beijing will not fight the war if it breaks out, but it will nonetheless find it messy and complicated to negotiate.

As for Ukraine, it is a crucial link in Xi's BRI project. China is also Ukraine's biggest trading partner — and its agricultural exports, particularly corn, have sustained China during its trade war with the US.

### View from New Delhi

In this crisis with many moving parts, it is easy to both overstate and under-read the the Russia-China relationship. All actors are hedging their bets in ways that are altering the geopolitics of Europe and Asia in real time.

New Delhi's best bet would be to treat its relations with both countries and the US separately — or it runs the risk of shrinking its own space. India's relationship with Russia is not what it used to be, but there is much that both sides continue to see as mutually beneficial. The Russia-China statement did not mention China's border dispute with India; it only made a reference to developing cooperation among the three countries.

After the Russian-linked Redfish media teased a documentary that drew parallels between Kashmir and Palestine, the Russian embassy clarified that Redfish was not official media, and reiterated that Kashmir was an issue for India and Pakistan to resolve bilaterally. This came a day after Pakistan and China issued a statement expressing concern at India's "unilateral actions" in J&K.

As one former Indian diplomat put it, India would restrict its foreign policy choices and undermine its own status as a rising power of global standing by taking sides in a conflict that has nothing to do with it. What else was French President Emmanuel Macron's five-hour meeting with Putin over dinner if not a display of the grand complexity of global politics, the fluidity of the present, and the opportunities in it?

# On EPFO agenda: interest, tax, investment

**AANCHAL MAGAZINE**
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 8

ON WEDNESDAY, the Finance Investment & Audit Committee (FIAC) of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) will meet to discuss the EPFO Board's accounts and earnings from investments so far. This comes ahead of the EPFO Central Board of Trustees meeting in Guwahati on March 4-5 to decide on the interest rate for its subscribers for 2021-22.

### What's new

2021-22 will be the first financial year when the government's proposal to tax interest on higher contributions to the EPF will come into effect. The Budget for 2021-22 had proposed to tax interest on PF contributions above a threshold — Rs 2.5 lakh (for private sector employees) or Rs 5 lakh (for government employees) — effective from April 1, 2021.

The Budget proposal had noted that the government has found instances of some employees contributing high PF amounts and getting the benefit of tax exemption at all stages — contribution, interest accumulation, and withdrawal. The proposal aims to exclude high net-worth individuals (HNIs) from this benefit on their higher-than-designated contributions.

### Interest rate, as of now

In March last year, the EPFO Board finalised a recommendation for an 8.5% interest rate for the previous financial year, 2020-21. This was the same as the rate for the year before that, and the lowest offered by EPFO in eight years.

The EPFO had started crediting the interest rate for FY21 for its subscribers. "23.59 crore accounts have been credited with an interest of 8.50% for the FY 2020-21," it said in a tweet on December 20. It has an active subscriber base of more than 6.7 crore, and 6.9 lakh contributing establishments.

For FY2021, the EPFO had decided to liquidate investment in equity, and the interest rate recommended was a result of combined income from interest received from debt investment as well as income realised from equity investment. The recommendation on interest rates is then ratified by the Finance Ministry.

The interest rate for 2019-20 was retained for 2020-21 despite substantial withdrawals and lower contributions by people whose resources were impacted by Covid. Until December 31, the EPFO had settled 56.79 lakh claims worth Rs 14,310.21 crore provided under the advance facility.

### Wednesday's agenda

The FIAC will discuss the Board's earnings and submit a recommendation for the interest rate ahead of the meeting next month, a Board member said.

It will also discuss the Board's approval for investment of up to 5% of its annual deposits in new asset classes of alternative investment funds (AIFs), including infrastructure investment trusts (InvITs), which the Board had given initial approval to in its meeting in November.

The Board had empowered the FIAC to decide upon options, on a case-by-case basis, for investment in all such asset classes. The EPFO would go for investments in public sector bonds. At present, the National Highways Authority of India and Power Grid Corporation have launched public sector InvITs.

In April last year, the Labour Ministry notified changes in investment options to include units issued by Category I and Category II alternative investment funds regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India.

The EPFO can invest up to 15% of investment in equity, as per the pattern of investment notified by the central government and the internal guidelines of the EPFO approved by the Board. It had invested Rs 7,715 crore in equity until June 30 this fiscal.

# Stricter policy for accreditation of journalists, and the concerns

**KRISHN KAUSHIK**
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 8

THE GOVERNMENT has issued a new policy on accreditation of journalists, introducing an entire section about reasons that can result in the suspension of the accreditation.

### What has changed?

The new policy, prepared by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) and issued by the Press Information Bureau, lays down guidelines on how PIB accreditation will be granted to eligible journalists. At the moment there are 2,457 PIB-accredited journalists in the country.

For the first time, it specifies conditions that can result in the journalist losing accreditation. If a journalist "acts in manner which is prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement of an offence", her accreditation can be cancelled.

The previous policy, issued in 2013, had stated, under general terms of accreditation, that accreditation "shall be withdrawn as soon as the conditions on which it was given cease to exist. Accreditation is also liable to be withdrawn/suspended if it is found to have been misused".

The new policy has ten points that may result in the accreditation being cancelled, including if a journalist is charged with a "serious cognisable offence".

### What concerns does this raise?

One of the core responsibilities of a journalist is to expose wrongdoing, whether by public officials, politicians, big businessmen, corporate groups, or other people in power. This could result, at times, in such powers trying to intimidate journalists or to block information from coming out.

A common tool used by powerful people is filing of defamation cases against journalists and media platforms. Now, defamation has been made one of the provisions that can lead to cancellation of accreditation.

Journalists often report on issues and policy decisions that the government may not like. The new policy's provision about acting "in manner which is prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality" or "incitement of an offence" can be subjective. The policy is silent on who will decide if a journalist's conduct violates any of these conditions. Any investigative story on sensitive issues could be held to be in violation of any of these provisions.

### Who is eligible for accreditation?

There are multiple categories. But a journalist needs to have a minimum five years' professional experience as a full-time working journalist or a cameraperson in a news organisation, or a minimum of 15 years as a freelancer to become eligible. Veteran journalists, with over 30 years of experience, and who are older than 65 years of age, too are eligible.

Accreditation is only available for journalists living in the Delhi NCR region.

A newspaper or a periodical needs to have a minimum daily circulation of 10,000, and news agencies must have at least 100 subscribers. Similar rules apply for foreign news organisations and foreign journalists. The policy has introduced a provision that journalists working with digital news platforms are also eligible, provided the website has a minimum of 10 lakh unique visitors per month.

Applications for accreditation are vetted by a Central Press Accreditation Committee headed by the DG, PIB. After a journalist applies, a mandatory security check is conducted by the Home Ministry, which includes police verification of the journalist's residence.

### How does accreditation help?

The policy mentions that the accreditation does not "confer any official or special status" on the journalists, but only recognises them as a "professional working journalist".

There are three advantages. One, in certain events where VVIPs or dignitaries such as the President, the Vice President or the Prime Minister are present, only accredited journalists are allowed to report from the premises. Second, accreditation ensures that a journalist is able to protect the identity of his or her sources. An accredited journalist does not have to disclose who he or she intends to meet when entering offices of union ministries, as the accreditation card is "valid for entry into buildings under MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) security zone".

Third, accreditation brings certain benefits for the journalist and his or her family, like being included in the Central Government Health Scheme, and some concessions on railway tickets.

### Have governments tried to put similar curbs earlier?

Several governments have tried, but have had to usually withdraw.

In 2018, during its first term, the NDA government introduced Fake News Guidelines, proposing that a journalist's accreditation can be suspended and even permanently cancelled, if media regulatory bodies adjudge that the journalist had propagated fake news. The order was withdrawn.

In 2017, the Rajasthan government brought in a Bill to protect state officials from "scurrilous and non-substantiable charges". It entailed a jail term for a maximum of two years and a fine. The Bill was withdrawn.

In 2012, during the UPA regime, Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan wanted to introduce a Private Member's Bill in Lok Sabha, which proposed setting up a media regulatory authority with powers to ban or suspend coverage of an event or incident that "may pose a threat to national security from foreign or internal sources". Eventually Natarajan did not introduce the Bill, and her party too distanced itself from it.

Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, whose government was rocked by corruption allegations, had proposed a defamation Bill in 1988, which would "make publication of imputations falsely alleging commission of offences by any person as an offence." The Bill, eventually withdrawn, proposed a jail term of up to five years for defamation.

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# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2022

**BE MORE FORCEFUL IN APOLOGY**

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal

This issue (Hyundai Pakistan Kashmir tweet) has been taken up both with the government there (in Korea) and the company concerned. They (Hyundai) have already issued a clarification. We have also asked them to be more forceful in their unequivocal apology on this issue.

## Revamping SEZs to boost exports

### Changes to SEZ Act need to be accompanied by better labour laws, lower levels of protectionism

**AT A TIME** when India is poised to breach the annual $400-billion target for exports, the move to change laws governing the Special Economic Zones Act comes as a big boost for the sector. This transformative announcement will enable states to become partners in the Development of Enterprise and Service Hubs. As the finance minister observed, the move would enable all large industrial enclaves to optimally utilise available infrastructure, thereby pushing up competitiveness of exports. During April-December 2021, exports from SEZs increased by 25% to $93 billion; these were $102.3 billion in 2020-21. About 270 SEZs are operational, though many more have been notified. In rewriting the SEZ legislation, the commerce ministry will be guided by the recommendations of the Baba Kalyani report, submitted in November 2018. It had suggested a focus on promoting employment, recommended that SEZs be transformed into Employment and Economic Enclaves (3 Es) and operational guidelines and other rules be modified accordingly. There have been calls for separate procedures for manufacturing and services SEZs.

The prospective SEZ legislation is expected to be more enterprise-friendly. As noted economist Prof Arvind Panagariya of the Columbia University has observed, if it "provides for significantly larger zones with more flexible labour laws and speedy customs clearance of inbound inputs and outbound finished goods, we may witness in India the emergence of China-style large, globally competitive processing firms." Panagariya has always been in favour of India taking a leaf out of the China book for the development of coastal economic zones on the lines of a Shenzhen.

India's coastline of 7,517 km, abutting nine states, can be leveraged to develop large hubs or industrial clusters near deep draft ports to enable goods to be sent out. At the same time, firms may choose to be located in tier-2 and tier-3 cities in the hinterland, to be able to cash in on labour costs and the relatively lower cost of living. If the new legislation is framed with these considerations in mind, labour-intensive exports in apparel, footwear, furniture can be encouraged in a big way.

The thinking behind the new law is also to enable optimum utilisation of all vacant land and buildings in SEZs and industrial parks. As commerce minister Piyush Goyal has been quoted, telling this newspaper, the infrastructure needs to be used to the maximum and, therefore, the government is looking to convert SEZs into a plug-and-play industrial park ecosystem. Services companies appear to have been able to use SEZs more effectively than manufacturing companies. Also, the pandemic has hit the performance of several businesses. According to some reports, the commerce ministry is understood to be working to see whether SEZ firms can be allowed to sell goods in the domestic market by paying just an 'equalisation levy'. This levy would be smaller than the regular customs duty that SEZ units are currently mandated to pay while supplying to the domestic tariff area. A lower duty would, no doubt, help boost sales. But it will neutralise the advantages that SEZs enjoy, being specifically delineated duty-free enclaves, vis-à-vis domestic manufacturers to ensure a level-playing field. To be sure, the changes to SEZs need to be accompanied by better labour laws and lower levels of protectionism. Ahead of the Budget, commerce secretary BVR Subrahmanyam had cautioned industry telling it to brace for increased competition and think global since India was going to sign a host of 'very deep' FTAs with advanced economies like Australia, the UK and the EU. Indeed, while the government needs to make it easier to do business, exporters too must shape up.

**DIGITAL RUPEE**

GIVEN THE STATURE RBI HAS EARNED IN THE COMITY OF CENTRAL BANKS, CBDC IMPLEMENTATION IS IN VISIBLE RANGE

## A new chapter in digital payments

AP HOTA

The author is former head of DPSS, RBI, and former MD & CEO, NPCI

**THE UNION BUDGET** announcement on the roll-out of the digital rupee by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) concluded the debate whether or not to implement a central bank digital currency (CBDC) and when. The primary objective of launching the CBDC has been articulated clearly. By indicating that the CBDC may be implemented with blockchain or 'any other technology' has also paved the way for endlessly waiting for blockchain technology to mature. Conventional non-DLT stable technology options are plenty. Given the maturity gained by the country in the digital payments space and the stature that RBI has earned in the comity of central banks, CBDC implementation in India is now in a visible range. India need not wait for global standards to develop.

The only large economy where a CBDC is being experimented on a national scale is China, which had the compulsion to go for a CBDC in view of absence of competition to two large players in digital payments. A few island nations in the Caribbean region and a couple of countries in Africa introducing a CBDC was mainly driven by the gaps in availability of digital payment instruments and much higher degree of exclusion than in India. The objective of introducing digital rupee in India is to help reduce the usage of currency notes and thereby reduce the ever increasing cost of printing of currency/bank notes and the logistics challenges circulating the same.

As per the prevalent currency management system, RBI prints bank notes (in several denominations) at its captive note printing presses in Mysore and Salboni, stores the notes in about 20 currency vaults at its regional offices, and feeds therefrom to about 4,000 currency chests being managed by commercial banks across the length and breadth of the country. Once currency notes get soiled after repeated use, they are brought back to RBI offices through the same distribution network and destroyed. As the country's GDP increases from $3 trillion to $5 trillion and per capita consumption level goes up, the demand for currency notes will correspondingly rise to meet the transactional needs. Unless timely measures are taken, operational load would severely affect the functioning of RBI and also the banking systems. Questions had been raised earlier arguing that digital payments in India with the wide range of payment instruments and channels such as IMPS, UPI, NEFT, wallets, debit/credit/pre-paid cards and NETC have made CBDC redundant. The rising digital payment index (from the base index number of 100 as on March 2018 to 304 as on September 2021) has been cited for the purpose. But there is still a wide gap in terms of number of active users of digital payments (hardly 200 million versus the potential of 700 million) and barely 15 million acceptance points versus the potential of 50 million. Cases of cyber-frauds in digital payments and number of cases reaching Banking Ombudsmen of RBI are many. In such circumstances, a radical shift in the format of the 'medium of exchange' by way of CBDC, and RBI itself jumping into the fray in managing digital payments infrastructure, becomes imperative. The timeline for going live being aggressive and tasks ahead plenty, the following aspects appear relevant:

> **Among other benefits, the digital rupee can help reduce the usage of currency notes, their printing cost and the logistics challenges involved in circulating currency notes**

**Finalise design options:** The first task is to finalise design options, if not closed so far. As it happens in any technology implementation, it would be an evolutionary process. The search for a perfect solution would be unending. The easiest option to get started on issuance, circulation and servicing of CBDC of retail nature is to ride the rails of existing digital payments infrastructure. Since blockchain-based technology is yet to stabilise in any financial application, it may be prudent to start with conventional technology and consider blockchain at a later date; account-based would be better for simplicity of communication because they can be operated almost like wallet accounts. On-device UPI wallet being planned by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) can also be moulded for CBDC. Around 10 large banks can be selected to play the role of distributors of digital rupee, each with about a million volunteering customers. Questions on anonymity can be addressed as the pilot progresses by additional suitable privacy layer. Banks can be incentivised by way of reimbursing the cost of initial technical infrastructure and system changes and recurring transaction fees.

**Widen acceptance:** The second and vital task would be to widen the acceptance infrastructure through steps such as a massive awareness campaign. The Payments Infrastructure Development Fund with an initial corpus of ₹250 crore contributed by RBI has shown remarkable progress, particularly at tier-3 and tier-4 centres. Seen against the goal of digital acceptance at every *kirana* store, funding contribution is certainly meagre, and for the next 3-4 years it should be substantially augmented. Wherever cash is accepted, it needs to be enabled for digital acceptance for building a less-cash society.

**Digital payment literacy:** The third dimension is digital payment literacy. Zero MDR benefit to merchants or cashback benefits to customers would not automatically lead to digital adoption. For converting the unaware, fence-sitters and reluctant critics, different approaches would be required. Large network of business correspondents of banks and citizen service centres can be tried as digital assistants. They need to be trained and then incentivised for new enrolments.

**A research institution:** The fourth task may be to create a research institution exclusively for the CBDC to take a lead role globally—both for formulating policy and also experimenting with several technologies. There is no doubt that in 10-15 years central banks the world over will go for digital versions of fiat currency. The global institution can commence operation during India's presidency of G20 during 2023.

Let us now look forward to the beginning of another chapter in digital payments landscape in India.

**LIC IPO**

## Game-changer for the environment?

JAMAL MECKLAI

The author is CEO, Mecklai Financial

LIC is a significant investor in many—perhaps, most—of the projects that end up as 'natural disasters'

**OVER THE** last 100 years, India has been the second-worst (after China) country affected by climate change. We have suffered 757 'natural' disasters (out of 15,000 studied), which affected nearly 2.5 billion people with nearly 10 million deaths—that's about 100,000 a year. The economic cost, too, was catastrophic—at $186 billion.

Now, over time, the world (including India) has got better at managing natural disasters, so the number of deaths per disaster (corrected, of course, for the intensity of the disaster) is likely lower today than it was 50 or 60 years ago. On the other hand, as a result of galloping climate change, the number and intensity of disasters has increased and continues to increase each year. With the directional assumption that these two trends cancel each other out, we can estimate that the number of deaths from natural disasters in India will remain in the range of 100,000 a year.

One would expect that with deepening penetration of life insurance in India, the pain and difficulty of managing a significant proportion of these deaths should be reduced by payouts from life insurance policies, except, of course, that policies are notorious for small print, which results in narrowing of coverage in many instances. It is important to understand that for LIC settlement of these claims is a very minimal drop in the bucket as compared to its annual revenue—if we assume the average LIC policy is for an insured value of ₹5 lakh and half the deaths due to natural disasters are insured, its liability on this score would be in the range of ₹2,000-3,000 crore a year, marginal in LIC's scheme of things.

However, the real issue is that LIC is a significant investor in many—perhaps, most—of the projects that end up as 'natural disasters'. It now widely accepted that most natural disasters are not 'Acts of God' but rather the result of mindless, and often venal, Acts of Man, many sponsored by the government and, indeed, funded by government institutions, like LIC.

> **Some of LIC's policyholders' premium is invested in projects that lead to natural catastrophes that often result in death or injury to those very policyholders**

Environmentalists point out that projects like "...Ken-Betwa (tom-tommed in the recent Budget) represents our penchant to plonk for financial investments based on political imperatives, ignoring their financial and ecological viability. Other such projects include dams under melted glaciers, huge tourism investments in new ports without ensuring that existing ports are made ready for sea surges and rises. Coal mining and dam building that destroy the ecological services supplied by pristine ecosystems... the list is long."

Increasingly, investors are recognising that underwriting categories like 'Nat Cat' should be recognised as neither Acts of God not natural catastrophes but basically a direct result of anthropogenic climate change. In response to accelerating climate change, general (and life) insurance premiums will have to rise—they are rising already—and investors will have to reassess both infrastructure projects and the rating of the insurance and reinsurance industries.

This is an issue that will come to the fore during LIC's much heralded IPO. Unless it dramatically revamps its investment policies, LIC will be seen as failing in the stewardship of its policyholders' premiums, some of which is invested in projects that lead to natural catastrophes that often result in death of or injury to those very policyholders. To quote Peter Bosshard, director of the Sunrise Project in the US, "Insurers selling insurance to (or investing in) fossil fuel companies is like hospitals selling cigarettes."

Global investors who are being wooed for the IPO, particularly European institutional investors who need to comply with the EU's Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) as well as the widening universe of ESG investors, should raise these issues that need to be addressed in LIC's long-term business strategy.

Correspondingly, the government of India, as steward of our country and the lives and well-being of our citizens, should use the IPO as an opportunity to be transparent about the hurdles we face in reaching our commitment of net zero in 2070. It was heartening to hear the finance minister lead off the Budget with energy transition and climate action as core thrusts. However, as the Indian Express has reported, in six mega projects across key sectors, cleared between 2004 and 2020, stringent conditions to compensate for the projects' high environmental impact have been sidestepped, ignored or, in some cases, met only on paper.

Investors—and citizens—still need to be convinced that the government was not simply using the finance minister to score brownie points by pushing empty words.

**UNION BUDGET FY23**

## Hopeful signals for India's future

### But there is inadequate support for those at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder

NIRVIKAR SINGH

The author is professor of Economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

**INDIA'S CENTRAL** government is relatively small, even allowing for the country's level of income and development. That feature is particularly apparent on the revenue side, and taxes provide revenue that is far short of expenditure—reporting the fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP tends to mask this imbalance. This means that every rupee the government spends should be made to matter. Of course, historically, government has played an outsized role in India's economy, through discretionary policies and many controls. So, the Budget used to be an opportunity for the government to micromanage the economy, with numerous tweaks and signals of intent. Thankfully, especially in recent years, that approach has started to fade away, and this year's Budget seems to follow that trend.

One can think of the central government Budget as influencing macroeconomic stability, economic growth and distribution. This year marks the beginning of a return to a more normal situation, as the pandemic finally recedes. The new Budget seems to do a reasonable job of setting the target for the fiscal deficit, with a small amount of consolidation. Despite inflation still being somewhat high, macroeconomic stability does not seem to be in any danger. Buoyant tax revenues, reflecting both a recovery from the pandemic-induced disruptions and the benefits of the new GST structure taking hold, mean that the deficit target is realistic rather than aspirational. Less rosy, though, is the increased share of expenditure that has to go to interest payments, because of pandemic-related spending. This leaves less, of course, for productive expenditures.

The headline feature of the Budget has been the substantial increase planned in public capital expenditure, in particular for infrastructure. This is welcome. As long as the spending is done efficiently and quickly (not an easy combination), it can provide a jump start for the economy, and put it on a higher growth path. Depending on the various spillovers and multipliers, this increase could stimulate private investment, and job creation (at least in some sectors). Continued efforts to stimulate manufacturing growth, and a redesign of Special Export Zones also promise to complement the increase in infrastructure spending.

Of course, there is a tradeoff, and there are concerns about inadequate support for those at the very bottom rungs of the economic ladder. The evidence suggests that spending on employment guarantee schemes, nutrition, health and education may still be inadequate, as those at the bottom are far from a full recovery from the pandemic. So, out of the three government objectives that the Budget influences, distribution may be the one that is least well addressed. It is true that this government has been paying more attention than its predecessors to delivering on basics like affordable housing and piped water, but these will not make an immediate difference, so temporary income supports might have been given more weight this year.

After the debacle of the farm Bills, there is no real attention to agricultural reform, including a rethinking of the foodgrain procurement system, but perhaps this is best left to a collaborative approach involving the states, which would in any case have been the right approach for the aborted agricultural marketing reforms. It is worth noting, however, that policy reforms to save water in agriculture are vital, not only to avoid environmental disaster, but also to make drinking water available for cities. Water pipes will be useless without regular supply. That issue has plagued attempts to improve sanitation, including toilet building. India has one of the lowest per capita water availabilities in the world, so using water more wisely is critically important.

The Budget has not tinkered too much with the tax system, continuing a move towards simplicity and predictability. Trends towards trade protectionism also seem to have been halted. There is attention to the digital economy, including infrastructure and incentives for start-ups, as well to beginning the long haul towards a greener economy. This latter goal will require much more attention and investment, and it will have to happen sooner rather than later, but the rhetoric and initial policies are in the right direction. However, some environmental experts have pointed out that ecological sustainability might be shortchanged in the focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, neglecting ecosystems may increase the costs of reducing emissions.

Other headlines have focused on the new taxes on digital assets, and the introduction of a digital rupee. There are many other details that have been commented on, and will continue to be analysed, even as the Budget itself is slowly translated into actual plans and spending. One major concern has been whether the balance between consumption and investment is the right one, with demand weak for much of India's population. A skewed demand pattern is also undesirable, along with deficiencies in restoring capabilities for the bottom half of the population. One matter that doesn't seem to have received systematic attention is the need to increase household savings and to improve financial intermediation. So, there is scope for further improvement in policy focus and design. But the Budget provides many hopeful signals for India's economic future.

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Opinion 06

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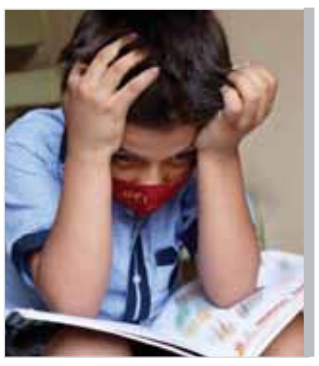
PAPER WITH PASSION

# Young stress

## As schools and colleges reopen, there's need to first evaluate the anxiety levels of students

Schools and colleges reopened in several States on Monday in the hope that the last wave of the Coronavirus pandemic has subsided. Millions of students will try to pick up the offline threads of their education from where they left them over 600 days ago. It is a tough time for reopening because annual board examinations are round the corner for class X and XII students. They will not only have to complete their syllabus by this month's end but also choose career options and prepare for the entrance tests. Students in the lower classes have the tough task of re-learning what they were taught online; most of it forgotten by now. The students will need a few days to settle down in class, rekindle their friendships and re-acquaint themselves with offline teaching. In this period of transition school authorities, parents and Governments must collectively check the students' trauma and stress levels. No comprehensive study has been done about the mental health of millions of students. Many children suffer from common behavioural issues like depression, stress and anger. Many more have developed eating and sleep disorders. Family tensions and home isolation would have anyway added to their mental burden. There could also be additional attributes, among older children, like substance abuse, violence, disobedience, peer pressure, and self-learning difficulties. In many cases, teenagers have developed a fear of vulnerability, self-management and the failure to accept virtual learning.



In Delhi, the Government has announced a large-scale survey to get a picture of how many students are still normal and how many need serious or psychiatric intervention to resolve their psychological and emotional blockages. It means studying the mental status of their parents, too, because that has a direct bearing on their children. School authorities will need to quickly assess to what extent online teaching impacted the students' ability to grasp what they were being taught. Some private schools are considering education models that focus on the mental health of students, and not their marks. The negative aspects of the children's addiction to digital devices, especially among urban children, during the pandemic like online bullying, peer pressure, gaming and inferiority complex need to be assessed as well. On the other hand, the magnitude of troubles that children from poor families, particularly in rural areas, have faced is yet to be calculated. Lack of electricity or internet or money to purchase smartphones or tablets has impacted these children the most. In some cases, it has led to student suicides. One of the first such cases was reported in Kerala's Malappuram district, where a bright student immolated herself because she failed to attend online classes for want of a TV set at home. This is quite serious. In the US, pandemic stress is reportedly behind the increasing incidents of high school shootings. Any time a teacher notices a student behaving in an unlikely manner, it must be recognised for what it is — a cry for help.

## PICTALK

An exhibit themed on 'Samudra Manthan' on display at Gurukul Vedrod, in Surat PTI

# Breaking news-men

## Yet another report underlines the increasing attacks on media by the State, or on its behalf

A democracy is stable only when its four pillars — the legislature, executive, judiciary and press — are balanced. All these have to work in unison to make democracy vibrant. But it looks like the fourth pillar, the press, is wobbly. The scribes, who work to expose the weeds, are now being hounded. The Rights and Risks Analysis Group (RRAG) has come up with shocking statistics that unequivocally state that scribes in India are facing threats. The freedom of press is under attack. India has ranked 142nd among 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index for two consecutive years. The RRAG data proves that scribes in India are being targeted for their work and they live in constant fear of State action should they report lapses in governance or dare to criticise those in power. The RRAG-prepared '*India Press Freedom Report 2021*' documents that at least six journalists were killed and 121 journalists/media houses were targeted, including 108 journalists and 13 media houses/newspapers. The report states that the State of Jammu and Kashmir committed 25 cases of violation of press freedom, and targeted the highest number of journalists/media organisations. Uttar Pradesh targeted 23 journalists/media organisations while Madhya Pradesh targeted16.

Moreover, the report mentions the disturbing trend of targeting women. Eight female scribes faced arrest, summons and FIRs. This is apart from the troll armies that abuse them with sexist remarks. The report also takes into account other measures like the use of Income Tax Department and Enforcement Directorate by the Governments to muzzle freedom of speech. In 2021, the ED and I-T Department raided *Newsclick, Dainik Bhaskar, Bharat Samachar and Newslaundry*. At least 34 journalists/media houses faced attacks from non-State actors, mainly political party activists, mafia and online trolls. Of these, six journalists were killed and at least 28 journalists/media houses were physically attacked or harassed online. FIRs against 44 journalists were registered in multiple States during the year. Besides, at least 24 journalists were allegedly physically attacked, threatened, harassed and obstructed from discharging professional duties by public officers. Of the 24 journalists, 17 were allegedly beaten up by the police. Such reports do nothing more than document the state of affairs in a democracy and, if not heeded in time, there might not be democracy left to report about.

# It's time to revive the glory of Bengal

PRAFULL **GORADIA**

## As India celebrates Netaji Subhas Bose, let West Bengal also tide over its trials and tribulations and go back to being the golden land it was

Dear Prof Sugata Bose, Give West Bengal a chance, especially when a glorious honour is being bestowed upon it. The 74 years since Partition have been years of trial and tribulation. When, in September 1945, our train streamed across the borders of United Bengal, we had arrived in *Sonar Bangla*. The streets of Calcutta, now Kolkata, were washed with piped water twice a day. Park Street could be mistaken for a pathway in London. Then the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 showed how much blood could be spilled in the golden land first on its western side and, come 1948, also in the east. I was told that people were Bengalis first and religion took a backseat, but this was not so. Over the years, three-fourths of the minority in the east has had to come away to West Bengal. From being India's premier industrial State, Bengal today gropes for the wheels of production to turn.

You have said in *His Majesty's Opponent* (page 324) that Habibur Rahman, Netaji's companion on his final journey, fought for Pakistan in the Kashmir war. The Prime Minister then was Netaji's chosen elder brother and a Left liberal, Jawaharlal Nehru. Should you not cancel your disapproval about the Right honouring Subhas Babu? If we do not confuse the future of 10 crore people with ideology, a lot of India will come to support Bengal to rebuild its economy. A great many people, even of West Bengal, believe that it was the Left which converted its garden of industry to a graveyard. I have been an active witness to this conversion. It can revive to its pristine glory; I will hasten to claim that the people of Bengal are as skilful as any.

Even at Independence, Bengal was more an agrarian economy than an industrial one. Nearly all the industries had been set up either by the British or a few Indian entrepreneurs, but all from outside the province. Bengalis were either saints like Sri Ramakrishna, Aurobindo, Vivekananda or intellectual reformers like Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan or leaders like Banerjee or Surendra Nath Pal, or excellent clerks or farmers. They were not entrepreneurs or even traders. Even sons of *zamindars* would rather choose trade unionism than buy out going concerns sold by departing industrialists. Yes, Bengalis are also excellent lawyers and doctors, like the genius Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy who could predict from a distance that a person had jaundice coming or bad kidneys. When it came to business, they felt it was the function of *baniks* like the Sahas, Lahas, Dahas *et al*, who are OBCs in the caste hierarchy. This was unlike northern and western India, where *banias* are considered twice-born and wear the sacred thread.

The Congress did produce upright and competent Chief Ministers, Dr Bidhan Roy (same as the doctor), Prafulla Sen, Siddhartha Shankar Ray but economic development was more saintly than political. One CM was so fed up of his United Front Ministry that he sat on a dharna opposite the Writers Building, the Secretariat. Upon a journalist asking him, he retorted, "I am neither a *mukhya mantri* nor a *murkha* (foolish) mantri; I am only a *thutho* Jagannath (of Puri)." Jyoti Basu was a gentleman, like any Marxist anti-capitalist but once confessed to me that the State cannot manage industries.

> TIMES ARE NOT THE SAME AS IN GOPALKRISHNA GOKHALE'S DAY WHEN WHAT BENGAL THOUGHT TODAY, INDIA WOULD THINK TOMORROW. TODAY, BENGAL HAS A HUGE DEBT, ITS PEOPLE NEED TO EARN MORE AND THE STATE HAS TO DEVELOP RAPIDLY

Yet his Finance Minister was Ashok Mitra, a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist, who displayed a portrait of Marx larger than I have seen anywhere. Mitra was recommended to Basu on the plea that he had been the chief economic advisor to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Jyoti*da*'s successor was Buddhababu, a refined, educated gentleman who visited China while being Chief Minister; he came back mightily impressed. He tried to copy China, rather Sinofy Bengal without understanding. He overlooked the fact that his was a province of India and not an independent country. He shouldn't have used sale proceeds of land to partly revive the loss-making PSUs. But he is an upright gentleman of a high order, nevertheless.

In the light of these circumstances, the State Government should opt to be normal and civil in its behaviour with the Centre. Lately, the policy has been the reverse whether to win elections, score brownie points or regain popularity with people. However, times are not the same as in Gopalkrishna Gokhale's days when what Bengal thought today, India would think tomorrow. Today, Bengal has a huge debt, its people need to earn more and the State has to develop rapidly.

For it to develop rapidly, a committee of, say, five persons should be appointed, of whom at least three should be with industrial experience. If a few of these members are from outside the State, so be it. So long as they have imaginative minds which understand Bengal from all viewpoints, it should be fine. Remember, entrepreneurs from outside, whether Indian or foreign, would come to invest in Bengal because they see prospects of profit and not because they are invited. West Bengal has the potential to bloom as brightly as any flower can. Just quarrel less and smile more, certainly for the supreme honour done to its greatest political son, Subhas.

*(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal.)*

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### OWAISI MUST ACCEPT Z-CATEGORY SECURITY

Sir — Given the continuing threat perception to his life, AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi should not have spurned the Union Government's offer of providing the parliamentarian with Z-category security because it was the second time he faced an attack on his life. That's why Home Minister Amit Shah himself had requested the AIMIM leader to accept the enhanced security arrangement. Parliamentarians and legislators, despite not being on the same page of political ideologies, are mass leaders and hence their lives matter. In case of any untoward incident, the loss of their health or life could trigger serious social as well as political unrest.

The lives of such mass leaders are not theirs alone but dedicated to public welfare. Owaisi is endowed with impressive oratorical skills, besides being a political leader who enjoys a high public persona of a 'man of stern rectitude' with an immaculately clean record. His acceptance of the Home Minister's offer of Z-security with a bulletproof vehicle in the national Capital will be in public interest as well in view of the adage "*Jaan hai toh jahaan hai*". Even his public service is subject to his living healthily. Hence, the Centre's offer indeed merits a mature reflection.

**Azhar A Khan** | *Rampur*

### HYUNDAI CHALLENGES NATIONALIST PRIDE

Sir — South Korea's Hyundai Motor company faced calls for a boycott of its cars from Indians incensed over a tweet from the account of its Pakistani 'sister concern' which expressed solidarity for the people of the "disputed territory" of Kashmir. The row erupted when Pakistan marked its annual Kashmir Solidarity Day and the posts on behalf of Hyundai's partner Nishat Group appeared on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram commemorating the sacrifices of Kashmiris struggling for self-determination. The whole of Kashmir is an integral part of India and Hyundai must apologise for being insensitive to India's position on the decades-old dispute.

Many Indians posted their intention to cancel orders for Hyundai cars in order to punish the company while urging support for homegrown brands like Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra. Hyundai, India's second-largest car seller after Maruti Suzuki, sold close to half a million vehicles in the country last fiscal year and exported over a million units, making it India's largest car exporter. India and Pakistan have twice gone to war over Kashmir and the Government is pursuing an aggressive policy to fight insurgency in J&K. Hyundai's cars must be boycotted till they apologise.

**Bhagwan Thadani** | *Mumbai*

### SHOW LOVE & TOLERANCE, NOT FANATICISM

Sir — In a country where a top leader holding a constitutional post can scandalously announce that "criminals can be identified by their dress", thereby demonising a large section of Indians who are as much nationalists as diehard saffronites claim to be; there is no surprise that hijab-clad girls are being forced to stay out of their college classes in Karnataka. What's the "crime" of these girls in wearing a dress of their choice or culture? In contrast, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern ensures promotion of a dress associated with people who are basically settlers there.

When sporting of hijab is being prohibited or frowned upon by India and many non-Islamic countries, New Zealand has proved to be a bright exception and shown to the world the essence of democracy by deciding to induct hijab as part of its police uniform. All believers of a majoritarian mindset should learn from New Zealand and Ardern. It is called humanity, compassion, solidarity with fellow citizens, and respect towards diversity and cultural, religious rights. India must learn to choose its leaders well.

**Kajal Chatterjee** | *Kolkata*

Send your feedback to: **letterstopioneer@gmail.com**

## PM's reply on President's address

While speaking on the motion of thanks to the President's address, the Prime Minister clarified many issues raised by several Opposition parties. He clarified how the incumbent Government showed the vision which could have been shown by the previous Governments, too. When 18,000 villages were without electricity, the previous regimes should have taken care of these but ultimately this Government got down to electrifying these villages. This Government built lakhs of houses for the homeless and the underprivileged. Lakhs of latrines were built with financial assistance from the Government, with the result that no one now has to go to open spaces for defecation. The Ayushman Bharat medical scheme has proved a revolutionary step; a poor family can now receive free medical treatment up to ₹5 lakh.

Crores of bank accounts were opened and the Government assistance is being credited directly with no possible chances of leakage or bribery. Every farmer is being provided an assistance of ₹2,000 every four months. The Mudra loans have been disbursed to crores of beneficiaries without any guarantee. Due to Coronavirus, the nation had to face many problems but it successfully overcame these and successfully achieved the huge vaccination target. Even during the pandemic, India successfully maintained economic growth which is evident from GST collections and the stock market index. Another case in point is the increasing exports. So, the nation is definitely progressing in spite of the COVID-19 challenges.

**Yash Pal Ralhan** | *Jalandhar*

## SOUNDBITE

I am anguished beyond words. The kind and caring Lata *didi* has left us... She leaves a void.

**Prime Minister**
—Narendra Modi

It's my sincere wish that, when time comes, Camilla be known as Queen Consort.

**British monarch**
—Queen Elizabeth II

Lata*ji* once said my voice is original. It was like goddess Saraswati blessing me.

**Singer**
—Udit Narayan

It was disappointing to miss the T20 WC. But there are two WCs in the next 18 months.

**Indian spinner**
—Washington Sundar

The whole world is sad. Can't believe you have left us, Lata*ji*. Praying your soul be in peace.

**Actor**
—Dharmendra

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FIRST COLUMN

## KEN-BETWA PROJECT: WATER AT ANY COST?

The project impacts the tiger's habitat and food security

KOTA **SRIRAJ**

The 14 districts of Bundelkhand region spanning over Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have always had a perennial problem of water scarcity. The population has to buy water to manage the most difficult summer months. This is exacerbated by the gradual disappearance of 10,000 ponds that were once a reassuring source of water supply.Government solutions were never long-lasting.The water woes have teamed up with erratic electricity supply issues to create a double whammy for the delicate agri-economy. Crops die premature deaths-for want of irrigation. The recent Union cabinet nod to the Ken-Betwa River Interlinking Project has brought a fresh wave of optimism in this situation. The euphoria comes with skepticismabout the full impact of the initiative and the collateral damages it can cause. The project with ₹44,605 crore funding is a new year's gift for Bundelkhand. It is slat-

ed to be completed in 8 years, benefitting the districts of Panna, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Sagar, Damoh, Datia, Vidisha, Shivpuri and Raisen of Madhya Pradesh, and Banda, Mahoba, Jhansi and Lalitpur of Uttar Pradesh. But going by the study published in "The Current Science" titled "The inter-linking of rivers and biodiversity conservation: a study of Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh", the environmental and wildlife cost of the project seems to have been lost in the excitement of announcing the project. This is strengthened by the fact that the requisite environmental, forest and wildlife clearances for the project are still not properly in place. As per the study report, the implementation of the project will submerge nearly 58 sq. km of the core area of the Panna Tiger Reserve. The Panna Tiger Reserve is included in the global network of biosphere reserves by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2020. For the tiger which is a protected species that is already fighting extinction the project could not have come at a worse time as it not only translates to loss of habitat but also loss of food security as the project threatens the habitat of Chital and Sambar, the natural prey of the tiger. These wildlife setbacks are in addition to the environmental impact of losing over 2 million trees which would either be felled or get submerged. Unfortunately, as pointed in the report, the soon to be submerged area shows rich tree density and diversity as compared to other areas of the Reserve. Moreover, by observing the regeneration pattern it is apparent that the seedling diversity, richness and sapling densityare high in the submerged area.Clearly, such widespread ecological and wildlife devastation could not have been missed by the experts who cleared the project, but yet the project has received a go ahead.

The project to interlink Ken and Betwa rivers surely has people's welfare as its core objective and that is appreciable, but the fact that the initiative turns a blind eye to environmental and wildlife collateral damage is disconcerting. The project architects could have done well to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)exercise for the project and made the EIA report public in order to assess accurately the perceived damage to the flora and fauna of the region on account of the project implementation. Local population and Bundelkhand environmental experts could also have been consulted before green flagging the project, this in turn would have provided ownership of the project to the local indigenous people. Bundelkhand needs a break from water scarcity, but not at the cost of the wildlife and environment. There is still time to consider this before the project takes off.

*(The writer is an environmental journalist. The views expressed are personal.)*

# Budget 2022-23: Avoid a debt trap

UTTAM **GUPTA**

## 'Demand recession' is inevitable if Government does not reform taxation, subsidy administration, unshackle farmers and ruthlessly tackle corruption

The Union Budget for 2022-23 provides for capital expenditure of ₹750,000 crore which is a jump of over 35 percent from the budget estimate (BE) of ₹554,000 crore for 2021-22 (revised estimate (RE)for the current year is ₹604,000 crore which is more or less close to the BE when we exclude ₹50,000 crore given to Air India Asset Holding Company Limited AIAHCL where the debt of now divested Air India resides).

Considering that the BE for current year was 26 percent higher than the RE of ₹439,000 crore during 2020-21, this sounds impressive. However, when seen in juxtaposition with over ₹100,00,000 crore investment needed to build infrastructure over five years-for catapulting the Indian economy to $5 trillion by 2024-25 - (this roadmap was laidby Nirmala Sitharaman in her maiden budget for 2019-20), these numbers are still inadequate.

As per the roadmap, 39 percent each of this amount was to come from the Centre and States and the balance from the private sector. This works out to Centre's contribution of around ₹40,00,000 crore over five years or ₹800,000 crore per annum. For three years (2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23) put together, this comes to ₹1700,000 crore (this is subject to all of the ₹750,000 crore allocation for 2022-23 materializing) which is ₹700,000 crore short of the proportionate amount required for this period or ₹2400,000 crore. The capital spend by states too has been far lower thanthe amount expected of them.

The Modi government expects private sector to partner with it in giving the required boost to economic growth; in fact, of the ₹100,00,000 crore, ₹22,00,000 crore was to come from the latter.

To make it happen, the Government hadalso given a plethora of incentives - the mother of all being steep reduction in corporate tax rate to 15 percent for new enterprises (22 percent for existing enterprises down from 30 percent) given in September 2019. It has alsounveiled the much-trumpeted PLI (production linked incentive) scheme.

These allurements have so far failed to yield the desired results. The crucial point is investment by private sector is governed primarily by the fundamentals of demand and supply.

For several years, industries have been operating at low-capacity utilization due to proliferation of capacity on the one hand and demand limitation on the other thereby impacting investment and growth. During 2019-20, GDP growth plummeted to a decade low of 3.7 percent. During 2020-21,it contracted by 6.6 percent, courtesy, COVID.Things are looking up during 2021-22 with the budget estimating growth at 9.2 percent, but surplus capacity remains.

During 2022-23, even as the government is hoping to consolidate withGDP growth estimated at 8 - 8.5 percent, it would be naïve to expect private firms add to fresh capacity as they will be focused mostly on enhanced utilization of the existing capacity. Yet, unmindful of the ground realities and bolstered by a so far untested notion that massive sustained push by public sector investment will result in so called 'crowding in' of privateinvestment, it continues to ride on the incentive spree.

> THE VISION AND ACTION PLAN OF TEAM MODI WITH OVERARCHING FOCUS ON BUILDING INFRA; INTER-LINKING RIVERS; BOOST TO TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN AGRI WITH FOCUS ON SMALL FARMERS; NURTURING MSMEs AND SO ON IS LAUDABLE. BUT THERE IS NO CLEAR VISION ON FUNDING THESE INITIATIVES IN A 'SUSTAINABLE' MANNER. FOUR AREAS NEED ATTENTION

*(The writer is a policy analyst. The views expressed are personal.)*

In the 2022-23 budget, the eligibility of 15 percent corporate tax has been extended to new entities which get incorporated before March 31, 2024 - against the existing threshold of March 31, 2023. The start-ups get one more year (those set up before March 31, 2023) to avail of tax holiday. The FM has also reduced surcharge on profits of cooperatives from 12 to 7 percent.

These incentives result in loss of revenue but there is no certainty regarding the outcome in terms of investment. Yet, they have a strong destabilizing effect on Centre's finances.

The RE of fiscal deficit (FD) during 2021-22 is about ₹15,90,000 crore or 6.9 percent of GDP (against BE: ₹15,07,000 crore). Slippagesin welfare schemes aggravate the stress. On fertilizer subsidy, against BE of ₹80,000 crore, the RE is ₹40,000 crore. We cannot also be oblivious of the escalating burden of interest payments - courtesy high FD/borrowings year after year - which takes away nearly 50 percent of Centre's net tax revenue.

The FM has kept FD for 2022-23 at around ₹16,60,000 crore which works out to 6.4 percent of GDP. She has described this as 'advancing on the road to fiscal consolidation' citing the target of 4.5 percent to be achieved by 2025-26. This is amusing.

A committee on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act under Dr NK Singh set up by the Modi government (2016) had asked it to aim at FD of 2.5 percent during 2022-23. While, presenting the budget for 2021-22, the finance minister brushed aside this recommendation; instead, she dished out a revised trajectory of FD aiming at 4.5 percent and that too in 2025-26. Having changed the goal post then to argue that we are on track to fiscal consolidation is anomalous.

The vision and the action plan ofTeam Modi with its overarching focus on building infrastructure; inter-linking rivers; boost to technology driven agriculture with focus on small farmers; nurturing MSMEs and so onis laudable. But there is no clear vision on funding these initiatives in a 'sustainable' manner. Four areas need attention.

First, Centre's gross tax to GDP ratio has been stagnating around 10-11 percent for years (10.8 percent during 2021-22). This is despite unconscionably high tax incidence on petroleum products (about 50 percent of retail price on petrol and diesel). The government's efforts to curb evasion especially in GST are commendable. However, there is a lot of untapped potential in direct taxation.

Secondly, at present,direct and indirect taxes contribute almost equally to Centre's tax kitty. This implies disproportionately high burden on millions of those who earn little. If, only the indirect tax share is lowered to say 1/3rd, imagine the extra money it will leave with them and resultant boost to aggregate demand and growth.

Third, the existing subsidy regimes for fertilizers and food are prone to misuse. Curbing leakage of urea (possible only when subsidy is given directly to farmers) alone can save up to ₹35,000 crore annually. Mammoth sums can be saved by curbing pilferage in administration of food subsidy. The budget has mooted ideas such as'organic farming corridor' along the banks of River Ganga, use of drones in agriculture etc.But thesecan't provide a substitute for 'overhaul of the flawed systems'.

Fourth, the government should ensure that the benefits of state support systems viz. subsidized credit, sovereignguaranteeetc actually reachthe MSMEs. As for farmers, mere offer of guaranteed purchase of their produce at MSP won't suffice. The way forward is to give them more choices to sell their produce by freeing up agri-markets.

To conclude, the budget has all the ingredients for building on the good growth seen during 2021-22 and laying the foundation for sustained growth in the medium to long-term. However, the government needs to guard against falling into a 'debt trap' and 'demand recession' - inevitable if it doesn't play hard ball by reforming taxation, reforming subsidy administration, unshackling farmers and ruthlessly tacklingcorruption.

POINT COUNTER POINT

THIS ELECTION IS FOR THE FUTURE OF FARMERS AND YOUTH. DEFEAT NEGATIVE FORCES TO KEEP GANGA-JAMUNI CULTURE ALIVE.
—SP PRESIDENT
**AKHILESH YADAV**

THEY WORSHIP JINNAH. WE ARE WORSHIPPERS OF SARDAR PATEL…WE WILL SACRIFICE OUR LIFE FOR MAA BHARATI.
—UP CHIEF MINISTER
**YOGI ADITYANATH**

# Budget figures contradictory, growth off the mark

## The 8-9 per cent growth presumption is far from reality. The FM could not count on savings for boosting consumption as people are not spending

A high-expectation ambitious Union Budget has many contradictions. It pines too high but may not create 60 lakh jobs and boost consumption.

It is a time of crisis. Farmers and youth are showing their displeasure. The micro and MSME sectors are in distress. People in the public sector are worried about job losses due to possible privatisation. The economy hit by the pandemic has to come back to health and business must be on track to boost jobs and growth. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman appropriately bites the bullet of increased public expenditure but curiously cuts down on welfare and slashes key subsidy by 27 percent. The 8-9 percent growth presumption is far from reality. Total expenses are calculated at 11.1 percent nominal growth. It is on assumption that retail or CPI inflation would be at 2.6 percent instead of actual 5.6 percent. Inflation is global. It means the total expenditure is inappropriately calculated. Two years back there was seven percent contraction; means actual growth is far less.

SHIVAJI **SARKAR**

*(The writer is a senior journalist. The views expressed are personal.)*

Her arithmetic is conflicting. The government being short on revenue earning is dependent on debt. It proposes to borrow ₹14.95 lakh crore and of this ₹11.6 lakh crore will be raised from the shaky market. If the government picks up all the money, the credit will be more expensive. As RBI rate rise is likely the cost of borrowings will increase. For creating jobs public sector is needed but it is being edged out. The market is choppy. The disinvestment target is being reduced as there are fewer buyers. It has come down to ₹65,000 crore for fiscal 2023, from ₹78,000 crore in 2022 and ₹ 1.75 lc in 2020-21. But transferring even profit-earning 171 public assets, as per Manmohanomics, to the private sector seems fashionable. The Air India deal cost a fortune.

During 2021-22, the Centre infused equity of Rs 62,057 crore to deal AI dues before disinvestment. Now another Rs 9259 crore has been allocated to AI Assets Holding Ltd (AIAHL), a new PSU, to handle AI's unsettled debt and non-core assets. So, Government spends over Rs 71316 crore (and plus Rs 51970 crore losses!) to "sell" the mammoth AI.The UPA minister, who drove profit-making AI and Indian Airlines to losses during 2005-07, escapes unscathed.

The first PSU steel plant NINL, with ₹6600 crore liabilities, is sold for ₹12,100 crore to Tatas on budget day. The buyer profits from a one-million-tonnes-a-year plant in Odisha, 2500 acres of land and a mine with 102 million tonnes of prime iron ore. The LIC and four banks are on the same sale block. Such 'privatisation' is too costly.

It has tax revenue of ₹27.58 lakh crore and wants to have capital expenses of ₹7.5 lakh crore, 35.4 percent more from the present ₹5.5 lakh crore but this year it spent 48 percent less. This cannot create more jobs. It reduces allocation on rural development, health and other programmes. The ₹50,000 crore for MSMEs is bank credit. The FM could not count on huge savings for boosting consumption as people are not spending. Pre-budget data reveals ₹7 lakh crore household savings and Jan Dhan deposits swelling to ₹39,000 crore. But the households with ₹18000 crore debts are not spending.

The kisan expects more. The farm sector alone has sustained growth of around 4 percent but 86 crore lost their land. Possibly 52 percent of them crore were in the informal self-employed economy till demonetization, according to an SBI study. Except about 15-20 percent, including a chunk of farmers who lost their lands, are now labourers. Should we not revive that low-cost people-initiated informalisation? It is cheaper than unicorns and employs more. The nation needs to rethink. Even MGNREGA allocations have been reduced to Rs 73000 crore from Rs 98000 crore of 2021-22. The rural development, health and labourers need more support. So does lowering of income tax rates to match corporate tax. People need more cash for consumption boost else manufacturing industry would be suffering.

The nation needs more people-oriented approach than mere 25000 km roads, airports and digital connectivity that help the corporate builders, toll collectors and fee extractors. Irrationally high tolls and cesses ideally be scrapped to keep prices in check. Taxes are not "hiked" but devious cess robs more and hike prices.

The budget cannot have contradictory projections and has to be more imaginative to overcome the difficult days and help the country sustain-

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## Letters to the : Has Mark Zuckerberg's futuristic Metaverse lost its sheen

Sir — Social media has become an inextricable part of our lives. The 21st century saw a meteoric rise in the popularity of platforms like Facebook and Twitter, both of which have a significant number of young users. But nothing lasts forever and the attraction of social media seems to be fading. Recently, Meta lost a chunk of daily users for the first time since its inception. Many young people are disenchanted with Facebook owing to the spread of misinformation and hate speech. Has Mark Zuckerberg's futuristic Metaverse, then, failed to incorporate the voice of its primary stakeholders?

Sir — The Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, spoke truth to power during the debate on the motion of thanks to the president's address to Parliament ("The king & master", Feb 3). In his speech, Rahul attacked the flawed policies of the Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre, saying that these have led to the creation of 'two Indias' — one for the rich and the other for the poor. The gulf between the two spheres is indeed widening because of the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, while the poor remain in deprivation. Rahul rightly argued that instead of addressing these issues, the government is imposing a 'culture of nationalism' on the people in order to divide and rule. The Centre must take note of this criticism and correct its failures. Sir — Rahul Gandhi must be lauded for drawing attention to issues ailing India. The Union budget for 2022-23 failed to take measures to curb the rising prices of essential commodities — a massive burden for the common people. Although the unemployment rate is at its lowest since March 2021, it continues to be high; millions of Indians are plagued by it. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government at the Centre has also failed to check Chinese aggressions along India's borders. Sir — India is in pieces, both socially and economically ("Two in one", Feb 4). The apathy of the Central government is evident from the fact that the interests of large sections of the public are ignored while framing laws. However, a part of the blame must be borne by the Opposition too. The lack of unity among Opposition leaders is the reason the government has not been held accountable for its actions. Sir — India is right to officially boycott the Winter Olympics in Beijing owing to the ongoing tension with China ("India Galwan protest at Olympics", Feb 4). The decision comes on the back of China appointing a regiment commander who had participated in the Galwan clashes in 2020 — it claimed the lives of 20 Indians — as a torchbearer for the Games. The brazen attempt to glorify the soldiers responsible for the continued stand-off with India and the genocide of Uighur Muslims is unfortunate. Sir — Many countries have decided to diplomatically boycott the Winter Games in Beijing in view of the human rights violations by China. However, China's decision to celebrate a regiment commander responsible for the Galwan clashes is a new low in its already fraught relations with India. It is shameful that China is using an event like the Olympics to exert its dominance over its neighbours. Sir — It is sad that the veteran actor-producer, Ramesh Deo, has passed away at the age of 93. Beginning his Hindi-film career as a villain in the 1962 movie, Aarti, Deo went on to deliver memorable performances alongside stars like Amitabh Bachchan and Rajesh Khanna. His roles in Anand, Aap ki Kasam and Mere Apne are unforgettable.

## Open season

### A Muslim citizen's default state is a state of culpability

The hardest part of being Muslim in India today must be that neither the State nor civil society gives you the benefit of the doubt. The benefit of the doubt simply means choosing to believe people even when it's hard to know with certainty that they are telling the truth. A Muslim citizen's default state is not a state of innocence, but a state of culpability. When a Muslim is in the news, the reportage that swirls around the newsworthy event, the arguments on social media, turn on the assumption that the controversy is related to perverse behaviour initiated by the Muslim/s in question. We've seen two examples of this in the last week; one relates to high politics and the other to college education.

Asaduddin Owaisi was shot at while travelling in a car to Delhi from Meerut where he had been campaigning in the run-up to the elections in UP. Several shots were fired at the car, one of which punctured a tyre, forcing Owaisi to change vehicles. One of the accused has been implicated in a murder case before. He claims to be a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party and there are several photographs circulating online that show him in the company of BJP leaders. Given the BJP's hostility towards Muslims and the UP chief minister's consistently communal campaigning style, you would imagine that this failed assassination attempt would be investigated in that fraught context. Instead, the statement issued by the additional director-general of police, law and order, Prashant Kumar, informed us that "The accused said they were hurt by his (Asaduddin Owaisi) remarks against a particular religion." Less than two months ago, a Dharma Sansad in Haridwar organized by Yati Narsinghanand had repeatedly called for genocidal violence against Muslims and yet the ADG had found a way of suggesting that the alleged assassination attempt had been triggered by something Owaisi had said about Hindus. Long story short: he started it. This state of mind is bigger than the BJP and its pliable police forces. Owaisi has been a member of Parliament for several terms. And yet, the response of his parliamentary colleagues from other parties was curiously muted in the aftermath of the shooting. The Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, which are the principal Opposition parties in Uttar Pradesh, didn't immediately condemn this shocking assassination attempt. The reason for that isn't hard to find. Owaisi is frequently accused of being in the pay of the BJP. His political excursions outside his home borough of Hyderabad are reviled as deliberate attempts to split the Opposition by siphoning off vital Muslim votes. So the first instinct of these parties is suspicion: is this a stunt? Will a concerted wave of sympathy help his cause? So even in extremis, even when he is at the business end of a bullet, Owaisi doesn't receive the benefit of the doubt. The irony is that Owaisi wouldn't exist as a political force if the BJP hadn't succeeded in making Muslims politically radioactive and if India's Opposition parties weren't so reluctant to acknowledge their political existence. The Aam Aadmi Party received an overwhelming majority of Delhi's Muslim votes in the last assembly election and repaid these Muslim voters by being ostentatiously indifferent to the plight of Muslims in the subsequent riots in northeast Delhi. This is something of an electoral template: solicit Muslim votes furtively lest it hurt your cause with Hindus or, better still, just take them for granted, because where will they go? One possible answer to that rhetorical question is — to the likes of Owaisi. Muslims in India have overwhelmingly voted for non-denominational political parties for the same reasons non-Muslims have: conviction, opportunism, principle and profit. Partition made the politics of religious community impossible for Muslims. But now, when India's ruling party is proud not to count a single Muslim in its phalanx of Lok Sabha MPs, when the leaders of Opposition parties vie with one another to enthuse about Ayodhya's Ram Mandir, when the BJP has succeeded in creating a Muslim-mukt Bharat in the realm of politics, a party like the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen that articulates explicitly Muslim needs and anxieties becomes inevitable.

If Owaisi didn't exist, we would have to invent him. Muslims constitute nearly twenty per cent of UP's electorate: when parties pretend that they don't exist, when Priyanka Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav distance themselves from Muslims leaders that their parties are allied to, they create a political vacuum that begs to be filled. The virtue or wickedness of Owaisi is beside the point: he didn't start this, just as he didn't hothouse the hate that allowed the wannabe assassin from Noida to believe it was open season on Muslim politicians. Owaisi is addressing a political disenfranchisement designed by others. In exactly the same way, though in a very different context, the responsibility for the stand-off at the Udupi pre-university colleges doesn't lie with the hijab-wearing girls denied admission to class rooms. It's the college authorities who chose to outlaw the hijab and then argued, falsely, that the parents of the affected students had signed an undertaking to that effect. But it would be a mistake to concentrate on the minutiae of a college's uniform rules. Whether they know it or not, the college authorities and their political patrons are invoking a larger principle, the principle of uniformity built into the French construction of secularism, laicité, and we should address the salience of that principle in the context of our republican history. It's important to note that the hijab-proscribing colleges are government colleges. State institutions are bound by a duty of even-handedness. The girls wearing the hijab argue that it is integral to their religious identity. The reason this is a powerful argument in India is that the country's government institutions and uniformed services make at least one sartorial exception on religious grounds: the patkas and pugrees that Sikh boys and men wear. There is a historical reason for this: the colonial army was disproportionately dependent on Sikh recruitment in the Punjab and created Sikh regiments where the criteria for entry mandated rigorous adherence to the five Ks which included, of course, long hair, kesh, and the concomitant turban. The soldier's turban became an institutionalized precedent.

Thanks to the Sikh diaspora and its enthusiasm for uniformed employment, the turban has proved to be a global challenge to the shibboleths of laicité. One Western country after another has changed the uniform rules of its armed forces to accommodate Sikh soldiers and every exemption has undermined the dogmatic and faintly sinister notion that absolute public uniformity is the soul of secularism. The principals of these Udupi colleges should be asked if they would admit turbaned men. If they say yes (as they must), they must admit hijabi women. If they choose not to, it should be clearly understood that they are actively discriminating against Muslims. It has been argued that the hijab, unlike the turban for Sikhs, is not integral to Muslim identity, if only because so many Muslim women choose not to wear it. There are many Sikh men who don't wear the turban; I can think of two in the current Indian cricket team. That doesn't make the turban less central as a symbol of Sikh identity for those who do. All religious communities contain a range of practice. It's impossible to find an argument against the hijab that doesn't apply equally to the turban, including the argument from gender. Indians are free to dislike and vigorously express their dislike for Owaisi and the hijab. What they should be careful of doing is blaming Owaisi and the young students for the predicaments they find themselves in. The girls didn't make their hijabs an issue; the colleges did. Owaisi, it's safe to say, didn't ask to be shot at. They were both ambushed and we owe them both solidarity and concern.

## The way we weren't

### The belligerent reaction of the ruling party to opposition MP Rahul Gandhi's speech says more about their understanding of democracy than his

On the last day of the winter session of the 15th Lok Sabha, the BJP's Sushma Swaraj gave a sterling speech as leader of Opposition. She summed up the achievements of the House, thanked colleagues across party lines, and said the thing to note was that the House was made up of virodhis and not enemies. She said, "We discuss and debate, sometimes much too intensely. But it is never personal." The BJP's reaction to Rahul Gandhi's recent speech in Parliament does not fit the debate-and-discuss label. From Amit Malviya to Rajnath Singh, Kiren Rijiju to S. Jaishankar, Pralhad Joshi to Biplab Deb, Shahnawaz Hussain to Baijayant Jay Panda, the reactions flowed --- hostile, shrill, bordering on the personal.

"You have a mixed personality with shades of Churchill as well as Chamberlain." That is how a young Atal Bihari Vajpayee from the Opposition benches had accused Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Parliament. In his 1999 speech, also in Parliament, Vajpayee recalled how the older politician not only did not take offence, but complimented him. Recalling the incident Vajpayee remarked, "Aajkal aisa alochona karna dushmani ko dawat dena… Today, such criticism would be tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet." Last week, Rajyavardhan Rathore, whose Twitter bio reads "Member of Parliament, Olympic Medalist, Indian Army, National Spokesperson BJP", tweeted: "Is Rahul Gandhi's script writer from Peiking (sic) or 'Pindi??" Panda called Gandhi "king of comedy". And Singh invoked Nehru, as if he were only Mr Gandhi's grandparent and not India's first Prime Minister. In 2003, reacting to leader of Opposition Sonia Gandhi's choice of words to describe the BJP-led NDA government on campaign trail, Vajpayee had reacted in Parliament by advising for close to an hour on the language and style of parliamentary debates. Sonia had called the BJP-led government "incompetent", "irresponsible", "insensitive" and "brazenly corrupt". Vajpayee's expression changed from disgust to disgust, his tone from reprimand to anguish as he read a portion of the speech. He said, "Sabhya tarike se ladiye." Counter, but be civil. By the time it was 2013, the precedent of Opposition leaders rushing to the well of the House chanting slogans of "Prime Minister chor hai" had been set. A decade on, the offensives intensified, the debate got diluted. Mr Gandhi's own hug-and-wink act from some years ago was an unparliamentary spectacle. Rijiju said last week, "I personally don't take Rahul Gandhi seriously. But because he's a leader of his political party and has spoken these words on the floor of the House, I have to take note of this," as if bestowing a great favour unto democracy. Indeed you have to, Mr Rijiju. Not for nothing is it called the House of the People.

## Another adviser? Nitish rewards those who serve well

### DELHI DIARIES: Gadkari ploughs a lonely road with green fuel

The love of the Bihar chief minister, Nitish Kumar, for the bureaucrats who serve him with utmost loyalty is well known and they are usually given plum post-retirement positions. But this time he created the post of additional advisor to the CM for the Indian Administrative Service officer, Manish Kumar Verma, who took voluntary retirement last year. Verma had been in Bihar for around a decade but was called back to his parent cadre which prompted him to quit the service. Nitish quickly made him a member of the Bihar State Disaster Management Authority. Now, Verma will join the former chief secretary, Anjani Kumar Singh, who is the advisor to the chief minister.

When people wondered about Nitish's benevolence on a mid-rank former IAS officer, a senior leader in his party pointed out several links. Verma shares caste (Kurmi) and native district (Nalanda) with Nitish. He could be groomed to contest the legislative assembly elections and fill the void if the wings of the Union steel minister, RCP Singh, need to be clipped because of his closeness to the Bharatiya Janata Party. "Manish is in no way being rewarded for his public service... Nitish made him the district magistrate of Patna and a stampede happened during Dussehra celebrations in which a large number of people were killed and injured. Manish was said to have been busy celebrating his son's birthday at a posh hotel... " said the senior Janata Dal (United) leader. These days, the Union road transport minister, Nitin Gadkari, has developed an obsession for green fuel. He believes that India cannot become aatmanirbhar without drastically reducing its dependence on oil imports and shifting to clean energy. Visitors to his home in Delhi this winter are reportedly shown a gas burner-type room heater fuelled by ethanol. Gadkari claims it causes zero pollution. Curiously, Gadkari's push for green fuel appears to be a solo effort. The prime minister, Narendra Modi, is rarely heard pushing the well-intentioned idea of the senior minister. Many in the BJP feel that Gadkari's effort to project himself as a visionary and his goodwill cutting across party lines are the reasons for the current leadership's disdain. He was the BJP president but is now hardly consulted in the formulation of electoral strategies. Old Delhi's historic Unani clinic, Hindustani Dawakhana, which is associated with the national movement, now bears the signage, Aam Aadmi Polyclinic. Established in 1910 by Hakim Ajmal Khan, it is opposite the haveli of the poet, Mirza Ghalib. The structure fell into disrepair and was renovated. It had been functioning as a Delhi government dispensary of allopathic as well as traditional medicine. As part of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party's mohalla clinic plan, the dispensary's facilities were augmented. While the original signage is long-lost, Unani practitioners in the area are aghast that the new sign makes no mention of the building's glorious past. The recent reunion of the BJP and the Bodoland People's Front in Assam was quite low-key, unlike their acrimonious split before the 2020 Bodoland Territorial Council polls. The Assam CM, Himanta Biswa Sarma, made it clear that the alliance was only within the state Assembly. Sarma added that the reunion will see the strength of the BJP-led ruling alliance go up to 81 in a House of 126. What he didn't say was that the renewed ties could help the BJP win both the Rajya Sabha seats falling vacant in the state soon. Winning both seats will help boost the BJP's strength in the Rajya Sabha. For the BPF, which lost the BTC polls, it is a new lease of life.

With elections to 24 legislative council seats in Bihar around the corner, the Opposition Grand Alliance partners, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Congress, are, once again, fighting with each other. They fought during the bypolls to two Assembly seats last year and contested separately. However, when the Telangana CM, K Chandrashekar Rao, invited the leader of Opposition, Tejashwi Prasad Yadav, to join a non-Congress third front to take on the BJP, the latter rejected the offer. The two parties are like spouses, constantly pecking at each other, but still standing united on important occasions. The 'Metroman', E Sreedharan, has been a slippery fish for his party. During the run-up to the April 2021 Kerala polls, he famously declared he was open to becoming the CM since his party would do well. But when the BJP lost, Sreedharan withdrew into a shell until he abruptly announced his retirement from active politics. Now, Sreedharan has shocked the BJP by declaring that the Vande Bharat trains would not help Kerala because of their slow speed. This came a day after the state BJP leaders urged the Kerala government to drop plans for the K-Rail. Now even his rivals are waiting to see what Sreedharan would say next. The Malayalam actor, Kunchacko Boban, was surprised to see his picture as a postman in a Karnataka school textbook. The actor brought the faux pas to light in an Instagram post, joking that he finally found a government job. The picture was a still from Kunchako's film, Oridathoru Postman. The Congress Lok Sabha member, DK Suresh, slammed the state's BJP government for such blunders. Whatever may be the reason for the blooper, Kunchacko's friends seem to be having a good laugh.

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# EDITORIAL

## Traders of hate

Hate may not be a desirable attribute for most of us but it is so for politics. There are sections among politicians who have mastered the art of selling hate for their benefit so well that they don't fail to exhibit their mastery in even the slightest of opportunities they get. On a big day, when the entire nation was mourning the demise of one of the most revered souls of India, some couldn't manage to get out of their petty business of selling hate. The opportunity for them came in the form of a short video clip of Shah Rukh Khan paying final tribute to the departed soul in a way that is considered very respectful in his religion. He raised his hands in prayer, blew air through his mouth on Lata Mangeshkar's dead body, bowed down to touch her feet and encircled her dead body — a practice seen as pure even in Hindu religion. The in-charge of BJP IT Cell in Haryana, who appears to have had a hawk's eye on the entire funeral process, found an element of suspicion in the act of blowing air through the mouth on the dead body. With his limited knowledge of Islamic traditions, he immediately threw an open question on Twitter, 'kyai isne thooka hai (Did he spit)?' After realising that his bet was too insignificant to succeed, he defended his act rather innocently saying that he was simply asking — not without bringing in the sacred 'national interest' concerns. The incident simply showed a high-degree of opportunism and the intensity to which trolls are committed to spreading hate. This also offers a glimpse into the working of IT Cells. While the current trolling incident against Shah Rukh Khan was countered by an overwhelming support for the superstar, this is not always the case. If the victim is not of Shah Rukh's fame, he/she will likely languish against the onslaught. Also, the ambiguity that was conflated in the Shah Rukh's case to stoke controversy was very marginal and clearly refutable. In case there are greater ambiguities, the situation would be entirely different. Apart from victimising a single person or a group, what the trolls do is to polarise the larger masses, further compartmentalising their views. While the IT Cell in-charge justified his act by saying he was simply asking, the incident gave a window for many Twitter users to vent out their half-baked versions of truth and opinions. Some saw Shah Rukh's act of paying tribute as an act of imposition of Islamic tradition over the Hindus through 'normalisation of culture with non-believers'. Even a renowned BJP leader raised his apprehension around using Islamic methods of paying tribute at a Hindu's funeral. While any wise person will say that such foolhardy notions don't deserve to be responded to, this may not be the best way out. Such outright bigotry needs to be condemned in the harshest of words. These vile remarks provoke the constructed and latent communal distrust among people to take larger forms. Better still, propagation of love in response to hate is the most apt way to retain communal fraternity within the country. This has to be done in the most organic manner possible, and not through romanticisation. The noble viewpoints of many people who shared the image of Shah Rukh Khan and Puja Dadlani paying tribute to Lata Mangeshkar is laudable. Still, while doing so one should ensure that he/she doesn't end up trivialising such gestures. The mutual bond between people from diverse communities is largely a normal thing in Indian society and that should be presented as such. Lata Mangeshkar and Shah Rukh Khan are known to have respected the work of each other as artists. Those who have opted to spread hate are perhaps not aware about the affection that Lata di held for Shah Rukh Khan and the respect and awe that Shah Rukh Khan has expressed for her on several occasions. An awareness at the mass level still eludes us as to what it feels to live perpetually in an atmosphere of hate. To be constantly under vigil, for belonging to a particular religious community, is a hard thing to imagine. The incidents related to superstars at least come to the fore but what about those who suffer on a daily basis for being a Muslim, a Christian, a Sikh, a woman, a Dalit and the list goes on? It is time to introspect as to what feeds this hate regime and what are its outcomes, and to normalise the fraternity that India is known for.

## Dear Editor

### DEFUSE THE CRISIS

*This is in reference to the news report, "Leaders meet around the globe hoping to calm the Ukraine crisis". With NATO countries sending ships and fighter jets to eastern Europe, and Russia amassing around 1,00,000 troops, tanks, artillery and heavy equipment at the Ukrainian border, tensions have reached a critical pass, and there are genuine fears of a fresh conflict in Europe at any moment. While talks have occurred between the highest-ranking American and Russian diplomats over the Ukraine crisis, so far these have failed to resolve the issue. Meanwhile, a summit between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Beijing on Friday sends a strong message to the West that China and Russia are displaying strategic convergence on a number of key global issues. In the backdrop of the brewing Ukraine crisis, as well as the West's boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over criticism of China's alleged human rights abuses, this meeting is quite significant. Without mincing words, Moscow and Beijing opposed the "further expansion of NATO" while calling on the "North Atlantic Alliance to abandon the ideological approaches of the Cold War". While the Cold War had witnessed the Sino-Soviet split, in the present times, the shared distrust of the US and EU is bringing China and Russia closer. The Western bloc sees Russia and China as strategic, military and economic competitors, while Moscow and Beijing seek to assert themselves on the global stage. And the eastern expansion of NATO is a key bone of contention between Russia and the West. Now it is NATO's responsibility to assure Russia that the bloc does not seek to encircle it. Also to avoid more tension, all sides need to keep competition within manageable limits, and the possibility of violent encounters must be off the table.*

— **KHOKAN DAS, KOLKATA** via email

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# Two-tier route to growth?

### While the Budgetary focus on physical infrastructure for growth is a step in right direction, neglect of social infrastructure will likely propel inequality

**ALOK RANJAN**

The Union Budget for the year 2022-23 has continued with the emphasis on growth with the expectation that a high rate of growth would lead to a better quality of life for people. Nobody can dispute that growth is important but there is also the spectre of rising inequalities which cannot be overlooked. Growth has to be inclusive in nature and it is against this paradigm that the Union Budget needs to be evaluated.

We must start with the positives. There is a substantial increase of 35 per cent in the capital expenditure with ambitious targets for roads, railways and ports. This emphasis on development of physical infrastructure was very much required to lay the foundation for industrial growth and economic development. It will also create a demand for items like steel and cement, which should act as an incentive for increase in private investment and also provide jobs for those involved in the construction activities. The real test of the matter would lie in the implementation in both quality and quantity terms. Looking at the trend of expenditure against the current year's Budget, the prospects do not look very bright but then one should not be unduly pessimistic, and hope that the government machinery will be able to fulfill the ambitious goals of capital expenditure that have been provided for in the Budget. It is also significant that despite the increase in government revenues, this expenditure will have to be met through additional borrowings which will increase the substantial interest liability in the Budget.

> The Budget has not taken any significant step towards enhancing consumer demand which contributes more than 50 per cent to the GDP and acts as a stimulus to private investment

The second-most significant aspect in the Budget is the clear focus on digital technology. In every sector in the Budget statement, one finds schemes related to introduction of digital technology. This will definitely improve the functioning of various departments and provide better services to the people. We have the concept of drones in agriculture to improve crop statistics as well as land records. In the education sector, E-Vidya is being used to develop about 200 channels to provide quality education to the school-going children. Similarly, in the health sector, digital healthcare has been given paramount importance. This is the age of technology and only that country will go forward which develops a knowledge economy. The importance given to digital technology is a step in the right direction and prepares India to face the disruptive challenges posed by the fast-changing technological environment. This should also lead to a creation of a new set of job opportunities for the youth.

**Proper health and education status is a prerequisite for inclusive growth**

My main concerns around the Budget are regarding the sectors of health and education that haven't seen any increase in budgetary allocation. Besides, apart from introducing digital technology there is no new scheme to bring about qualitative improvement in education and healthcare. The development of social infrastructure is as important as the physical one. We have examples of various countries which first focused on education and healthcare to develop their human capital and then emphasised on physical infrastructure. Only a well-educated and healthy society can take full advantage of the opportunities created by enhancement of capital expenditure. Health and education should be the topmost priorities of the nation and this should have been reflected in the Budget. For instance, having a digital health card and digital infrastructure is undoubtedly useful but digital intervention without a sound physical foundation is not likely to yield the required outcomes. Healthcare will improve only if there are more doctors, nurses, paramedics, ICU beds, hospitals and other health-related infrastructure. This requires significantly stepping up the expenditure in public health, which is still languishing at only about 1.3 per cent of GDP whereas it should be stepped up to 2.5 per cent at the earliest. The pandemic has exposed the huge gaps in our healthcare system, particularly in the rural areas. This should have sensitized the government to accord highest priority to the health sector.

Similarly, the pandemic has created huge issues in the education sector, which should have been reflected in the Budget. E-Vidya is a welcome move but it is no substitute for improving the education infrastructure, quality of teaching and learning outcomes. I am also mystified by the reduction of allocation for the crucial MGNREGA scheme. People are still suffering from the adverse impacts of the pandemic which has pushed millions into poverty, who require the safety net of a rural employment guarantee scheme like MGNREGA. Also, I was looking forward to the introduction of an urban employment guarantee act along the same lines as MGNREGA to cater to the unemployment problem in urban areas. This could have helped in creating productive assets and more consumer demand. In fact, the Budget has not taken any significant step towards enhancing consumer demand which contributes more than 50 per cent to the GDP and acts as a stimulus to private investment.

Previous year's Budget talked big on disinvestment and privatisation but current year's Budget is silent on these goals. For the current year, against the target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore only about Rs 9,000 crore has been realised. Expectations are that with the LIC IPO, it would reach Rs 78,000 crore. The roadmap for the future is not clear. It may be that not being able to push through the structural reforms in agriculture, the government has become a little cautious. Furthermore, the government had announced monetisation of Rs 6 lakh crore of public assets and there were talks of realising Rs 88,000 crore this year itself. Once again, the Budget has not spelt out any details regarding this.

The middle class, particularly the salaried section, was eagerly looking forward to some benefits in income tax but the Budget has not touched the income tax rate at all. A reduction could have once again stimulated consumer demand by putting more disposable income in the hands of the people. However, it is noteworthy that the tax rates have been kept constant which is a positive point in itself.

We can hail the budget as being a growth-oriented one, and also appreciate the stress on digital technology. However, in a society where inequalities have gone up over the last few years, more thought could have been given to the inclusiveness and development of human capital.

*The writer is an ex-Chief Secretary, Govt of Uttar Pradesh. Views expressed are personal*

# No time to quit

### Simply being tired of the pandemic is not a reason to let it burn through the population; write Karen Mossman & Matthew S Miller

This is no time to give in to COVID-19.

It's understandable that after two years, everyone is tired of being afraid, staying home, wearing masks and queueing up for rounds of vaccines and tests.

With the virus finding the unvaccinated in greater numbers — as expected — and breakthrough infections affecting the vaccinated, a spirit of resignation threatens to take hold.

Some are even suggesting it would be best to stop trying, or even accelerate the spread of the virus to get it over with, in the same way parents of yesteryear used to put healthy and infected kids together to get chickenpox and be done with it.

They had no idea their "chickenpox parties" would ultimately lead to painful, sometimes debilitating, shingles outbreaks for many later in adulthood.

**Omicron's impact**

Even if Omicron infections are typically milder than previous variants, there remains considerable uncertainty around the long-term consequences of COVID-19.

Further, the impact of a huge wave of any infection is severe, even when it is mild for many. We are seeing the devastating effects of infected workers being absent, not only in healthcare and long-term care, but also in businesses and schools that can't run properly or in some cases not at all.

> Pandemics have always changed and improved the way people live afterwards. Cholera led to sewers and clean water. Yellow fever and influenza pandemics gave rise to the concept of public health

**Our new "normal" can be much healthier, with only the most subtle of changes**

As researchers in molecular virology and viral immunology, we are here to say in no uncertain terms that it would be wrong to give up now.

Vaccines have helped us to avoid near certain disasters during the current Omicron wave. The number of deaths and devastating illnesses would be much, much higher without them.

Already, we know that long COVID, with its sometimes very serious physical and mental health consequences, is shockingly common among COVID-19 patients, with symptoms affecting as many as one in three. We are also seeing some evidence that children are more likely to develop Type 1 diabetes after COVID-19. Those are not risks we can afford, either.

Our society may have become complacent about infectious diseases, even without COVID-19. In Canada, people have been lucky to live in a time when vaccines are so successful that almost no other public health measures have been necessary to protect us from infections like smallpox, polio and tetanus that have plagued humanity for most of its natural history.

Pandemics have always changed and improved the way people live afterwards. Cholera led to sewers and clean water. Yellow fever and influenza pandemics gave rise to the concept of public health.

Our new "normal" can be much healthier, with only the most subtle of changes.

**A healthier 'normal'**

Last year there was barely any influenza, and the common cold went on hiatus because COVID-19 precautions also happened to provide a barrier to those familiar infections. The near absence of influenza probably saved about 3,500 lives in Canada alone, and those benefits can continue.

If we normalize mask-wearing by vulnerable people during peaks of influenza or other seasonal infections, we can save thousands of lives globally, even after the threat of COVID-19 recedes.

We learned early in the pandemic to wash our hands better and more frequently, which protects us from many forms of infection. Let's keep it up. Likewise, improvements to building ventilation are long overdue and will continue to benefit our collective health going forward.

We have learned to stay home when we are sick, perhaps finally shedding the warrior mentality of slogging through infections as if it were somehow more productive than staying away from the workplace. It isn't, especially when one outbreak can pull down a whole organization.

Now, there are much better ways to work remotely for those whose jobs permit it. The requirement to isolate when ill has also renewed public discussion around the need for improved paid sick leave policies to support vulnerable workers. Adopting these policies would improve the lives of many in the years to come.

COVID-19 has exponentially raised public awareness of infection control due to its constant intrusion into our everyday lives over the past two years. That can pay off in other ways, if we decide to take advantage of all the tools we have and lessons we have learned out of necessity.

All of this is certainly not to say COVID-19 is good. Far from it. But we can benefit from what we have learned so far, and we certainly should not give up now.

We have proven, effective tools. Using these tools effectively can keep us healthy, protect the most vulnerable members of our communities, allow businesses to operate safely and accelerate our return to "normal." Simply being tired of the pandemic is not reason to let it burn through the population. DTE

*Views expressed are personal*

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THE ASIAN AGE

9 FEBRUARY 2022

# Don't allow hijab row to hinder girls' education

Religion should be kept a private affair of individual citizens, but that is an ideal case scenario. Whether we like it or not, elements of religious practices have become part of the culture of believers, and the harmonious co-existence of such customs with the ones of those who practise no religion is a pre-condition for a society's progress.

India is a secular democracy founded on a Constitution that assures every citizen the right to practise their religion, subject to conditions. Religion being a general term, the courts have elaborated on this constitutional proviso and brought essential religious practices under its protection.

It is in this background that one should view the controversy raging in Karnataka about Muslim girl students wearing the *hijab* (headscarf). Some colleges objected to the habit and asked the girls to stop attending lessons with headscarves on, which they protested. The issue soon took a communal turn with a section of students parading saffron shawls, saying they, too, have the right to do so. Dalit students chipped in, wearing blue dress in support of the Muslim girls. Islamists did not waste the chance, introducing the *niqab*, or dress that conceals even the face, seeking the cover of fundamental rights.

As the Karnataka high court rightly observed while hearing the petition of the girl students, every citizen of this country should go by reason, the law, and the Constitution; not passion and emotion. This is an advice to all those who have taken to violent protests and also to those who come up with whatabouteries to argue their points. They must realise that the Constitution does not mandate banishing of religion; instead, it affords people the right to practise it. The question is how to make it least obtrusive in a secular system.

**A total ban on the hijab, which Muslims claim to be an essential religious practice, will result in Muslim women either avoiding multicultural and secular institutions or, worse, becoming dropouts**

The situation as of today is that while sane persons would be busy seeking to address the question as suggested by the high court, vested interests and extremists have almost hijacked the issue. Protests against the *hijab* are taking place all across Karnataka now, and it is highly likely that it shall spread to other states, too. Political parties who have religion as their sole agenda to seek power and retain it have a lot to gain from this but rational people have every reason to worry about the future of this nation when people tend to view everything through the lens of religion and nothing but.

The Constitution and the law are made with a view to address issues as citizens of a nation, and not as enemies. It must not be done in a mechanical way in all situations; how a decision would impact the lives of law-abiding people must be a consideration the court should keep in mind. A total ban on the *hijab*, which Muslims claim to be an essential religious practice, will result in Muslim women either avoiding multi-religious and secular institutions or, worse, becoming dropouts. At the same time, the court cannot give in to the pressure of identity politics and communalists and allow each one to wear the dress of their choice. It will thus be called upon to come out with a solution that protects the right to practise religion and the right to education while refusing to yield to the demands of religious obscurantists of all hues. It should ensure that better sense prevails.

# Trudeau, Ottawa face the music

It is not just a truckers' rally named "Freedom Convoy" against a Covid vaccine mandate that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is grappling with. The protests against government overreach in tackling the pandemic appear to be an early manifestation of a larger social movement reflecting a clash between two Canadas — the urban, liberal metropolises and the vast rural swath whose people feel hardly connected with the federal government in Ottawa.

The irony is not lost as Mr Trudeau, a minority PM whose Liberal Party could win the popular vote only in urban pockets — 109 of 150 seats in the most urban of constituencies and only 34 seats of 150 of the most rural and Conservative parts — has been forced to stay in a secret location. The protests have paralysed the capital where the mayor has declared a state of emergency, the police are arresting demonstrators and the national war memorial has been fenced off after it was desecrated by urinating protesters.

Those in India mocking Mr Trudeau now after pillorying him for his earlier comments supporting Indian farmers while addressing his sizeable Canadian-Punjabi constituents on Guruparab last year might be missing the wood for the trees. It is clear as crystal that the Canadian PM has become a deeply polarising figure even as those with an anti-establishment bias are waging a battle on the streets against a mandate that affects most those truckers who have to shuttle between Canada and the United States.

The issues coming to a head in Canada could become stereotypical across democracies as they are emblematic of the larger divide between urban and rural, liberal and conservative, and the left and the right even more than the rich-poor divide. Much as the farmers of India chose the capital New Delhi as the focal point of their protests, Canadian truckers have descended on Ottawa. And one of two prominent figures who set off this cycle of massive protests by raising funds online or campaigning on TikTok has even apologised to Ottawans for choosing their city for the protests while a judge has asked the truckers to stop tooting their horns.

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Subhani

# Stand firm at Siachen: No question of glacier retreat

Abhijit Bhattacharyya

**Didn't the decisive political-cum-clinical military action of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi bring the Siachen Glacier back to India in April 1984? Can this rare achievement of India's exemplary act be frittered away?**

When the incumbent Chief of Army Staff and a former foreign secretary talk about the Siachen Glacier, it's time to take note. If India's highest-ranking serving general refers to the possible demilitarisation of the glacier, where the Indian Army has been deployed without any break since 1984, it's a serious matter. A former foreign secretary justified the move to seek a review on the grounds that "Siachen is a most inhospitable theatre and the extraordinary human and material costs it imposes on troops". So, both are not averse to the withdrawal of Indian troops on account of the "inhospitable theatre"!

Unfortunately, however, it's an idea that is hard to implement as there is no sign yet of peace, harmony and understanding with our neighbours, specifically Pakistan. True, one shouldn't fault the lofty thoughts of two public figures; yet the fact is that 1.4 billion Indians' fate can't depend solely on noble intentions. Those acting in good faith need to do some rethinking. This is all the more so at a time when our western neighbour, in tandem with the powerful, destructive Dragon to the east, are together plotting all kinds of mischief against India.

In the light of the suggestions by Gen. M.M. Naravane and a former foreign secretary, let us revisit the entire question of the glacier. Where is Siachen? It's a part of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir (now divided into two Union territories — Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh), which legally acceded to India on October 26-27, 1947 and has since then been its integral part. This was endorsed by every political party in the land, and both Houses of the Indian Parliament passed an unanimous resolution on February 22, 1994 that the (then) "State of Jammu and Kashmir has been, is and shall be an integral part of India"! Has there been any change in this policy?

We can't just "pick and choose" our stand on Siachen, and it simply can't be put on the agenda for a redrawing of boundaries. This is all the more so when those involved are senior politicians, military brass or diplomats. On the contrary, defence and diplomacy must, in tandem, act as protective force multiplier to abort any attempt at withdrawal from a territory which legally, technically and politically has belonged to India since 1947?

Didn't the decisive political-cum-clinical military action of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi bring the Siachen Glacier back to India in April 1984? Can this rare achievement of India's exemplary act be diminished, diluted, or frittered away? Should India again regret the loss of its own territory at the high table of international politics after shedding soldiers' blood in hot terrain? Must New Delhi forget the January 1966 Tashkent capitulation where at the behest of a third-party host's intervention India surrendered Haji Pir Pass, which was reclaimed after much bloodshed on the battlefield? Isn't the Haji Pir still haunting and bleeding Indian soldiers owing to the "line of sight" disconnect between Uri and Poonch? Can strategic heights on a hilly terrain be handed over to a congenitally hostile neighbour on a platter? Doesn't the Siachen Glacier occupy the "strategic heights" — overlooking both Pakistan and China?

Any move to withdraw from our territory will also be a violation of the Constitution by India's rulers. The reality is, Siachen can't be a discussion point except for its acceptance and recognition as an integral/inviolable part of India. There's absolutely no scope for either kite flying on Siachen or resorting to bilateral diplomacy on, or unilateral withdrawal from, any "inhospitable" ground.

The Constitution only provides for acquisition of territory — as happened with Goa in 1961 and Sikkim in 1975 — and not for any cession of land. Yes, India did cede a small portion of West Bengal land to erstwhile East Pakistan in 1958, but each and every such act requires an amendment of the Constitution under Article 368. The Supreme Court, in the Berubari verdict in 1960, made it clear Parliament doesn't have the power to cede any Indian territory, and in the 1969 Maganbhai Ishwarbhai verdict it spelt out that "a settlement of a boundary dispute cannot be held to be cession of territory".

Siachen is not a "boundary dispute", it has been an integral part of India since 1947. It is in fact New Delhi's duty to try and get back its land which lies beyond Siachen and across the terrain of J&K and Ladakh now under the forcible occupation of Pakistan and China.

India could also profitably draw some lessons from the Chinese dragon in the way it keeps harping on reuniting Taiwan with the mainland. India has lost territory earlier and the prospect of more such losses loom larger than ever before.

Sadly, a large chunk of urban India remains clueless about our border regions. They think India's land is some sort of lucrative commercial plot comprising mainly metropolitan cities and other towns and urban areas that provide lucrative contracts for construction, cash and commerce.

You don't need much imagination to visualise the kind of mischief aimed against this country that Beijing's "wolf warrior" diplomats and its aggressive People's Liberation Army are happily conjuring up. The PLA kidnaps Indians and creates havoc in the hinterland with organised crimes. A Siachen withdrawal should, therefore, never be contemplated. Remember Kargil 1999?

Indians could profitably study each and every statement by the German naval chief, Vice-Adm Kay-Adam Schoenbach, at a New Delhi seminar on China's ceaseless perfidy and treachery against India. (He also spoke at length on President Vladimir Putin and Russia's role in Ukraine, for which he was subsequently sacked.) We should take serious note of the views of the fallen German admiral. Let China try and get some Indians sacked as well for being professional and standing up to its malice.

**Post-script:** The Army Chief appears to have had a change of heart, as his recent statement of February 3 appears to indicate. "In the present context, the ceasefire line at the Line of Control continues to hold as we negotiated from a position of strength… The northern (China) border also adequately underscored the requirement of ready/capable forces, with optimal components of boots on the ground, backed by modern tech to preserve sovereignty and integrity." A retreat at Siachen is, therefore, completely out of the question.

*The writer is an advocate practising in the Supreme Court. The views expressed here are personal.*

## LETTERS

### HARASSING BOMMAI

The nation could have done without the hijab controversy which has only served to distract the attention form the manifold problems faced by the people. The education minister of the state must clarify why girls sitting on the roads is against Indian culture. In the polarised times of today every every small incident with communal undertones is likely to flare up into a major problem. It would not at all be surprising if the entire issue was started with the sole purpose of embarrassing the CM, B. Bommai. Apparently somebody doesn't like him there. Who it is, is anybody's guess.

**Anthony Henriques**
**Mumbai**

### PRAISE THE DRAGON

**EVEN WHILE** China has proved an untrustworthy neighbour with its allyship with Pakistan and its expansionist designs, one is constrained to note the rapid progress of science and industry that have taken place in the Middle Kingdom. We all know about the successful space missions undertaken by China in recent years. China also created the artificial sun and, now, artificial snow in a water-scarce city. The Beijing Winter Games thus occupy a special place in Olympic history. With this, China looks all set to overtake the United States, Russia and Europe in technological prowess in the near future.

**Kirti Wadhawan**
*Kanpur*

### PUNJAB GAMBLE

**THIS REFERS** to the editorial, "Let us celebrate rise of Channi" (Feb. 8). If the elevation of Charanjit Singh Channi as CM in September 2021 was an accidental outcome of internal rivalries in the Congress, the party's announcement that he would continue in the post if it wins the Assembly election is a bold gamble. Entrenched social alignments in the state appear to be unravelling, and the Congress is trying to knit together a viable electoral majority, with a dalit face as its axis. Although it remains to be seen how Navjot Singh Sidhu reacts to Mr Channi's ascent, the latter is the right choice to lead the Congress.

**Sankar Paul**
*Chakdaha, West Bengal*

Dilip Cherian
**Dilli Ka Babu**

# Will ex-oil secy's appointment as regulator bring stability or crisis?

Former oil secretary Tarun Kapoor's appointment as chairman of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) has been noted with considerable interest by industry watchers. If a regulator comes from many years in the industry, he has a vested interest in this and that is what the players in the oil sector are worrying about. Those involved in the business are concerned whether their original regulator will now be a super-regulator and, will they see the influx of some fresh thinking on the sector and its issues, especially since there hasn't been much movement on the proposed sale of BPCL?

But more than anything else, seeing the strategic importance of the oil companies and the regulator to the nation, most players and investors would like to see Mr Kapoor infuse stability of business operations.

Mr Kapoor was selected in response to the government re-advertising the post of chairman, PNGRB, last November from among 13 candidates, including former ONGC chairmen Subhash Kumar and Shashi Shankar, and former director of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) G.K. Satish, among other big names.

The post had been vacant since December 2020 since Dinesh K. Sarraf completed his three-year term. Interestingly, the selection committee had picked former power secretary S.N. Sahai for the post, but the government did not confirm the appointment and the post was consequently re-advertised.

**Tarun Kapoor was selected in response to the government re-advertising the post of chairman, PNGRB, last November from among 13 candidates, including former ONGC chairmen Subhash Kumar and Shashi Shankar, and former director of IOC G.K. Satish**

### MHA TO REVAMP IB CADRE

Nearly two years after it was first recommended, the ministry of home affairs (MHA) has given the go-ahead for restructuring the Intelligence Bureau (IB) cadre. Sources inform DKB that the intention here is to help increase promotions within the cadre and streamline operations.

The ministry has reportedly approved the reduction in the entry-level, assistant central intelligence officer-II (ACIO-II), from 7,898 to 5,898, the posts of ACIO-I, deputy central intelligence officer, assistant directors, joint deputy directors and additional deputy directors have been increased to 1,558. Besides, the number of special assistants has also been increased from 3,848 to 4,290.

Undoubtedly, the restructuring is aimed at strengthening the resilience of the internal security apparatus in the face of the fast-changing environment. Perhaps no other agency in the country undertakes the wide-ranging internal intelligence collection as the IB. Since it is attached to MHA, it is entrusted with counter-terrorism intelligence as well as monitoring political and social developments and has often, therefore, been accused by political rivals of the government of following the whims and fancies of their political masters of the moment. Will the restructuring of its cadre to make the IB a better and more efficient outfit, remains to be seen. But the IB sleuths might welcome the new energy created by this shake-up.

### NO GOVT HOUSING FOR EX-BABUS IN MAHARASHTRA

The Maharashtra government is clamping down on the tendency of retired babus, especially those on an extension, to hold on to their government accommodation. Acknowledging the acute shortage of housing for officers in the state, the general administration department (GAD) has decided not to provide accommodation to exiting babus even if they manage a post-retirement government assignment. GAD deputy secretary D.P. Deshmukh has conveyed the decision to the housing department.

Sources have informed DKB that the decision has already affected at least two senior babus K. Shivaji and S.R. Jagtap, who superannuated recently but were appointed members of the MahaRera appellate tribunal. The government has taken the line that since the housing department appointed them, it can provide accommodation to them asl well. According to Mr Deshmukh, more than 70 senior transferred or retired babus have not vacated their official residences, denying serving babus their right. In many cases, the babus owe rent to the government and the GAD has not been very successful in recovering the dues. Will it be different this time around?

*Share a babu experience! Follow dilipthecherian@Twitter.com. Let's multiply the effect.*

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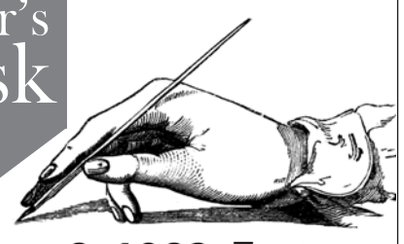
# Editorial

From Editor's Desk



## February 8, 1982, Forty Years Ago: Air Force crash

**Twenty-three military personnel and crew were killed when an Air Force Packet aircraft crashed in blinding snow and rain in the Lohi Malhar hilly area in Kathua, 136 km northeast of Jammu.**

Twenty-three military personnel and crew were killed when an Air Force Packet aircraft crashed in blinding snow and rain in the Lohi Malhar hilly area in Kathua, 136 km northeast of Jammu. Police and rescue parties, which went to the accident site, found 15 mutilated bodies. Search for more bodies was abandoned because of approaching darkness, and heavy rain and snowfall. According to a senior Air Force official, the aircraft left Pathankot in the morning for Leh with supplies of troops in forward areas and servicemen returning from leave. An official source said the crash occurred when the pilot on encountering rough weather tried to return to base but lost radio contact. A police picket which saw the aircraft crash informed the Kathua police.

Indira criticises US

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has lashed out at the US for its utter lack of understanding of the Indian position. In an interview in the latest issue of US World and News Report, Mrs Gandhi criticised Washington's decision to sell F-16 fighters to Pakistan as the latest demonstration of this lack of understanding. She charged that the sale adds "tremendously to our burdens and it has brought dangers and pressures much closer to our borders". Representatives of three Opposition parties talked of joint action rather than merger. A co-ordination committee set up by the Janata Party, the Congress (S) and the Lok Dal to discuss the modalities for their merger concluded its day-long session with the realistic plan of joint action based on a common minimum programme. Biju Patnaik, convenor of the front, said that they did not want to repeat the mistake of 1977 by talking of a merger first. The Janata Party was formed but there was no unity of mind and vision, he said.

## WILLIAM BACKS CAMILLA AS QUEEN

**Prince William (pictured middle with the Duchess of Cambridge and the Duchess of Cornwall at the premiere of James Bond film No Time to Die in September last year) was not part of the decision-making process, the Daily Mail understands, but is 'respectful' of the logic of his grandmother's decision. Sources say that while theirs was not an easy relationship at first - or indeed for a number of years after her marriage to his father - the second in line to the throne is pragmatic about Camilla's role in his father's life and, now, the future of the monarchy. 'The duke is supportive,' a well-placed palace source confirmed to the Daily Mail last night. Another emphasised that while he was not part of the final decision-making process, the prince, 39, would have discussed the issue with his father and, effectively, given his blessing. 'None of this can have been easy for him,' one insider said. 'There were huge family rows in the early stages of Charles (pictured inset with Kate Middleton) and Camilla's marriage as everyone found their feet. William didn't have the best relationship with his father back then. But he sees that Camilla had made his father happy and it is something he has come to terms with. So far, there has been no comment from Prince Harry on the weekend's developments. Left: The Queen with Camilla in 2019. Right: William with Camilla at the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations in 2016.**

## Sri Lankan Navy arrests 16 Indian fishermen

Chennai, Feb 8 (IANS) While Sri Lanka has been assuring India that they would not be troubling the Indian fishermen, the Tamil Nadu 'Q' branch police has said that 16 Indian fishermen from Rameswaram were apprehended by the Sri Lankan Navy at Deft island in the early hours of Tuesday.

According to a statement of the 'Q' branch police of Tamil Nadu, 16 fishermen and three boats were taken into custody by the Sri Lankan Navy at 2 a.m.. The Sri Lankan Navy, according to the 'Q' branch had apprehended the fishermen from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu at the Delft Island or Neduntheevu in thern Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan Navy has slapped charges of crossing the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) on the Indian fishermen, according to sources in the police.

Sixty-three Indian Fishermen from Tamil Nadu were arrested and remanded to judicial custody by the Sri Lankan Navy in December 2021, and 53 of these fishermen are still in an isolation centre of the Sri Lankan government after being released from prison.

The Sri Lankan Fisheries department has also advertised in newspapers in the Island nation on the auction of the Indian fishing boats seized some time back by the Sri Lankan authorities.

It may be noted that the Government of India had recently sanctioned a huge amount to the Sri Lankan government to support that country which was in a major debt crisis due to foreign exchange issues.

K. Jesudasan, a fishermen leader from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu while speaking to IANS said, "Sri Lankans are exceeding the limit and our fishers are voyaging into waters with much reluctance these days. The Government of India and the state government of Tamil Nadu must jointly bring a settlement to this issue.

"The Palk Straits are a small area and unintentionally, our fishermen cross over to the Sri Lankan waters. This need not be taken as a major issue and arrests and all are unwarranted. The Government of India is supporting the present Sri Lankan Government with all means and this leverage has to be taken diplomatically to bring an amicable settlement to the issues of our fishermen."--IANS

## Kenya launches national rollout of universal health plan

Nairobi, Feb 8 (IANS) Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta has launched the national scale-up of the Universal Health Coverage (UHC) which seeks to ensure that all Kenyans access quality healthcare. Kenyatta, who launched the ambitious health plan in the coastal city of Mombasa, on Monday said the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to bear the urgent need for the country to upscale implementation of the UHC. He affirmed the government's commitment to spreading the benefits of UHC across the country through the development of a focused policy to accelerate its implementation. He added that his administration has developed the UHC Policy, covering the period 2020-2030, to guide the acceleration of the progress in attaining UHC. It is part of the President's Big Four agenda comprising of food security, manufacturing, affordable housing and universal healthcare. Kenyatta said the UHC which started in 2013 with the launch of the highly acclaimed free maternity program dubbed "Linda Mama" (protect mother) currently benefits more than one million mothers annually, Xinhua news agency reported. He outlined various initiatives the government has put in place to ensure the successful implementation of UHC, including investment in health infrastructure and development of a digital health platform, to support the effective monitoring of the health sector. He added that the investments the government has made since 2013 have seen an increase of 43 per cent in public health facilities from a stock of 4,429 facilities in 2013 to 6,342 currently.

## Colour Therapy: Improving Mood And Lifestyle

By N. Lothungbeni Humtsoe

New Delhi, Feb 8 (IANSlife) In terms of colour therapy and how each colour has a significant meaning, there has been a standardisation of colours. It can have its own impact and associative memories in the new-age approach, and they can either elevate your mood or simply become a trigger.

Colour therapy has been used for health and wellness since ancient Egyptian times. Furthermore, light can be processed and perceived as colours by the eyes and brain. Nakshi Satra, Founder, In:ha Wellness explains further how colour therapy act as a mood booster and how colour therapy could help improve overall health.

How does colour therapy act as a mood booster?

Nakshi: Based on my experiences with over 3000+ clients, the human eyes and brain trigger memories, perceptions, and emotions about experiences of memories for each individual differently. As these triggers travel backwards in our minds, they cross the critical filter into our subconscious mind where the deepest of memories are all stored.

This defines our perception towards colours which can be subjective and personal. Some colours have an associative memory of safety and precaution; some might have a bitter memory associated with them. Below are a few examples to understand this well.

. A lot of clients prefer black and white tones and associate these colours with their personality. Black and white can exude feelings of power, freedom, safety and protection etc.

. Colours like red make strong statements and stand out, while blue has a calming and soothing effect and can help to increase focus.

. Green and pastel shades are often associated with nature, flora & fauna.

. Teals, greys, oranges, whites and other English pastel colours are recent trends because they break the monotony of conservative environments and regular way of life. They are appreciated because of the newness and urban freshness that they bring into our lives.

Colours also have negative associations and very subconsciously we decide to block these colours from being in our homes or wardrobes. To get rid of such negative triggers, an emotional cleanse or release as a combination can help to disassociate from such memories and emotions, and this could eventually help to open up one's colour palettes. Nakshi: Colours have a deep effect on our lives and including the right ones in our diet, homes, and wardrobes can really help to positively impact our overall health. We must constantly work on incorporating colour palettes that are associated with positive feelings into our food, homes and wardrobes.

## Indian hospitality sector witnessed a 100.3 percent YoY RevPAR growth

**By IANSlife**

New Delhi, Feb 8 (IANSlife) With improved vaccination rates and fewer travel restrictions the Indian hospitality industry is currently on an upward trend, with traveller confidence. The Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) witnessed a growth of 100.3 percent year-on-year (YoY) in Q4, 2021. The quarterly RevPAR of Q4 (October-December) was at 41.9 percent , according to JLL's Hotel Momentum India (HMI) Q4, 2021.

Whilst the latter part of Q4 started to witness some impact from the Omicron wave, last quarter (Q4, 2021) was largely the best performing period of the last year bolstered by long weekends, holidays during festivals and social gatherings. Business travel also resumed albeit in low numbers in some markets. The last quarter of 2021 (Q4 2021) also witnessed a significant increase in international arrivals as compared to the same time in the previous year

"Hotel performances across major cities in India witnessed stellar growth in Q4 2021 before the onset of the third wave of the pandemic.

Corporate travel started to witness a recovery on the back of improved confidence in the office sector as commercial real estate witnessed the highest net absorption rate over the last eight quarters. Furthermore, staycations, long weekend leisure demands, weddings, and social gatherings continued to remain the base business for the hospitality sector. Improved road infrastructure particularly to hill destinations has given impetus to road travel. This immediate recovery would not have been possible without improved confidence in the minds of travellers due to the high vaccination rates achieved by the nation. The hospitality sector is likely to recover well in 2022 even as uncertainty around different Covid variants and waves continue," said Jaideep Dang, Managing Director, Hotels and Hospitality Group, South Asia, JLL.

**Budget 2022-23:**

## Another Strong Step towards Atmanirbhar Ashtalakshmi

As India celebrates its 75th year of independence through Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, the Hon'ble Prime Minister has often spoken about setting a vision for India in its 100th year. The planning and the groundwork for Amrit Kaal needed to start from this year and the Budget for the financial year 2022-23, while brilliantly balancing fiscal and social priorities and providing limitless possibilities to unleash innovation and animal spirits in the Indian economy, has provided the right foundation for it.

Without a doubt, the Ashtalakshmi states of the North Eastern Region stand to gain tremendously from the Budget 2022-23. Envisioned as India's growth engine and gateway to ASEAN, the 8 States have remained central to the government's developmental agenda for Atmanirbhar Bharat. This Budget further brightens the path forgrowth and adds more muscle to all the developmental efforts for setting up an Atmanirbhar Arthvyavastha in the region.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has always had a special focus for the Northeast region and has been working on mission mode towards its development since 2014. Be it the first freight train connectivity in 75 years for Manipur, adding Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya to the railway map for the first time, the construction of the Bogibeel bridge - India's longest railroad bridge, the world's tallest bridge pier in Manipur (Jiribam-Imphal), the first-ever petrochemical project in the North East inaugurated in Assam, Sikkim's first Airportor the recent inauguration of the new terminal at the international airport of Agartala, North East is charting its unprecedentedcourse to growth and prosperity under his visionary leadership.

Budget 2022-23 pumps even more energy to this mission. Since 2014, this Government has spent more than Rs. 2.65 lakh crore in the North Eastern Region to accelerate its march towards growth and development. The political will towards the development of North East Region is evinced by the fact that the budget for North Eastern Region has gone up by over 110% in last 7 and half years, i.e., from 36,108 crores in 2014-15 to 76,040.07 crores allocated in FY 2022-23. In one fiscal year, i.e., from last year's 68,020.24 crores, the budgetary allocationshave risen by 12% to 76,040.07 crores. Continuing on the impetus of bridging the infrastructure gap, more than15% of this allocation has been towards Highways, Information ways, Railways and Airways (the HIRA model of development that the Prime Minister passionately espouses). In fact, for strengthening the rail transport system alone, Rs.39,000 crore have been spent by railways between 2014 and 2021 in the Northeast.

The recent Budget's launch of a new scheme for the Northeast, thePrime Minister's Development Initiative for North-East (PM-DevINE), with an initial allocation of Rs. 1,500 crore is another historic step in the rapid development journey of the Northeast. The scheme adopts a holistic approach towards development in the region and would cater to diverse developmental needs along with filling critical gaps aidingrapid employment generation and enhancing livelihood support in the region.

Among the carefully selected initial projects of PM-DevINE, the Bamboo Link Road in Mizoram and the promotion of Scientific Organic Agriculture harness the natural assets of the region for developmental goals, while, the dedicated services for the Management of Paediatric and Adult Haematolymphoid Cancers in Guwahati and the North East Centre For Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR) Livelihood Improvement Projects go a long way towards the enhancing welfare of the people of the Northeast.

Along with the much-needed impetus on the green economyin this Budget, the Parvatamala Ropeway development plan has the potential of becoming the next mass transportation revolution which is both environmentally friendly and more amenable to the difficult topography of the Northeast. This is yet another avenue for the North East region to generate new employment opportunities.

The North Eastern States hold immense strategic value, both from the security and economic point of view for India. With over 5,182 kilometersof the international border, they are thefocal point of the Government's Act East policy. The recent Budget's announcement of Vibrant Villages scheme will take development and connectivity to villages at the frontiersalong the country's borders including in the Northeast and offer equal opportunities fortheir development and growth as in the mainland villages.

The Prime Minister has rightly given the epithet to the 8 North Eastern States asas 'Ashtalakshmi' of India, for their immense inherent potential and their indispensability in India's growth story of brighter future for its billion plus population. It is time for all of us to make most ofthis progressiveand positive Budget 2022-23 and ensure giant leaps inthe growth and prosperity of the North East Region.

(G Kishan Reddy is the Union Minister of Development of Northeastern Region, Tourism and Culture and represents Secunderabad Constituency)

## Travel Differently in 2022: Stay at the Iconic Nelson Mandela House Which Has Been Converted into a Boutique Hotel

Travel has moved on from being centred around typically touristy experiences, to being something that provides perspective, enrichment and life-defining moments. Today, culture enthusiasts actively seek out places that are steeped in history and heritage. South Africa takes this engagement a step further by allowing guests to stay and immerse themselves in history at the prestigious Nelson Mandela's House – also known as Sanctuary Mandela.

Resting in a buzzing Johannesburg suburb named Houghton, is the former home of the First President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. Excitingly, the nine-room house has now been converted into an upmarket, boutique hotel with the capacity to accommodate eighteen guests.

This house was the same place that Mandela came back to after spending 18 years in the prison at Robben Island, where he had been transferred to after being imprisoned for his part in the anti-Apartheid revolutionary struggle. This is also the home where he hosted illustrious dignitaries like Bill Clinton and Michelle Obama!

True to its name, Sanctuary Mandela is surrounded by lush gardens and retreat spaces filled with perfectly curated exhibits that evoke memories of the icon. Every corner of the hotel is envisaged to provide the perfect combination of tranquillity, heritage and mindful experiences.

The renovated hotel has many objects and belongings that adorn the halls displaying Mandela's role as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, an anti-Apartheid revolutionary, political leader and philanthropist. Visitors will also find monochromatic photographs and copies of his books inside. Filled with mid-century styled furnishings, pressed-metal ceilings along with newly renovated floor-to-ceiling bay windows, the place is nothing short of a serene legacy.

Paying homage to Mandela's love of food, the hotel also offers a fine dining restaurant experience which serves his favourite dishes and his favourite Constantia wine. The hotel also offers a variety of amenities, including swimming pool, a fully serviced bar and lounge as well as several meeting rooms.

This boutique, luxury hotel manages to reflect two of the basic qualities of the beloved South African president: modesty and elegance. With the addition of the heritage it holds, visitors will find this place to be a perfect historical treat!

## Light snow in higher reaches of J&K, Ladakh during next 24 hours

Srinagar, Feb 8 (IANS) Weather improved on Tuesday in J&K and Ladakh as the India Meteorological Department (IMD) forecast light snowfall in higher reaches and cloudy sky in the plains during the next 24 hours.

An official of the IMD said light snowfall is likely to occur in the higher reaches of J&K and Ladakh while the sky would be generally cloudy in the plains during the next 24 hours.

Srinagar had 1.4, Pahalgam minus 6.2 and Gulmarg minus 9.0 degrees Celsius as the minimum temperature.

Drass in Ladakh region had minus 14.4, Leh minus 8.6 and Kargil minus 14.0 as the minimum.A

Jammu city had 8.7, Katra 7.6, Batote 1.1, Banihal minus 1.0 and Bhaderwah minus 0.1 as the night's lowest temperature. --IANS

## D'you suffer from damaged skin barrier?

**By N. Lothungbeni Humtsoe**

New Delhi, Feb 8 (IANSlife) While "skin barrier" gets slapped on products and thrown around a lot on social media, unless formulated correctly ceramides don't aid much in barrier repair. It can in fact, delay barrier repair if formulated incorrectly.

The founder of the d'you, Shamika Haldipur shares her insights on 'barrier protection'.

How do you stand out from similar product competitors?

Shamik: While there are a plethora of ceramide products in the market, not all products have been developed to mimic our skin's natural lipid ratio - the Golden Ratio of 3:1:1. In most products, ceramides have been either used in isolation or combined with cholesterol and fatty acids in the wrong ratio which actually impedes (delays) rather than accelerates the barrier recovery.

. Most products have an extremely low concentration of ceramides which provide very few functional benefits to the skin. The research done on ceramides indicates that 0.8 to 2 percent is effective to promote the recovery of the barrier. However, the ceramide complex that is commonly used in the industry yields a mere 0.015-0.05 percent or at best 0.1 percent ceramide content which is approximately 10-20X lesser than what in my defence contains.. Many ceramide products are unable to use ceramides inadequate concentration because ceramides are: (i) a very expensive ingredient, and (ii) a very thick, waxy and unstable molecule to work with. So, brands prefer to use them in lower doses to control the feel, texture, and stability of the end product. We overcame this issue in in my defence by using a patented dispersion technology that allows us to use pure ceramides in a highly stabilised form and at a high dosage while still making a very lightweight formula with a pleasant texture.

We made in my defence by using ceramides in a high dosage of 1 percent pure concentration and in the optimal ratio of 3:1:1 to ensure lipid penetration into the stratum corneum (top layer of the skin barrier) such that it actually repairs your skin barrier over time and gives it resilience and strength to defend itself on its own.

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DECCAN Chronicle

9 FEBRUARY 2022

# Don't allow hijab row to hinder girls' education

Religion should be kept a private affair of individual citizens, but that is an ideal case scenario. Whether we like it or not, elements of religious practices have become part of the culture of believers, and the harmonious co-existence of such customs with the ones of those who practise no religion is a pre-condition for a society's progress.

India is a secular democracy founded on a Constitution that assures every citizen the right to practise their religion, subject to conditions. Religion being a general term, the courts have elaborated on this constitutional proviso and brought essential religious practices under its protection.

It is in this background that one should view the controversy raging in Karnataka about Muslim girl students wearing the *hijab* (headscarf). Some colleges objected to the habit and asked the girls to stop attending lessons with headscarves on, which they protested. The issue soon took a communal turn with a section of students parading saffron shawls, saying they, too, have the right to do so. Dalit students chipped in, wearing blue dress in support of the Muslim girls. Islamists did not waste the chance, introducing the *niqab*, or dress that conceals even the face, seeking the cover of fundamental rights.

As the Karnataka high court rightly observed while hearing the petition of the girl students, every citizen of this country should go by reason, the law, and the Constitution; not passion and emotion. This is an advice to all those who have taken to violent protests and also to those who come up with whatabouteries to argue their points. They must realise that the Constitution does not mandate banishing of religion; instead, it affords people the right to practise it. The question is how to make it least obtrusive in a secular system.

**A total ban on the hijab, which Muslims claim to be an essential religious practice, will result in Muslim women either avoiding multicultural and secular institutions or, worse, becoming dropouts**

The situation as of today is that while sane persons would be busy seeking to address the question as suggested by the high court, vested interests and extremists have almost hijacked the issue. Protests against the *hijab* are taking place all across Karnataka now, and it is highly likely that it shall spread to other states, too. Political parties who have religion as their sole agenda to seek power and retain it have a lot to gain from this but rational people have every reason to worry about the future of this nation when people tend to view everything through the lens of religion and nothing but.

The Constitution and the law are made with a view to address issues as citizens of a nation, and not as enemies. It must not be done in a mechanical way in all situations; how a decision would impact the lives of law-abiding people must be a consideration the court should keep in mind. A total ban on the *hijab*, which Muslims claim to be an essential religious practice, will result in Muslim women either avoiding multi-religious and secular institutions or, worse, becoming dropouts. At the same time, the court cannot give in to the pressure of identity politics and communalists and allow each one to wear the dress of their choice. It will thus be called upon to come out with a solution that protects the right to practise religion and the right to education while refusing to yield to the demands of religious obscurantists of all hues. It should ensure that better sense prevails.

# Trudeau, Ottawa face the music

It is not just a truckers' rally named "Freedom Convoy" against a Covid vaccine mandate that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is grappling with. The protests against government overreach in tackling the pandemic appear to be an early manifestation of a larger social movement reflecting a clash between two Canadas — the urban, liberal metropolises and the vast rural swath whose people feel hardly connected with the federal government in Ottawa.

The irony is not lost as Mr Trudeau, a minority PM whose Liberal Party could win the popular vote only in urban pockets — 109 of 150 seats in the most urban of constituencies and only 34 seats of 150 of the most rural and Conservative parts — has been forced to stay in a secret location. The protests have paralysed the capital where the mayor has declared a state of emergency, the police are arresting demonstrators and the national war memorial has been fenced off after it was desecrated by urinating protesters.

Those in India mocking Mr Trudeau now after pillorying him for his earlier comments supporting Indian farmers while addressing his sizeable Canadian-Punjabi constituents on Guruparab last year might be missing the wood for the trees. It is clear as crystal that the Canadian PM has become a deeply polarising figure even as those with an anti-establishment bias are waging a battle on the streets against a mandate that affects most those truckers who have to shuttle between Canada and the United States.

The issues coming to a head in Canada could become stereotypical across democracies as they are emblematic of the larger divide between urban and rural, liberal and conservative, and the left and the right even more than the rich-poor divide. Much as the farmers of India chose the capital New Delhi as the focal point of their protests, Canadian truckers have descended on Ottawa. And one of two prominent figures who set off this cycle of massive protests by raising funds online or campaigning on TikTok has even apologised to Ottawans for choosing their city for the protests while a judge has asked the truckers to stop tooting their horns.

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Subhani

# Stand firm at Siachen: No question of glacier retreat

Abhijit Bhattacharyya

**Didn't the decisive political-cum-clinical military action of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi bring the Siachen Glacier back to India in April 1984? Can this rare achievement of India's exemplary act be frittered away?**

When the incumbent Chief of Army Staff and a former foreign secretary talk about the Siachen Glacier, it's time to take note. If India's highest-ranking serving general refers to the possible demilitarisation of the glacier, where the Indian Army has been deployed without any break since 1984, it's a serious matter. A former foreign secretary justified the move to seek a review on the grounds that "Siachen is a most inhospitable theatre and the extraordinary human and material costs it imposes on troops". So, both are not averse to the withdrawal of Indian troops on account of the "inhospitable theatre"!

Unfortunately, however, it's an idea that is hard to implement as there is no sign yet of peace, harmony and understanding with our neighbours, specifically Pakistan. True, one shouldn't fault the lofty thoughts of two public figures; yet the fact is that 1.4 billion Indians' fate can't depend solely on noble intentions. Those acting in good faith need to do some rethinking. This is all the more so at a time when our western neighbour, in tandem with the powerful, destructive Dragon to the east, are together plotting all kinds of mischief against India.

In the light of the suggestions by Gen. M.M. Naravane and a former foreign secretary, let us revisit the entire question of the glacier. Where is Siachen? It's a part of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir (now divided into two Union territories — Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh), which legally acceded to India on October 26-27, 1947 and has since then been its integral part. This was endorsed by every political party in the land, and both Houses of the Indian Parliament passed an unanimous resolution on February 22, 1994 that the (then) "State of Jammu and Kashmir has been, is and shall be an integral part of India"! Has there been any change in this policy?

We can't just "pick and choose" our stand on Siachen, and it simply can't be put on the agenda for a redrawing of boundaries. This is all the more so when those involved are senior politicians, military brass or diplomats. On the contrary, defence and diplomacy must, in tandem, act as protective force multiplier to abort any attempt at withdrawal from a territory which legally, technically and politically has belonged to India since 1947?

Didn't the decisive political-cum-clinical military action of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi bring the Siachen Glacier back to India in April 1984? Can this rare achievement of India's exemplary act be diminished, diluted, or frittered away? Should India again regret the loss of its own territory at the high table of international politics after shedding soldiers' blood in hot terrain? Must New Delhi forget the January 1966 Tashkent capitulation where at the behest of a third-party host's intervention India surrendered Haji Pir Pass, which was reclaimed after much bloodshed on the battlefield? Isn't the Haji Pir still haunting and bleeding Indian soldiers owing to the "line of sight" disconnect between Uri and Poonch? Can strategic heights on a hilly terrain be handed over to a congenitally hostile neighbour on a platter? Doesn't the Siachen Glacier occupy the "strategic heights" — overlooking both Pakistan and China?

Any move to withdraw from our territory will also be a violation of the Constitution by India's rulers. The reality is, Siachen can't be a discussion point except for its acceptance and recognition as an integral/inviolable part of India. There's absolutely no scope for either kite flying on Siachen or resorting to bilateral diplomacy on, or unilateral withdrawal from, any "inhospitable" ground.

The Constitution only provides for acquisition of territory — as happened with Goa in 1961 and Sikkim in 1975 — and not for any cession of land. Yes, India did cede a small portion of West Bengal land to erstwhile East Pakistan in 1958, but each and every such act requires an amendment of the Constitution under Article 368. The Supreme Court, in the Berubari verdict in 1960, made it clear Parliament doesn't have the power to cede any Indian territory, and in the 1969 Maganbhai Ishwarbhai verdict it spelt out that "a settlement of a boundary dispute cannot be held to be cession of territory".

Siachen is not a "boundary dispute", it has been an integral part of India since 1947. It is in fact New Delhi's duty to try and get back its land which lies beyond Siachen and across the terrain of J&K and Ladakh now under the forcible occupation of Pakistan and China.

India could also profitably draw some lessons from the Chinese dragon in the way it keeps harping on reuniting Taiwan with the mainland. India has lost territory earlier and the prospect of more such losses loom larger than ever before.

Sadly, a large chunk of urban India remains clueless about our border regions. They think India's land is some sort of lucrative commercial plot comprising mainly metropolitan cities and other towns and urban areas that provide lucrative contracts for construction, cash and commerce.

You don't need much imagination to visualise the kind of mischief aimed against this country that Beijing's "wolf warrior" diplomats and its aggressive People's Liberation Army are happily conjuring up. The PLA kidnaps Indians and creates havoc in the hinterland with organised crimes. A Siachen withdrawal should, therefore, never be contemplated. Remember Kargil 1999?

Indians could profitably study each and every statement by the German naval chief, Vice-Adm Kay-Adam Schoenbach, at a New Delhi seminar on China's ceaseless perfidy and treachery against India. (He also spoke at length on President Vladimir Putin and Russia's role in Ukraine, for which he was subsequently sacked.) We should take serious note of the views of the fallen German admiral. Let China try and get some Indians sacked as well for being professional and standing up to its malice.

**Post-script:** The Army Chief appears to have had a change of heart, as his recent statement of February 3 appears to indicate. "In the present context, the ceasefire line at the Line of Control continues to hold as we negotiated from a position of strength… The northern (China) border also adequately underscored the requirement of ready/capable forces, with optimal components of boots on the ground, backed by modern tech to preserve sovereignty and integrity." A retreat at Siachen is, therefore, completely out of the question.

*The writer is an advocate practising in the Supreme Court. The views expressed here are personal.*

## LETTERS

### JNU'S FIRST WOMAN VC

Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit succeeds M Jagadesh Kumar who recently became chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Pandit began her teaching career from Goa University in 1988 and moved to Pune University in 1993. She has held administrative positions in various academic bodies. She has also been a member of the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Council of Social Science Research and Visitor's nominee to central universities. She has guided 29 PhDs. Pandit has published three books, several booklets, contributed nearly 100 chapters in edited books and more than 180 research papers and publications in reputed journals on political science and foreign policy. She will be the first woman to head the institution. Kudos to Pandit.

**M.R.JAYANTHI,**
Coimbatore

### EASY TO CRITICISE

Playing the blame game on the floor of the house is very easy as displayed by the ex-Congress President Rahul Gandhi. But facing the task and putting them into action really put paid to our hopes. Rahul Gandhi tried his best to impress but lack of knowledge and facts put his ambitions down and he was a sitting duck. Prime Minister Modi gave a fitting reply and gave in depth of the present situation and major problems facing the country and how the government is tackling a ticklish situation with concerted efforts. Covid or no Covid, the situation was alarming and the leadership at the Centre made a 24X7 effort. As usual, Rahul Gandhi was conspicuous by his absence. It is true that criticism is the ornament of a vibrant democracy. The covid situation was handled well but the Congress government in some states tried to play spoilsport. How long will this politics continue?

**C.K.Subramaniam,**
*Chennai*

Dilip Cherian
**Dilli Ka Babu**

# Will ex-oil secy's appointment as regulator bring stability or crisis?

Former oil secretary Tarun Kapoor's appointment as chairman of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) has been noted with considerable interest by industry watchers. If a regulator comes from many years in the industry, he has a vested interest in this and that is what the players in the oil sector are worrying about. Those involved in the business are concerned whether their original regulator will now be a super-regulator and, will they see the influx of some fresh thinking on the sector and its issues, especially since there hasn't been much movement on the proposed sale of BPCL?

But more than anything else, seeing the strategic importance of the oil companies and the regulator to the nation, most players and investors would like to see Mr Kapoor infuse stability of business operations.

Mr Kapoor was selected in response to the government re-advertising the post of chairman PNGRB last November from among 13 candidates, including former ONGC chairmen Subhash Kumar and Shashi Shankar, and former director of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) G.K. Satish, among other big names.

The post had been vacant since December 2020 since Dinesh K. Sarraf completed his three-year term. Interestingly, the selection committee had picked former power secretary S.N. Sahai for the post, but the government did not confirm the appointment and the post was consequently re-advertised.

### MHA TO REVAMP IB CADRE

Nearly two years after it was first recommended, the ministry of home affairs (MHA) has given the go-ahead for restructuring the Intelligence Bureau (IB) cadre. Sources inform DKB that the intention here is to help increase promotions within the cadre and streamline operations.

The ministry has reportedly approved the reduction in the entry-level, assistant central intelligence officer-II (ACIO-II), from 7,898 to 5,898, the posts of ACIO-I, deputy central intelligence officer, assistant directors, joint deputy directors and additional deputy directors have been increased to 1,558. Besides, the number of special assistants has also been increased from 3,848 to 4,290.

Undoubtedly, the restructuring is aimed at strengthening the resilience of the internal security apparatus in the face of the fast-changing environment. Perhaps no other agency in the country undertakes the wide-ranging internal intelligence collection as the IB. Since it is attached to MHA, it is entrusted with counter-terrorism intelligence as well as monitoring political and social developments and has often, therefore, been accused by political rivals of the government of following the whims and fancies of their political masters of the moment. Will the restructuring of its cadre to make the IB a better and more efficient outfit, remains to be seen. But the IB sleuths might welcome the new energy created by this shake-up.

### NO GOVT HOUSING FOR EX-BABUS IN MAHARASHTRA

The Maharashtra government is clamping down on the tendency of retired babus, especially those on an extension, to hold on to their government accommodation. Acknowledging the acute shortage of housing for officers in the state, the general administration department (GAD) has decided not to provide accommodation to exiting babus even if they manage a post-retirement government assignment. GAD deputy secretary D.P. Deshmukh has conveyed the decision to the housing department.

Sources have informed DKB that the decision has already affected at least two senior babus K. Shivaji and S.R. Jagtap, who superannuated recently but were appointed members of the MahaRera appellate tribunal. The government has taken the line that since the housing department appointed them, it can provide accommodation to them asl well. According to Mr Deshmukh, more than 70 senior transferred or retired babus have not vacated their official residences, denying serving babus their right. In many cases, the babus owe rent to the government and the GAD has not been very successful in recovering the dues. Will it be different this time around?

*Share a babu experience! Follow dilipthecherian@Twitter.com. Let's multiply the effect.*

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THE HINDU BusinessLine
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2022

## SEZ 2.0

*SEZs have failed to live up to their billing. The Centre is right in its decision to overhaul its policy*

The Budget 2022-23 has picked up a recommendation from the Baba Kalyani Committee report, submitted in November 2018, to look into the travails of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). This pertains to converting them into industrial parks; or, to be precise, a 'framework shift from export growth to broad-based employment and economic growth'. The Budget says that the SEZ Act will be replaced by a new legislation that will enable "large existing and new industrial enclaves to optimally utilise available infrastructure and enhance competitiveness of exports". It also says that the Customs administration in SEZs will be "fully IT-driven". The reasons for expanding the scope of SEZs into more generic industrial zones are not far to seek. Their performance as export drivers has been underwhelming for over 15 years. Of the 425 SEZs approved under the SEZ Act, 2005, 376 are notified and just 265 are operational. Of late, the downturn has been pronounced. This is borne out by the significant share of sales to local markets, or domestic tariff area firms, despite the Customs duty outgo for the latter. This goes against the *raison d'etre* of SEZs. DTA sales amounted to 27 per cent of total production at ₹2.59-lakh crore in the first nine months of 2021-22, coinciding with India's export revival. They were 18 per cent of the total production in 2020-21, and 12 per cent in 2019-20. It appears that SEZs have ceased to be attractive after the tax holiday for units and developers was wound down between 2017 and 2020. There is a sense that SEZ units are rushing for the exit. Meanwhile, the proliferation of FTAs between 2005 and 2015 robbed SEZs of their sheen, as importers outside SEZs benefited from zero-rated imports without being subject to DTA-related restrictions.

Scan & Share

SEZ exports did not rise at a faster rate than overall exports even in better times, as a 2019 UNCTAD report suggests. Their share is slated to fall below the trend level of 25 per cent of overall exports. If SEZs are not working out as export hubs, it stands to reason that their infrastructure be thrown open to industries, in general, as mooted by the Budget. The rigid definition of SEZs on the basis of activity has been relaxed, in keeping with the Kalyani panel's recommendations. This should be followed up by allowing job work in the DTA space. Finance Secretary TV Somanathan noted in a post-Budget interaction with this newspaper that SEZ and DTA IT players can even be allowed to use the same physical space, as their operations can be electronically overseen. This adaptation of SEZ to the digital age is a welcome move.

An infra cluster approach makes sense, rather than one based on export subsidies which will be open to WTO challenge. The Gati Shakti programme could synergise multi-modal logistics. Rather than focus on creating new SEZs, the existing ones should first be fully utilised, including those which lie fallow after land acquisition. The Centre should carry out a review of SEZ performance and assets before moving forward.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH

# Moving to an era of better regulation

Carrying out regulatory impact assessment not only improves the quality of regulation but is also cost effective

MS SAHOO/ANURADHA GURU

Regulatory impact assessment is necessary but not sufficient to ensure better regulation. Participative democracy envisages participation of citizens in policy-making. The Law Ministry in 2014 advised consultation before any legislative proposal is submitted to the Cabinet for consideration and similar consultation for subordinate legislation.

In 2016, the Supreme Court (*Cellular Operators Association of India Vs. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India*) exhorted Parliament to make a legislation requiring regulations to be made in consultation with stakeholders. A few pieces of legislation, including subordinate ones, mandate such a consultation for making regulations.

### Growing importance

Consultation is effective where stakeholders are presented an assessment of likely impact of proposed regulation, the associated costs of compliance and enforcement, and whether it would achieve the desired objectives. The most typical methodology for such an assessment is regulatory impact assessment (RIA).The importance of RIA has been growing over the years. Many matured market economies have institutionalised it. It probably has genesis in the US in an Executive Order in 1981, which requires the executive agencies to carry out RIA for all major regulations (having annual effect exceeding $100 million).

RIA is required in the UK for any regulatory measure that impacts business above a threshold (having annual net direct cost to business exceeding £5 million). The OECD envisages seven tools for regulatory improvement and considers RIA to be the most important of them. Most jurisdictions have an agency (Better Regulation Executive in the UK, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the US, and Office of Best Practice Regulation in Australia) to monitor the quality of RIA, and accord approval for regulations, wherever required.

Scan & Share

An RIA typically carries the rationale for regulation, options — regulatory and others — considered to meet the regulatory objective, justification for the preferred choice, full range of costs, benefits, and impacts — economic, social, and environmental — tangible and intangible associated with the choice in pecuniary terms to the extent possible, availability and effectiveness of mechanism for monitoring compliance and enforcement of the choice and associated costs.

The head of the regulatory agency signs a declaration that it presents a reasonable view of the costs, benefits and impacts of the choice. Take a simplistic example. Say, the regulations presently enable electronic filing of documents. Proposal is to make such filing mandatory. A typical RIA may state that the objective is to address information asymmetry.

### Informed decisions

As documents become easily and quickly accessible, stakeholders would benefit substantially by way of informed decisions. This will reduce costs associated with storage, retrieval, and dissemination and facilitate tracking, monitoring, and processing of filings, thereby improving operational efficiency. This will, however, add to costs in terms of setting up or hiring facilities for such filing for those who are not presently filing electronically.

Such costs may be offset in terms of reduced cost of filing in the long run. The RIA would quantify most of these costs and benefits. Wherever it is difficult to quantify benefits, it will provide a qualitative description. The proposal may not have much impact on society and the economy, or any unintended consequences.

**Many economies** have institutionalised regulatory impact assessment ISTOCK

The RIA may state whether the filing platform can handle increased flow of filings and the regulator has capacity to monitor and enforce compliance. It will detail other options considered such as no regulation; regulatory incentives to electronic filers; sharing costs of electronic filing; electronic filing of select documents; promoting a market for electronic filing; etc.

RIA has several benefits. This ensures that the cost of proposed regulation is less than the cost of market failure which it intends to address, and it imposes the least costs on the regulated and the ecosystem. It demonstrates that the regulation is effective and efficient *ex ante*, considering its likely impact over its life cycle.

By facilitating comparison of the outcome *ex post* with *ex ante*, the exercise improves accountability in decision-making. By securing buy-in of the regulations, it avoids rollback and uncertainty. All these ultimately reduce the burden of regulations on business and improves quality of regulations.

### No substitute for judgment

RIA, though very powerful, does not substitute the judgment of the regulator. It may not have a clear answer to many regulatory proposals. It may not effectively capture social or invisible impacts or monetise all of them. It may suffer from technical difficulties such as limitations of data or expertise of the assessors.

It is, however, an essential tool to aid decision-making. It improves quality of decision if used in conjunction with professional advice of trusted experts/expert committees, the accumulated experience and expertise of the regulator, and consultation with stakeholders.

In India, overtime, a few expert bodies have recommended RIA. These include the Working Group on Business Regulatory Framework (Erstwhile Planning Commission, 2011), the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission (Department of Economic Affairs, 2013), the Committee for Reforming the Regulatory Environment for Doing Business in India (Ministry of Corporate Affairs, 2013), the Tax Administration and Reforms Commission (Department of Revenue, 2015), and the Expert Committee on Prior Permissions and Regulatory Mechanism (Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, 2016). A few non-governmental bodies have prepared toolkits and guidance notes to facilitate preparation of RIA.

RIA has not really taken off in India for perhaps three reasons: (a) non-availability of requisite data, (b) limited capacity of regulators to undertake RIA, and (c) hesitance to accountability. These are, however, not insurmountable. It is only a matter of time if there is interest and investment. For example, it will not take long for regulators to build up a versatile database as a by-product of their operations, minimising the need for fresh data for undertaking an RIA. Making it mandatory for governmental agencies to carry out RIA before making any policy decision, whether in the form of a legislation, subordinate legislation, notification, circular, or direction, where the net costs to the stakeholders exceeds a certain threshold, will be a big step towards better regulation (see 'The touchstones of effective regulation', *Business Line*, January 13).

This also presents a compelling business opportunity for the academia to help build capacity in the ecosystem to undertake RIA.

*Sahoo is a distinguished professor, National Law University, Delhi. Guru is an officer of the Indian Economic Service Views are personal*

# Urban revival, key to picking up rural slack

With Budget allocations cut, a jump in agri exports and higher urban remittances may help the rural economy

DHANANJAY SINHA

Consumer companies are less-than-enthusiastic about the rural economy as they point towards slowing demand conditions. While these indications appear out of sync with the recent robust government support to rural programmes, they may indeed be indicating a more complex situation.

The likelihood that the current slack will sustain is high given that government support to the rural sector has reached its peak. These include procurement and distribution of foodgrains, allocation for rural employment, and various subsidies.

Additionally, the profitability measure for the farm sector, that is, the terms of trade — which is arrived at as a ratio of price received on farm produce to cost paid — has failed to rise despite the aggressive government support to the foodgrain sector in the past three years.

For the rural sector, and particularly for the farm sector, the problem of a general rise in unemployment has led to forced absorption of the labour force displaced from the industrial and services sectors. CMIE data indicate that the farm sector absorbed a substantial, two-thirds of the 25 per cent lower post-pandemic industrial employment and 3 per cent lower sector employment in the services sector.

Hence, unless job creation in the services, industrial, and urban sectors revives rapidly enough, the drawdown in cash flow to the rural sector due to the decline in fiscal support can lead to a further fall in per capita income and real wages in rural areas.

### Lower allocations

Budget FY23 indicates a considerable easing in rural allocation, including the steep contraction in allocation under food and fertiliser subsidy and rural employment. Rural spending at ₹3.6 trillion is only 2 per cent higher than last year. The total central government spending on rural and agriculture at ₹6 trillion is budgeted to decline by 18 per cent in FY23BE.

Our estimate for agri sector terms of trade has continued to contract during 2021-22 (-0,7 per cent YoY) after rising by 8 per cent during 2019-20. The current level of ToT is still 6.5 per cent lower than 10 years back.

Reflecting the weak price realisation in the agri sectors, food inflation at the wholesale level averaged 3.1 per cent and 2.5 per cent in FY21 and FY22 YTD respectively despite the temporary supply shortage caused by the lockdown in mid-2020. These averages have been lower than the basic input costs like agri wages (averaging 4.5 per cent), and diesel and fertiliser prices.

**Farm stress** Decline in fiscal support

The moderation in India's agri sector terms of trade contrasts with the aggressive support to the foodgrain sector (wheat and rice) by the government through a combination of peak level of procurement (100 million tonnes) to production ratio at 47 per cent in FY21, higher support prices (4-year average of 6 per cent), and buffer stock at an all-time high of over 80 million tonnes.

Thus, the aggregate value of government procurement had risen to peak levels of ₹2.5 trillion in FY21E and is expected to decline as the emergency interventions made during the height of the Covid pandemic ease as normalcy returns. While the higher 130 per cent current buffer/average off-take during non-Covid years reflects surplus in the foodgrain sector itself, the inability of agri terms of trade to rise despite large government support is indicative of weak economics in the broader agri sectors.

Thus, the 28 per cent decline in food subsidy in FY23 (Budget estimate) implies that the government procurement of foodgrain can come down substantially. If the production of wheat and paddy continues to grow at the past average of 3 per cent per annum, the lessening of government procurement from the peak proportion of 70 per cent of market surplus (net of produce held for self-consumption by farmers) can cause significant weakening in realised price in the open market.

Can agriculture exports be an answer? Possibly yes. Up till now, agri exports, in quantity terms, have gained insufficiently from the surge in global prices. Indian agriculture exports growth has averaged 23 per cent during FY21 and FY22. The World Bank's agri commodity index averaged a 17 per cent rise in line with the synchronous rise in global commodity prices. Thus, in quantity terms, agri exports grew by a modest 6 per cent. This is much lower than the FY12 peak of 42 per cent.

The spike in wheat exports has been strong in recent months and has provided some support to domestic prices. Contrastingly, high exports of rice in 2021 also saw a 27 per cent decline in global prices. Thus, higher rice exports failed to benefit domestic price realisation, which is still 3.5 per cent lower than January 2019. The scope for further gains is limited as the conversion of Indian MSP in dollar terms is almost equal or higher than global export prices of wheat and rice.

The slackening rural demand outlook thus intensifies the relevance of a quick revival in industrial and urban service sectors. It can enable reversal of excess supply of rural labour, and regenerate urban remittances.

*The writer is Managing Director & Head – Strategist & Economist, Equity Research| JM Financial Institutional Securities*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

**Who will bell the cat?**

It is highly disappointing to observe that a large number of lawbreakers have shamelessly yet unabatedly been turning out to be our own lawmakers. What else could explain the recent report filed in the Supreme Court, which literally spills the beans about the fast growing criminal tendencies and antecedents of thousands of these so-called people's representatives, who not only remain safely and so 'proudly' ensconced inside the august house of Parliament but in our State Assemblies too?

How come despite the apex court already having shown the requisite roadmap, the Centre and States have miserably failed to rise to the occasion?

**Kumar Gupt**
Panchkula (Haryana)

**Labour pains**

This refers to 'Pregnant employees must not be seen as a liability' (February 8). The instance cited about the wording of medical fitness guidelines concerning employment of pregnant candidates by SBI also demonstrates how a good intent is easily killed by bad communication.

Instead of rejecting the three-month-or-more pregnant candidates, the bank wanted to select the meritorious and allow them to join four months later, thus showing concern for their health during the period. However, choice of a bureaucrat expression like "temporarily unfit" reduced the effect altogether.

In fact, public sector undertakings are more serious about following labour laws compared to many private sector companies as the former's actions are subject to continuous scrutiny by the public, the press and the members of Parliament.

An area of greater concern is the pitiable lot of pregnant women workers in the informal sector which employs 85 per cent (or 195 million) of the female workforce — they do not have access to these benefits.

**YG Chouksey**
Pune

**EV ecosystem**

This refers to 'Charged issue' (February 8). Indeed, creating charging infrastructure goes in hand with the mission of increasing EV vehicles on the road to avert pollution and reduce fuel imports. Buying an EV without battery at a lower cost and using battery swap instead of charging can be a good alternative to charging stations. Battery swap will be meaningful only when the swapped battery is a standard one.

Swapping increases the dependence on import of such batteries and will hurt the exchequer. Charging stations will reduce the need for battery swap without any harm to the original battery fixed by the manufacturer. Domestic manufacturing of batteries will augment the speed of the EV mission.

**NR Nagarajan**
Sivakasi, TN

**Organic certification**

Apropos 'APEDA finds lapses in organic certification process' (February 8). In October last, an organic certification agency was suspended for ETO (ethylene oxide) norm violation. In addition, four Indian certification agencies were blacklisted by the EU, and a penalty imposed on them.

Despite the punitive measures, the agencies seem to be ignoring due diligence in the matter of certification. If not viewed seriously now, other importing nations also may follow suit and impose severe restrictions on Indian farm exports. It is time APEDA viewed this development on a priority basis, failing which the entire farming community may face a backlash.

**Rajiv Magal**
Halekere Village, Karnataka

**Roping in private sector**

This refers to 'Private sector must join hands with govt' (February 8). There is a lot of talent in the private sector, which can be well-utilised for the development of the nation/economy. However, due to rampant corruption in government, people of integrity keep away from government organisations.

The Modi government should set up an expert panel of advisors for each ministry. However, such an advisory panel will remain merely on paper if it is not given responsibilities and powers. It should directly report to the PMO, to avoid any bottlenecks or roadblocks.

**Veena Shenoy**
Thane

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# Budget and GST

## It has been a mixed bag for taxpayers

MOHAN LAVI

The dissection of GST provisions in the Budget should be done in two parts — the speech of the Finance Minister and the proposed amendments to GST laws.

The difference between the two is quite stark — the Budget speech waxes eloquent on how GST has been a success while the amendments continue to impose further restrictions on availing input tax credit and filing of returns. In a rare occurrence, the Finance Minister deviated from the written script and announced extempore that GST returns for January 2022 have come in at ₹140,000 crore — an all-time record.

The figure does look high if one takes into account the fact that a good population of taxpayers was either down with Omicron or recovering from it in January 2022. It is clear that artificial restrictions on input tax credit (mandating taxpayers to get credit only on their input invoices that show up in GSTR 2B) and aggressive tax collections by the Department (pay now, rest later) have contributed to the record revenue collections.

These numbers have probably prompted the Finance Minister to estimate an almost 16 per cent increase in GST to ₹660,000 crore in the Budget Estimates for 2022-23. The Budget Estimates for 2022-23 should be met with a stronger dose of the same medicine — restrictions and aggressive assessments. The Budget speech also highlighted the fact that GST laws have now become progressive and fully IT-driven — a fact that many taxpayers and their advisers who visit the Department daily would not agree with.

### The Amendments

The proposed amendments to GST laws are a mixed bag of beneficial and not-so-beneficial proposals. Taxpayers could risk losing their registration if they do not file their returns for a period of three months (Section 29).

One of the beneficial clauses is an extension of the time limit for issuing credit notes from September to November of the financial year. While welcoming this provision, the only question from taxpayers would have been "Why not December?". Similarly, the due dates to rectify errors in furnishing of returns has also been extended till November.

The "matching concept" that was proposed when GST was introduced never really took off. Budget 2023 nips this in the bud by amending the sections that mandated a two-way communication process. In short, taxpayers can only get input tax credit on the invoices that are both in their books of account as well as auto-populated in GSTR 2B. It has almost become usual a habit for Budgets to introduce some provisions with retrospective effect.

The Tax Department has been showing and attempting to explain to taxpayers across the country Section 50(3) of the CGST Act which prescribes an interest of 24 per cent for undue or excess claim of input tax credit. The Section has also brought in some decent revenues. Dreaming of a fortune, the Budget makes the Section applicable from July 1, 2017. They also made sure that similar amendments are made in the SGST and UTGST Acts. Late fees are going to be levied for delays in filing returns.

Annual Budgets are not expected to make major announcements as far as GST amendments are concerned — that is the job of the GST Council. With Council meetings becoming a rarity, annual budgets can be used to bring in amendments that cannot wait.

Budget 2023 has missed a trick in not taking a cue from the Direct Taxes provisions in the same Budget as far as reducing litigation is concerned and extending the same to GST. In GST, different jurisdictional Authorities for Advance Rulings (AAR's) have given contrary opinions on the same query. Budget 2023 could have brought in a structure to plug this issue. Take more, give less could well become a theme for Annual Budgets.

*The writer is a chartered accountant*

# Pump priming the economy with credit

## Banks must focus on lending to small and micro enterprises given their employment potential

K SRINIVASA RAO

Despite considerable improvement in the asset quality, provision coverage ratio (PCR) and capital adequacy ratio (CAR) of banks, credit growth continues to be far from desired levels, particularly at a time when the economy struggling to revive in midst of the pandemic's third wave.

The CAR of banks improved from 14.8 per cent in March 2020 to 16.3 per cent in March 2021. CAR of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) improved from 12.9 per cent to 14 per cent during the period. The gross non-performing assets (GNPAs) improved from 8.2 per cent in March 2020 to 7.7 per cent in March 2021. The GNPAs of PSBs had gone down from 10.3 per cent to 9.1 per cent during the corresponding period.

The improvement may partially be due to the restructuring of loans permitted by the RBI due to Covid induced stress. As per ICRA's estimates, 60 per cent of the total restructuring of ₹1.0 trillion under Covid 1.0 was accounted for by corporates and the balance (or ₹0.4 trillion) by the retail and MSME segments. Hence, the restructuring under Covid 2.0, which was available for retail and MSME borrowers added on to the stock of restructured assets under Covid 1.0 cumulatively lowering GNPAs.

It is also noteworthy that the corporate sector has deleveraged its balance-sheet in the last two years and improved the repayment of loans. The fear of invocation of the Insolvency and bankruptcy Code (IBC) by banks has also worked in improving asset quality of banks. Due to improved provision, the net NPAs (NNPAs) of banks went down from 2.8 per cent to 2.4 per cent while PSBs' bad debts went down from 3.7 to 3.1 per cent reflecting improved PCR. But these improvements have not been reflected in increased off-take of credit so far.

### Debilitating credit growth

Credit growth continues to be sluggish at 6.7 per cent as on December 31, 2021 with no perceptible sign of revival. The quarterly RBI statistics indicate that credit growth was 7 per cent during Q2 of FY22, out which PSBs posted an abysmal growth of 3.7 per cent as against industry average of 7.4 per cent while private peers posted a growth of 10.9 per cent.

As a result, a large number of low and medium end business entities connected to PSBs are scouting for support to come out of the pandemic crisis. On the whole, the credit growth has decelerated over previous two years, largely reflecting muted demand conditions compounded by risk aversion. The worst sufferers have been the micro small and medium entrepreneurs (MSMEs) borrower segment.

The RBI monthly data on credit flow of November 2021 shows that credit to agriculture sector during November 2019-20, 2020-21 increased from 7 per cent to 10.4 per cent while credit to MSME was fragile at 0.7 per cent which reached 3.8 per cent, much below any other sector during the two-year period.

Credit to services sector also fell from 8.2 per cent to 3.6 per cent. Personal loan segment was however a bright spot with credit growth rising from 9.2 per cent to 11.6 per cent. Lenders are more reluctant to reach out to low ticket loan segment which worsens the plight of entrepreneurs at the bottom of the pyramid.

Credit growth turned buoyant in the third quarter of the current fiscal by a wide margin at ₹3.5 lakh crore as against a steep decline by ₹2.2 lakh crore in previous fiscal indicating corporate sector plans for capacity expansion and increase capacity utilisation across sectors.

**Credit booster** Micro and small entrepreneurs are still starved of formal credit PICHUMANI K

According to the latest SBI Ecowrap research report, credit growth had shown a visible expansion in Q3 of FY22 with incremental credit to deposit (CD) ratio reaching 133 per cent.

According to S&P Global Ratings, as the country's economy recovers, the demand for credit could increase. Faster loan growth will improve the asset quality further and normalise credit costs over the next 12-18 months. With favourable financing conditions prevailing, and a powerful economic rebound under way with with largely positive credit momentum though downside risks cannot be ruled out due to new Covid variants.

With results of Q3 of FY22 ticking in, credit growth is showing some early signs of improvement though the industry level credit growth is still languishing in single digit. HDFC Bank had posted a credit growth of 16.4 per cent while ICICI Bank posted 16 per cent growth. The retail sector has been the big beneficiary with ICICI Bank retail credit growth reaching 19 per cent while HDFC Bank registered 13.3 per cent growth.

Kotak Mahindra Bank posted a credit growth of 18 per cent and Federal Bank 12 per cent. Among PSBs, Canara Bank posted credit growth of 9.3 per cent year-on-year by December 2021. The trends of Q3 results reflects improved strengths of banks with better profitability which can again flow back to improve CAR. With Bad Bank becoming fully functional soon, banks should be in a better position to focus on lending.

### The way forward

With Omicron's impact on the economy being minima, demand for credit is set to improve. The next priority of banks obviously should be to accelerate flow of credit to industry to speed up revival of the economy.

Credit flow to MSMEs needs priority as livelihood of masses are connected more to the sector. The MSME entrepreneurs need to be brought into the formal financial system and all stakeholders including non-government agencies (NGOs) should persuade them to borrow and repay bank loans to maintain continuity.

The increasing depth of financial and digital inclusion built in the last few years should be harnessed well for deeper credit out reach. The corporate sector and large borrowers can access funds from multiple sources but the small and marginal entrepreneurs with high employment intensity have no source for funding. Small finance banks and PSBs should work in tandem using the co-origination model and collaborate with non-banks to reach out to lower borrower segments.

Use of technology and developing suitable infrastructure for automation of lending and recovery operations can bring down the costs making even low-ticket loans viable and sustainable. In gearing up for gradual but inevitable normalisation of interest rate trajectory, inflation and liquidity management, banks should steadily focus on reviving credit risk appetite. It can improve profitability and borrower outreach and help in the economy's revival .

*The writer is Adjunct Professor, Institute of Insurance and Risk Management – Hyderabad. Views expressed are personal*

SHORT TAKE

# Severe sanctions on Russia may hit ratings: Fitch

New possible severe sanctions against Russia could have an adverse impact on its sovereign rating and the banking sector, Fitch rating agency said on Tuesday.

Tensions between Moscow and the West have intensified recently as Russia amassed troops on its border with Ukraine,while western leaders threatened to slap fresh sanctions on Russia if it invades Ukraine.

Moscow denies such plans, saying it has the right to move its army within its territory as it deems necessary.

"Our base case is that new sanctions would not be sufficiently severe to warrant negative rating actions, but the risk of this scenario has become more significant in recent weeks," Fitch said.

Among sanctions that the West is considering against Russia are the suspension of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, blocking Russia's access to global electronic supplies, penalties against Russian banks and government debt as well as sanctions on individuals.

Measures with a larger sovereign credit impact include preventing systemic banks and corporates from transacting in US dollars or accessing the international payments system, or broad-based energy market sanctions disrupting exports, Fitch said.

Russia has a 'BBB' sovereign rating with a 'Stable' outlook from Fitch and comparable ratings from Moody's and S&P, which helped Moscow to borrow money on global markets in 2021.

"The biggest impact on banking sector creditworthiness would be if sanctions impaired large state-owned banks' ability to execute foreign-currency payments, particularly through banning dollar transactions," Fitch said.

Tensions between Russia and the West have already dented Russian bonds, stocks and the rouble, while also affecting other economies in the region.

Last week, Fitch revised its outlook on Ukraine to 'stable' from 'positive', citing the likelihood of a protracted period of tensions .

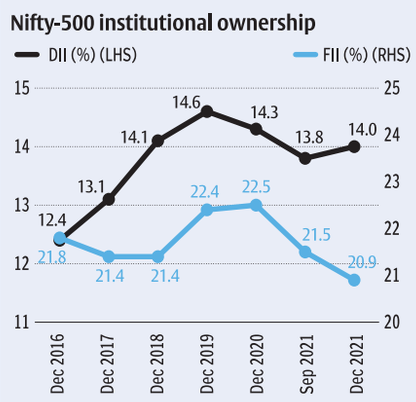
REUTERS

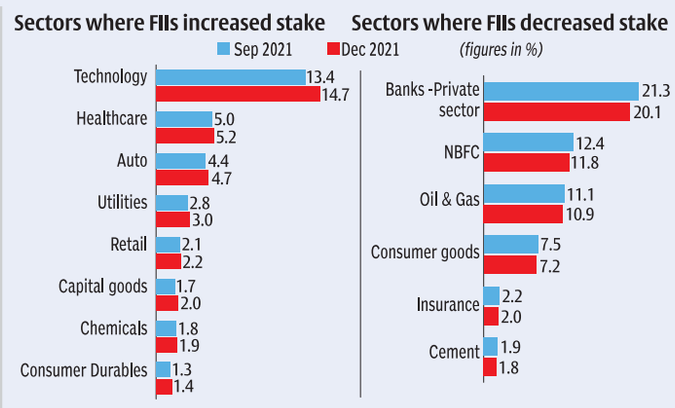
VISHAL BALABHADRUNI

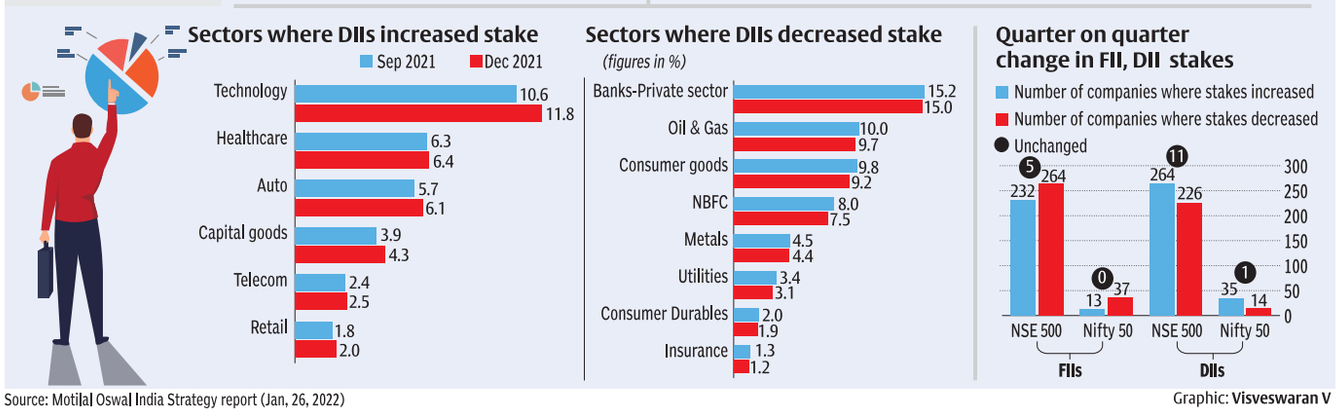
STATISTALK

# Institutions up technology bet

*In the recently concluded December 2021 quarter, Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) pared their overall exposure to the Indian market, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) raised bets. Technology is one sector where both FIIs and DIIs remained bullish. Here is a look at the key sectors and the trend of institutional ownership.*




Source: Motilal Oswal India Strategy report (Jan, 26, 2022)

Graphic: Visveswaran V

BusinessLine
TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY

FEBRUARY 9, 2002

**Zuari-Chambal bids for Paradeep Phos**

The K.K. Birla promoted Zuari-Chambal group is understood to have submitted a joint bid for acquiring 74 per cent of the Government's stake in Paradeep Phosphates Ltd (PPL), according to sources. Four companies had completed their due diligence of the company including Oswal Chemicals and Fertilisers Ltd, Tata Chemicals Ltd, Zuari-Chambal group and the public sector Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilisers Ltd. The bid submitted by the Zuari-Chambal group will be evaluated by the evaluation committee and the inter-Ministerial Group.

**Chhabrias to up overseas stake in Falcon**

The Dubai-based M.R.Chhabria group has decided to increase the overseas holding in Falcon-Tyres Ltd to 100 per cent of the issued and paid-up equity capital of the company. The group currently holds around 78 per cent stake in it. Jumbo World Holdings Ltd, Dubai, controlled by NRI businessman, Mr Chhabria, has applied to the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) for acquiring 18,38,825 shares of Falcon Tyres, constituting 30.65 per cent of the company's paid-up equity capital, held by group company Mather and Platt, at the ruling market price.

**Rakesh Mohan proposals for Rlys shelved**

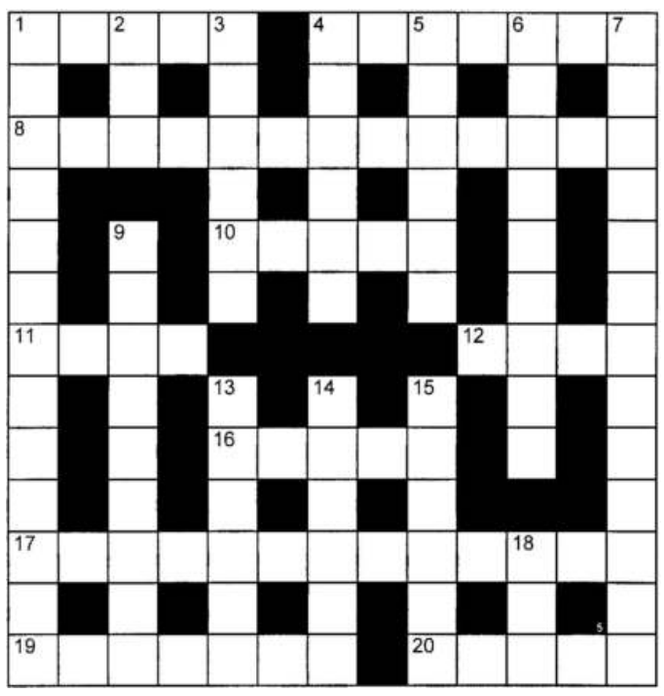
The Railway Minister, Mr Nitish Kumar, today made it clear that it will not be feasible to implement reform measures recommended by the Rakesh Mohan Committee - corporatisation of production units, revamp of the Railway Board, recast of railway accounts into company format - in the near term. The committee's recommendation on tariff-rebalancing through a substantial hike in second-class fares may not pass muster either. Indications are that there will only be a modest hike in rail passenger fares and freight rates may not be tinkered with.

# BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2060

## EASY

**ACROSS**
01. Fiction, myth (5)
04. The female side (7)
08. Dictionary-maker (13)
10. Flowers (5)
11. Go without food (4)
12. At one time (4)
16. Way taken in travelling (5)
17. Painter of a certain school (13)
19. Cultivated plots (7)
20. One under age (5)

**DOWN**
01. Sympathy (6-7)
02. Carton (3)
03. Repeat performance (6)
04. Synopsis, abstract (6)
05. Thin on the ground (6)
06. Followers, partisans (9)
07. One marrying for wealth (7-6)
09. Canine disease (9)
13. Mourn (6)
14. Blasphemes (6)
15. Amendment, transformation (6)
18. Electrically charged particle (3)



## NOT SO EASY

**ACROSS**
01. In such a story animals and objects may be humanised (5)
04. I'd turned to those working for firm on Mother's side (7)
08. Echo, relax grip, get broken up : he'll find words for it (13)
10. 'It was _____, _____, all the way' (Browning) (5)
11. Clock is that shows time before it's due to go without (4)
12. There's no going back to capture both ends at one time (4)
16. The way one goes out, re-embraced (5)
17. Stamp and sit around for an artist (13)
19. Red nags run riot in places with beds in them (7)
20. Ronald, I am returning as the younger brother at school (5)

**DOWN**
01. Chap, being sensible of something, shows sympathy (6-7)
02. Bovine leader, bovine creature and transport for horses (3)
03. Some Flamenco requires a repeat performance (6)
04. Deal with food intake like a summary (6)
05. Manage to do without taking in sulphur, there being little of it (6)
06. Followers who stick – nuts, if non-u (9)
07. Being in favour of melody, chaser is seeking wife with money (7-6)
09. Paint canine sickness (9)
13. Lament the wrong rig being given to Woman (6)
14. Nothing missing from stages of meal but the imprecations (6)
15. Shape again a school for correction (6)
18. It's a little bit charged when number one turns up (3)

**SOLUTION: BL Two-way Crossword 2059**

**ACROSS** 1. Put up 4. Signals 8. Carnation 9. Two 10. Located 12. Knot 14. Scandal 17. Ibis 18. Swollen 20. Inn 21. Replenish 23. Serpent 24. Sweep
**DOWN** 1. Peculiarities 2. Thrice 3. Practice 4. Ski 5. Gone 6. Acting 7. Sportsmanship 11. Dunes 13. Baroness 15. Winner 16. Sluice 19. Free 22. Pot

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The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

# Decoding the UP manifestoes

The BJP's and SP's documents reveal farm and jobs are the main issues. Identity matters too

Employment, agriculture, safety for women and better law and order, targeted delivery of subsidies and bolstering of infrastructure. These appear to be the primary issues shaping the election season in Uttar Pradesh (UP), if the manifestoes released by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its primary challenger, the Samajwadi Party (SP), are anything to go by.

Both documents, released on Tuesday, underline three issues. One, rural distress and agricultural slowdown. For the BJP, this can be ameliorated through mega irrigation schemes, expanding buying at State-regulated support prices and bettering payment schedules. For the SP, which hopes to benefit from the yearlong protests against three now-scrapped farm laws, the remedies include reducing the debt of cultivators, more procurement and cheap loans, and free giveaway of fertiliser and seeds. Two, both parties see resentment over unemployment as a big concern and are looking towards targeted subsidies to provide a healing touch. The BJP, which triumphed in the past three elections in UP on the back of improved delivery of welfare schemes and visibly improved quality of rural life, promises to give jobs, or self-employment opportunities and double incomes. This is supplemented with piped water, subsidised housing, free gas cylinders, welfare payouts and free tablets or smartphones. The SP makes similar pledges of I-T jobs, monthly pensions for worker and social groups, free laptops and an urban job guarantee scheme. Three, law and order is a priority for both. The BJP, which has made law and order an election plank, promises to make roads safer for women, establish anti-corruption units, strengthen its controversial law against forced conversion and establish anti-terrorist commando centres. The SP, which alleges that the action on criminals was biased by caste allegiances, has promised a policy of zero tolerance of hate crimes against women, minorities and Dalits, a group it hopes to wean away.

Elections are rarely decided on single issues. Conventional narratives such as caste and faith blend with livelihood concerns, and macro frames of reference such as Hindutva, secularism or social justice are not enough to explain the voting choices. It is yet unclear who has the edge in this election but the manifestoes make it clear that concerns of jobs, safety and a better quality of life, combined with that old staple, identity, will determine the victor.

# What Channi's anointment signals

Call it the politics of caste or class. In anointing Charanjit Singh Channi as its chief ministerial candidate in poll-bound Punjab, the Congress attempted to strike a balance between the two paradigms of identity politics in keeping with its electoral calculations in the state, and beyond. Left to itself, the Congress high command would have fought the Punjab elections under a collective leadership. But, an intense tussle between Mr Channi and state Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu over chief ministerial sweepstakes, coupled with the Aam Aadmi Party naming its sole Lok Sabha Member of Parliament from the state, Bhagwant Mann, for the top job, forced the party to change tack barely two weeks before the February 20 contest.

Even before Rahul Gandhi's formal announcement this past Sunday, incumbent Channi's naming was a foregone conclusion, unlike his unexpected elevation in September last when he replaced Captain Amarinder Singh as the first Dalit chief minister (CM) in Punjab's political history. That was a coming of age moment for Mr Channi and Punjab's 32% Scheduled Caste population. Since then, Mr Channi, a Sikh face from the Ramdasia sub-caste, has assiduously played on his humble origins to shore up his image as an *aam aadmi* (common man). That has helped him strike a wider chord beyond the caste identity while consolidating his sway in the fragmented Dalit communities, a crucial swing vote in the poll matrix. Mr Channi was a fortuitous find and as an electoral asset helps the Congress signal its intention of empowering marginalised communities beyond the northern state. To resurrect its fortunes in a country where its traditional base of poor and weaker groups has eroded, however, the party will need a lot more than a face.

# How to build a new innovation structure

The Rama Rao-Hamied-CSIR bond made HIV/AIDS drug accessible. To succeed, they broke the walls between scientific institutions, researchers and industry. This must now happen routinely

K VijayRaghavan

India is one of the world's largest producers of what are called generic drugs. When pharmaceutical companies develop new drugs, they usually patent them. When patents expire, it is possible for other manufacturers to make the equivalent drug and market it. This is the niche Indian companies have very effectively occupied.

This has been a difficult accomplishment and a result of the intelligence, zeal and commitment of individuals, institutions, and the industry. Equivalence with branded drugs, high standards, and quality control are vital for acceptance. There is arguably a no better example of this than how Yusuf Hamied of Cipla provided the world with an affordable cocktail of anti-HIV/AIDS drugs.

Sometime in 1988, AV Rama Rao, then at the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research's (CSIR) National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) in Pune, came across a news item about a 13-year-old boy dying due to HIV/AIDS. Rama Rao decided to act. Azidothymidine (AZT) was the only drug available at the time and was extremely expensive. Rama Rao improved on the known process and approached Hamied, who he knew well from an earlier collaboration.

"My friend at the National Chemical Laboratory was a gentleman called Dr Rama Rao; he assisted us with the development of many raw materials. He is still very active today, even at the age of seventy-eight [still active at 87 now], and I am still in touch with him. One day in 1991, Rama Rao came to me and said, 'Yusuf, I've developed a synthesis for AZT, zidovudine, and the government has allowed me to collect the starting material beta thymidine, which can be imported without duty in India'," said Hamied in a 2013 interview to Tarun Khanna as part of the book Leadership to Last: *How Great Leaders Leave Legacies Behind*, by Khanna and Geoffery Jones.

Rama Rao had also applied to the drug controller for review and a permit for manufacturing. Cipla started distributing this drug at only $1 a tablet, many times lower than the international price. Soon Cipla added other drugs to make a cocktail, again for $1 a day, saving millions of lives all over the world. While other industries were potential competition, the matter was one of astuteness in taking the business leap and of trust in Rama Rao's daring. Hamied said, "If Rama Rao wouldn't have come to me with this in 1991, I might not have taken it up."

Rama Rao (born 1935) was one of 12 siblings and grew up in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Education meant the hope of a job, and failure meant poverty. As a chemistry student, employment as a demonstrator in the same college was a lifetime sinecure. But Rama Rao left that and went to Mumbai for his PhD at the university's Institute of Chemical Technology (ICT), a great institution. He then went to NCL, another great institution, where Raghunath Mashelkar was the director when Rama Rao's Cipla interactions took place. Rama Rao now runs AVRA Laboratories that do research and development of active pharmaceutical ingredients.

Hamied's life could not have been more different. His Indian father and Lithuanian mother met in pre-war Vilnius, now in Lithuania, where he was born in 1936. Hamied studied chemistry too, did his undergraduate studies and PhD in Cambridge, England. Today, he is also well-known as a benefactor of research and collaborations between India and the United Kingdom.

The story of how a young man from Guntur whose spirit and drive matured in great institutions and made him seek out motivated scientist-industrialists needs to be heard by scientists, bureaucrats, and youth. It is a special Indian love story.

**The story of how Rama Rao's (extreme right) spirit and drive matured in great institutions and made him seek out motivated scientist-industrialist Yusuf Hamied (second from right) needs to be heard by all** ANI

Much of this happened through turns of fate, individual motivation, and institutional permissiveness. This must now happen routinely and freely, for which enabling processes of collaboration between institutions, with universities, and with the industry must be absorbed and implemented. Top national laboratories of CSIR (NCL, Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, Central Drug Research Institute), Mumbai University's ICT, the department of pharmaceutical's National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research, and pharma departments in universities must have collaborate in research that complement their strengths while valuing their diverse approaches. Early-stage research also depends heavily on computational approaches. Tools for this need to be developed, and we must not only import plug-and-play applications. For drug development to move from generics to innovation animal trials and "first-in-human" trials will have to be amplified here, in partnership with the industry.

Our strengths in the organic chemistry of generic drug development have come from the efforts of several scientists, usually determined men working on difficult problems. Determined women — such as Asima Chatterjee (1917-2006) and Darshan Ranganathan (1941-2001) for example — have faced greater odds and yet excelled. The next generation of drug innovators needs greater diversity.

We have a thriving drug and pharma industry, with dozens of companies such as Cipla.

We have international companies investing in India for chemistry and computational approaches to drug discovery. All of these are staffed by talented Indian students. On these broad shoulders, we can build a new structure of innovation and discovery, which is globally competitive and original. There will be many more triple bonds of researchers, institutions, and industry.

*K VijayRaghavan is the principal scientific adviser to the Government of India. In this column, we celebrate the 75th year of our Independence and remember our great scientists, institutions, and scientific achievements even as we introspect and look to the next 25 years*
*The views expressed are personal*

# Putin is forcing a third reordering of Europe

Rakesh Sood

2022 has begun on an ominous note with apprehensions of a war breaking out in the heart of Europe. The immediate provocation is the presence of at least 100,000 Russian soldiers engaged in ostensible winter exercises on the border of Ukraine and another 35,000 in Belarus. January witnessed frenetic diplomacy between the leaders of Russia, the United States (US), France, the United Kingdom (UK); meetings of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), European Union (EU) and Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and yet, tensions run high.

What is at stake is not only Ukraine but also the redrawing of Europe's security map. The first reordering in the 20th century was in 1945, the result of an enormously destructive World War II. The UN was created. Respecting the territorial boundaries of sovereign states and non-interference in internal affairs became the bedrock for preventing wars in Europe.

However, it was a bipolar world with two hegemons, the US and the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Europe was divided. The Soviet Union-led military alliance (Warsaw Pact) dominated the Eastern Bloc, while West Europe came under NATO and the US' extended nuclear umbrella. Germany was bifurcated into a Federal Republic of Germany (West) and German Democratic Republic (East) with the NATO-Warsaw Pact dividing line passing through the heart of Berlin.

A second reordering of Europe was peaceful and triggered by the coming down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 followed by the unification of Germany, East European and Baltic states coming out of the Soviet shadow and finally, the break-up of the USSR into Russia and 14 other independent countries in end-1991. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved. However, in Putin's Russia, there is growing resentment that the second reordering exploited a weakened Russia. Convinced that the Western objective is to keep Russia down, President Putin is attempting a third reordering of Europe, and Ukraine is the catalyst that has triggered the crisis. At its heart lies the question: Has the West reneged on its promise not to expand NATO?

In 1989, NATO consisted of 16 countries. After the Berlin Wall came down, US secretary of state James Baker met Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990, urging him to let East Germany go. Gorbachev declared that an eastward expansion of NATO was unacceptable. In return for letting East Germany go, Baker suggested that NATO's military jurisdiction would not be expanded eastwards, an assurance reiterated by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl the following day.

Months later, on September 12, 1990, the two Germanys and the four occupying powers of Berlin — France, the UK, the US and USSR — signed the 2+4 agreement that no foreign forces or nuclear weapons would be stationed in Berlin or East Germany. This agreement cleared the way for German unification on October 3 and Germany has adhered to it.

During the following months, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in East Europe, and Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the Baltics raised independent flags one after another. By December 1991, even Ukraine and Belarus had exited the Soviet embrace.

Russia became the successor State under President Boris Yeltsin and Gorbachev faded into history. Unable to forget the heavy yoke of the USSR, the newly independent states now wanted the West to guarantee their sovereignty against future Russian interventions.

During the early 1990s, the US remained conscious of the Baker-Gorbachev understanding. President Bill Clinton famously stated that the US would not draw a new line in Europe. He initiated a Partnership for Peace programme for all former Warsaw Pact countries. Even Russia joined and in 1997, a NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed.

Two years later, flush with victory in the Balkans and with NATO now undertaking "out of area operations", Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were admitted to NATO, followed by seven more erstwhile Soviet bloc members in 2004 during George Bush years and two each during Barack Obama and Donald Trump periods, taking NATO membership to 30. The cautionary principle that had guided President Bush and his secretary of state Baker that "the cost of expansion goes up as NATO moves closer to Russia" was forgotten in the intoxicating hubris of the US' unipolar moment.

The first warning signs came over a decade ago. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, President Putin raised the issue of security guarantees from the US and NATO. However, the 2008 NATO Summit Declaration opened the doors for Georgia and Ukraine. Months later, citing Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's actions in South Ossetia as a grave provocation, Russia intervened and took over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In 2013, protests against the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich led to the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014; here, Sevastopol hosts the Russian Black Sea naval fleet, providing it access to the Mediterranean Sea and Russian bases at Latakia and Tartus in Syria.

The fact is that Ukraine is not just any other East European nation; it has been part of Russia for over 600 years and last July, Putin authored an article, *"On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*, drawing clear red lines.

Neither the US nor Russia want a conflict. Europe is struggling for economic recovery. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is facing domestic challenges, French President Emmanuel Macron has a difficult re-election in April and German Chancellor Olaf Schulz is yet to make his presence felt. The frenetic diplomacy is proof that all key players are seeking a way out.

Putin has succeeded in focusing Western attention and laid down a set of demands for security guarantees from both the US and NATO. But he has also rejuvenated NATO. A reordering of the European security map is underway; the diplomatic challenge is to achieve it without a destructive war.

*Rakesh Sood, a distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation, is a former diplomat who has served as India's ambassador to France and PM's special envoy for disarmament and non-proliferation*
*The views expressed are personal*

{ MANSUKH MANDAVIYA } HEALTH MINISTER

About 67% in the age group of 15-18 years have been vaccinated so far... The future decision [to vaccinate those below 15] will be taken based on the expert group's suggestions.

# In UP, a realignment of not just parties, but also communities

Badri Narayan

Assembly elections matter in a democracy because they determine the future trajectory of a state, the fate of its people, and, therefore, the nation. The stakes become even higher if the state in question is Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous province and an electoral highway to the *singhasan* (throne) of power in Delhi. This has been an unusual election — held in the shadow of the pandemic, with muted physical campaigning and a focus on social media.

And yet, at its core, the election will be determined by the clash of two age-old narratives. The first is performance and development, pivoting on the claims of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of having delivered on its poll promise of *Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas* (equitable development for all). The Opposition will hope to convince the electorate that the BJP failed to control price rise, provide jobs to young people and curb atrocities and crimes, especially against women and marginalised communities. The suffering wrought by the second wave of Covid-19 will be a looming factor — the deaths in families is certainly a part of people's memories — but it is still unclear whether it will translate into anti-incumbency at the local or state level.

The second narrative is a battle between Hindutva and caste. The BJP is projecting "*samagra Hindutva* (inclusive Hindutva)" to mobilise all Hindu castes under a religious umbrella while the Opposition is trying to corral support under caste-based political identities, first developed during the Mandal moment in the 1990s. Though important, this Mandir vs Mandal narrative appears to be supplementary to the development narrative and not the main determinant in deciding the voter's choice.

Both sides are trying to expand their social alliances — the BJP by projecting Hindutva and the Opposition on caste identity-based mobilisation. The Congress is attempting a third form of mobilisation, based on social identities such as gender, but the effort appears nascent and needs time to evolve.

The BJP has organised its campaign around Prime Minister Narendra Modi and chief minister Yogi Adityanath) factor by projecting the former as the development messiah and the latter as the strong-on-law-and-order administrator. The Samajwadi Party (SP), which is seen as the main challenger, hopes to burst the second myth by saying that only some communities bore the brunt of the punitive action. Even if this sticks, it may help the BJP because some Hindu communities may appreciate such selective action, and see this as part of the Hindutva appeal.

In the past five years, the BJP created a large pool of support by efficiently delivering welfare to people, keeping in touch with them, and hoping to transform them from grateful, but politically fickle, beneficiaries to loyal vote bases. If the BJP succeeds, it will be on the basis of this new configuration in electoral politics.

The challenge for the SP, hamstrung in previous polls by its limiting social coalition of Yadavs and Muslims, is more conventional. It is hoping to attract smaller backward communities by stitching alliances with smaller caste-based outfits such as Rashtriya Lok Dal, Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party, Mahan Dal, and Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), and welcoming rebel BJP leaders to the party.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is contesting this election on a *bahujan* to *sarvjan* strategy (adding other communities to its traditional vote bank of Dalits and some backwards) and will hope to not lose its loyal base, even if it doesn't add more to it. The party has yet not been able to create any *hawa* and that might be due to its relatively weaker social media and digital footprint.

Every election creates its compulsions, and forces realignments of not just parties but also communities. So, in many ways, it's not only a political phenomenon but also a social one — this is why every party organises a Dalit meeting, a *prabudh warg* (proxy for Brahmin and other upper castes) conference or a *samajik samvad* (for middle and occupational castes). March 10 will tell us which party has managed to convince the largest number of communities to entrust their fate in their hands.

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*The views expressed are personal.*

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REPORTAGE | TALKING POINTS | IDEAS | INSIGHT | THE BOTTOMLINE

# INSIDE MUKESH AMBANI'S RETAIL LENDING AMBITIONS

A little-known RIL subsidiary can disrupt the loan marketplace just by tapping customers of Jio and Reliance Retail

Mukesh Ambani, chairman and managing director, Reliance Industries Ltd. MINT

Shayan Ghosh & Kalpana Pathak
MUMBAI

A month ago, at the India Digital Summit, Rajan Anandan, managing director of venture firm Sequoia India, engaged Vijay Shekhar Sharma, Paytm's founder, in an online fireside chat. His first question wasn't a surprise: "You probably got more flak for the IPO. What happened with this IPO?"

As Paytm's stock plummeted from its listing price of ₹1,955 in November last year, Sharma has had to make multiple public statements to soothe investor nerves. He put up a spirited defence of the company's business at this summit, too, and went on to say something interesting about Paytm's credit business.

"For our credit business, we should be benchmarked against only one guy and that is Bajaj (Finance)," he said in his usual animated self. "We should be looked at for the scale we deliver in terms of total loans, value of loans, and quality of loans."

People soon pointed out how the two companies are different: while Paytm earns fees on sourcing loans—the company does not have a licence to lend—Bajaj Finance can lend and earn interest.

The lack of opportunities to make money in the payments business and the array of opportunities in the lending business is perhaps making India's richest man think, too.

Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) group is gradually changing its financial services plans. It is morphing an existing non-banking financial company (NBFC) into a retail lending behemoth.

In parallel, RIL's plans of launching Jio Payments Bank along with the State Bank of India may be further delayed as it fine-tunes plans around a full-fledged retail lending business as opposed to being just a payments service provider.

At the heart of this push to build a retail franchise is Reliance Retail Finance Ltd, one of the many unlisted companies of Ambani's Reliance group. It is a wholly-owned subsidiary of RIL and, till 2018-19, had primarily functioned as an investment company to generate revenues for other group companies. As per CareEdge Ratings (erstwhile Care Ratings), the company was incorporated to engage in the business of investments in shares and securities in India.

However, since September 2019, it has stepped up to disburse retail loans.

The company did undergo quite a bit of morphing already—ever since it was formed two decades ago. It was incorporated on 19 January 2000 as Tex-Style Synthetics Private Ltd and renamed as Reliance Power Ventures Ltd on 17 May 2000. On 24 May 2000, it received a NBFC license from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), according to CareEdge Ratings. Then, on 21 August 2006, it was rechristened as Reliance Retail Finance.

Between 2019 and 2020, customers who bought Jio phones on a 12-month equated monthly instalment (EMI) programme, did not own them unless they repaid the loan, and instead had the right to use them. Reliance Retail Finance provided the back-end credit for these transactions. The financing model for Jio phones has now changed.

In a report dated 16 September 2021, the company's management said that the idea is to tap the 400 million-strong customer base of Jio and Reliance Retail, one of India's largest retailers, for consumer durable and personal loans.

"Reliance wants to emulate the success of Bajaj Finance," said an analyst tracking the conglomerate. "In future, when you go to a Reliance store to buy a consumer durable product, you will have access to finance from its own subsidiary. Later on, Ambani would also be able to tap into these customers for personal loans, as well, since he will have their repayment trends."

Some experts say RIL's B2B plan to target merchants is more promising than its B2C plan. RIL is onboarding more and more merchants through its Jio and retail network.

## WHAT SWOT SAYS

To say that India's retail lending market is crowded is an understatement. Banks, non-bank financiers and fintechs jostle for their own niches with every lender eyeing a share of the middle-class pie—customers who would spend on consumer durables and thereby need cheap credit. Several deep-pocketed public sector banks and equally well-capitalized private lenders have, over the last few years, moved away from lending to corporate borrowers. They have realigned their books towards smaller consumer loans.

While retail loans by banks stood at ₹29.18 trillion in September 2021, those by non-bank financiers were at ₹7.62 trillion, according to data from the RBI. The size of the total lending market in India, as of March 2021, stood at ₹156.9 trillion, showing a growth of about 100% between 2016-17 and 2020-21, credit information company Crif High Mark stated in a report.

It also pointed out that a majority of consumer durable loans, a segment Reliance Retail Finance is keen on, is dominated by the NBFCs. As on 31 March 2021, NBFCs accounted for 75.8% of the outstanding consumer durable loans, followed by private banks at 21.5% and public sector banks at 1.2%.

Meanwhile, Reliance Retail Finance has done a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities, threat) analysis to check its strengths and weaknesses. The analysis found that with Reliance Digital Stores spread across India and one-third of the population using a Jio SIM card, Jio's brand recall and equity will assist the company in creating an effective branding strategy.

The weakness: Reliance Retail Finance is a late entrant.

"Reliance Retail Finance is entering a space which already has over 20 well-established players. As an NBFC, it is competing with banks like HDFC, ICICI, Kotak Mahindra, Axis, IDFC First and others along with NBFCs like Bajaj Finance and HDB Financial Services. The fintech companies who appeal to the millennials also provide sufficient pushback in terms of smooth and less cumbersome customer journeys as compared to traditional credit underwriting. It shall be a challenge in terms of innovation," the SWOT analysis, accessed by *Mint*, states.

Reliance group companies, however, operate at scale. And their disruptive abilities—ask the telcos—is something analysts know all too well. Yet, some experts see more promise in the NBFC's merchant business than in lending to individuals.

"In my opinion, RIL's B2B (business to business) plan to target merchants is more promising than the B2C plans. RIL is onboarding more and more merchants through its Jio and Retail network and this wholesale model is a low hanging fruit for them," feels Deven Choksey, managing director of KRChoksey Shares and Securities Pvt Ltd.

Choksey says that if the company ends up giving a credit of ₹5 lakh to a million kirana merchants, that aggregate amount turns out to be in trillions of rupees. "The size of the balance sheet itself will become so huge—it will be bigger than many NBFCs operating at present," he adds.

Announcing the December quarter results, RIL said that JioMart Kirana (JioMart works as an e-commerce website as well as on the online-to-offline platform where customers place an order online and can purchase the products from the local kirana store) recorded new highs with aggressive merchant partner onboarding in existing and new markets. On 15 December 2021, Akash Ambani, director of Jio Platforms Ltd, spoke at Meta's (formerly Facebook Inc) Fuel For India event. He said that JioMart currently has half-a-million retailers or kirana owners on its platform. Jio Platforms is leveraging WhatsApp as a channel to solve stock assortment issues for small retailers, and as an ordering channel for customers.

RIL's job will be to leverage the excess cash it has on the balance sheet and put it to work even in the form of a loan book. "This, I think, is what RIL is looking at. The B2C plan could be at a later stage," Choksey says.

**mint SHORT STORY**

### WHAT

RIL is gradually changing its financial services plans. It is morphing an existing unlisted non-banking financial company —Reliance Retail Finance Ltd— into a retail lending behemoth.

### AND

RIL wants to emulate the success of Bajaj Finance. In the future, a customer buying a consumer durable product from a Reliance store may have access to finance from its own subsidiary.

### MOREOVER

Reliance Digital Stores are spread across India. And with one-third of the population using a Jio SIM card, its brand recall and equity may assist the lending arm create an effective branding strategy.

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING LOANS

The consumer loans on the books of Reliance Retail Finance, though, appear in one year and disappear during the next.

In 2019-20, the company had consumer loans of ₹14,893 crore on its balance sheet. In 2020-21, it is entirely absent. In its place are unsecured related party loans of ₹3,599 crore. For an NBFC focussed on lending to retail customers, this is strange.

According to the company's notes to financial results for 2020-21, the loans were given to fellow subsidiary company Reliance Strategic Business Ventures Ltd. The non-bank financier has three other fellow subsidiary companies: Reliance Retail Ltd, Reliance Projects and Property Management Services Ltd, and Jio Platforms Ltd.

A person aware of the development said that when the Jio feature phones were launched in 2019, Reliance Retail was the master franchisee for the devices. Reliance Retail procured those devices from the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) from China and other nations. They were given to subscribers on a 12-month equated monthly instalment basis. There was a need to book these loans—this is where Reliance Retail Finance came into the picture, financing these devices. The monthly instalments were collected by Reliance Retail and were escrowed back to Reliance Retail Finance.

"The market dynamics changed next year. They were already in discussion with Google and Facebook for launching smartphones but covid-19 disrupted this plan and the smartphone launch was delayed. Moreover, expecting the launch of smartphones, the company went slow on pushing its existing feature phones, leaving no requirement for consumer finance from Reliance Retail Finance," said the person cited above.

At a group level, there was also a change in strategy for the NBFC. Following the outbreak of covid-19 and the expected rise in bad loans, the group was apprehensive of expanding the retail lending programme. They decided on a different business model where Reliance Retail would procure the mobile devices from OEMs only to lease it back to them. This way, the OEMs ended up taking the credit risk. Under the new strategy, EMIs were collected by Reliance Retail and escrowed to the manufacturers directly.

"That is why there are no consumer loans on its books in 2020-21 and whatever net-worth they have built up with equity infusion, they have lent to a group company. However, they have again launched smartphones and it would be interesting to see what financing strategy they use this time round," the source said.

An email sent to the spokesperson for RIL seeking comments on the story remained unanswered.

However, Reliance Retail Finance is entering a space that is already overcrowded with 20 well-established players. Innovation will be the real challenge.

## A BROADER PUSH

Reliance Retail Finance would want the company to emulate its parent group's strategy of testing the waters through in-house roll-outs, according to documents seen by *Mint*.

It is looking to finance customers who purchase from Reliance Retail—they will be used as captive borrowers before a broader, official launch. The covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on its plans to launch its loan products in the open market as the company monitors unemployment, cost of borrowing and bad loan trends in the market.

Meanwhile, RIL in 2020 expanded its business to include a vast swathe of financial services—it added non-banking services, including insurance broking and mutual fund products on the Jio platform. The platform already caters to its telecom and e-commerce businesses.

RIL's aspirations, however, is not restricted to traditional forms of finance. In 2019, Reliance Jio obtained an account aggregator (AA) licence from the Reserve Bank of India through Jio Information Solutions Ltd. AAs are entitled to collect and share financial information with third parties after getting the user's consent. The information can pertain to sectors governed by the RBI, besides three other regulators—the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, and the Securities and Exchange Board of India. Jio's foray may be part of its larger consumer finance push.

Jio's anchor customer base of 428.6 million and Reliance Retail's 14,412 stores could provide a strong distribution channel for its financial products, say analysts tracking the company. But as is the case with any other Reliance entity, analysts and other experts are somewhat in the dark about the group's plans for Reliance Retail Finance.

Yet, it can be said with a degree of certainty that the conglomerate—if and when it decides to go the whole hog in retail lending—will be a force to reckon with.

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OUR VIEW

REUTERS

# The case for easing our identity proof insistence

*It's prudent of India's government to have vaccinated 8.7 million people without Aadhaar ID cards. Let us extend the principle of full inclusion to cover the state delivery of essentials*

It almost came to be seen as a fixation of governance, the requirement of an Aadhaar proof-of-identity for sundry interactions with the state. In spite of a judicial push-back, biometric records had assumed such an asymmetric role in our lives that their use as tickets for covid jabs was no surprise. So it's a relief that India's government has vaccinated 8.7 million people without asking for identification, as it informed the Supreme Court on Monday. An Aadhaar number is not a must to register oneself on Co-Win, our website for vaccine allotment; while eight alternative documents could be used to get a shot, this ID rule was relaxed for "sadhus and saints of all religions", those leading nomadic lives, inmates of prisons and mental-health institutions, folks in rehab and roadside alms-seekers, apart from other identified individuals aged above 18 with none of the nine identity certificates. This was a prudent exemption, given our urgency to immunize the country and quell the pandemic. With 1.7 billion doses given overall, our aim has been to maximize coverage. Prudence apart, the inclusion of those who are off the national identity grid, even if by their own choice, also happens to be backed by a sound principle.

As in the case of those who renounce the material world, often casting off their birth or family names for spiritual pursuits, many others among us might have opted for reclusive lives with such loose ties with the state apparatus that they may not have anything to establish who they are for officials to check. Then there would be those who remain clueless about worldly events and systems for a variety of reasons. Odd as this may seem in a hyper-linked age of online chatter, a country as populous as ours must surely have large numbers in all those brackets, and then some. A constitutional assurance of lifestyle liberty, coupled with the public responsibility we bear for everyone's well-being, would require us to ensure that nobody is deprived of access to basic provisions of health and sustenance. In times of crisis, especially, identity insistence must not get in the way of aid distribution.

Though personal safety displays an obvious overlap with the public interest in vaccine delivery, we should extend the same principle to all food handouts. Granted, this could result in leakages, plugging which was a key Aadhaar goal. Yet, this would be a small price to pay for universal nutrition security. In many welfare states abroad, anyone asking for such support is assumed to be in need of it and ID-free dole-outs ensure nobody goes hungry. We could also go beyond beneficiary lists. Should a large-scale heist of food supplies ensue, smaller but more frequent rations could be explored. By similar logic, the proposed health ID cards aimed at offering online access to a central database of our medical reports should remain optional in practice as much as theory. Our National Digital Health Ecosystem, which is scheduled for a roll-out next fiscal year, must not end up erecting healthcare barriers for those who opt out of it. Data firewalls will likely be installed against hackers, but patients who are uncomfortable with the storage of their health details on such a network must not come to suffer for it. Aadhaar was touted as 'voluntary' before it became a must-have, bit by bit, for a variety of purposes. An opt-in health data facility that is subject to such mission creep may fail to generate the confidence needed for its success. Technology allows us to verify identities accurately, but its rigid use could have ill effects. Let's ease up.

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

# The impact of RBI's low interest rate policy on the Union budget

*Poor bank-deposit returns pushed people towards saving schemes used to finance the fiscal deficit*

VIVEK KAUL
is the author of 'Bad Money'.

Good economics is not just about identifying the direct effects of policy decisions, but their indirect effects as well. Interestingly, an indirect effect of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) monetary policy is clearly visible in the Union budget presented on 1 February.

The fiscal deficit for the current financial year 2021-22 has been revised to ₹15.9 trillion. When the budget for this year was presented last February, the fiscal deficit was expected to be at ₹15.1 trillion. The fiscal deficit is the difference between what a government earns and what it spends.

The government finances a bulk of its deficit by issuing bonds and borrowing money. In 2021-22, around ₹8.8 trillion of its borrowings are expected to be met by issuing bonds. This tells us that the total fiscal deficit is not just financed by bonds. The major other way is money coming into post office small savings schemes net of repayments. Every year, some investment made in past years by people in such schemes matures and that needs to be repaid . This year, the government expects around ₹6.8 trillion to be invested into these schemes. The redemption expected is ₹86,749 crore, which leaves around ₹5.9 trillion.

This ₹5.9 trillion will be used to finance the fiscal deficit. Hence, borrowing through the issuance of bonds and money invested in small savings schemes finances a large part of the government's fiscal deficit.

This is where things get interesting. When the budget was presented last February, the government had assumed that around ₹4.8 trillion will be invested in these schemes during 2021-22. Further, ₹91,343 crore would be redeemed, leaving ₹3.9 trillion, which would go into financing the fiscal deficit.

Instead of ₹3.9 trillion, the government has ended up with ₹5.9 trillion, which is ₹2 trillion more. Why did this happen? The repo rate or the interest rate at which RBI lends money to banks was at 6.5% in January 2019. By February 2020, around the time the covid pandemic struck, RBI had cut it to 5.15%. By May 2020, the central bank had cut the repo rate further to 4%, which is where it has stayed since.

Before the pandemic struck, the idea was to push down interest rates so that people would borrow and spend more, and corporates would borrow and expand, thus helping the economy, which was going through a rather moribund phase. After the pandemic, the idea was to also help the government borrow at lower interest rates.

Along with cutting its key interest rate, RBI also printed and pumped money into the economy. Post-covid, bank lending growth collapsed, pushing interest rates on fixed deposits held with banks further down.

With a bulk of Indian household financial savings being in bank deposits, this hurt households and pushed them to search for higher returns. Stock markets beckoned. In 2019-20, on an average, around 420,000 demat accounts were opened every month. In 2021-22, this number reached 2.76 million demat accounts. A similar uptick has been seen even in case of mutual funds, through which people buy stocks indirectly. As the Securities and Exchange Board of India points out in its latest monthly bulletin: "On an average [2.39 million] new investor folios are being added every month."

Everyone doesn't want to take on the increased risk that stocks come with. Hence, many individuals have increased their investment in small savings schemes. While the interest rates on these schemes are lower than they were in the past, they are still higher than what bank deposits have to offer. This explains why the investment in these schemes has gone up dramatically this year and net of repayments is ₹2 trillion more than what the Centre expected.

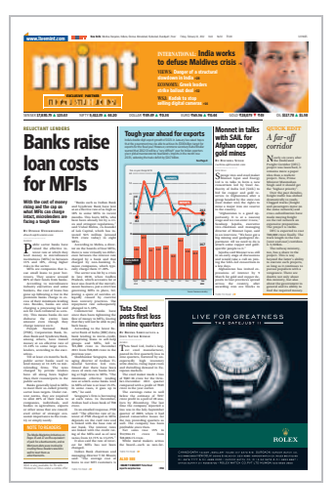
This shows us the indirect effect of monetary policy and the impact that it has had on the Union budget. Low interest rates pushed people towards small savings schemes, which increased the total receipts of the government. Helped by this increase in receipts, along with an increase in tax collections, the government increased its expenditure for this year to ₹37.7 trillion against the ₹34.8 trillion it had budgeted for.

It doesn't end here. There will be effects of this effect as well. As mentioned earlier, the money invested in small savings schemes matures over a period of time and needs to be repaid. It is repaid by using the fresh money being invested into these schemes in the year of maturity of past investments. In that sense, these schemes have a pyramid structure, where older investors are paid off using money brought in by newer ones.

This essentially means that future generations will pay for the expenditure of the current generation. Of course, all long-term government debt is like that. The trouble is that in tough times like these, considerations of inter-generation equity go for a toss.

As Arun Jaitley had said in his maiden budget speech: "Fiscal prudence to me is of paramount importance because of considerations of inter-generational equity. We cannot leave behind a legacy of debt for our future generations." But that is precisely what's happening and the reason for that is simple: future generations don't yet have a vote. They have to bear the cost of our free lunch.

## 10 YEARS AGO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Banks raise loan costs for MFIs
Tough year ahead for exports
Monnet in talks with SAIL for Afghan copper, gold mines
Tata Steel posts first loss in nine quarters
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## JUST A THOUGHT

The words of law often look like words of the language you speak, but when they are legal terms, they are not.

DAVID BELLOS

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

# *Why we ought to replace legalese with plain language*

RAHUL MATTHAN

is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

Last month, while considering an appeal on a decision of the Himachal Pradesh high court, the judges of India's Supreme Court found themselves at an uncharacteristic loss for words. The order that was being appealed had been written in language so convoluted that even the most learned legal minds in the country struggled to fathom what exactly it was saying. "How do we understand this judgment?" asked Justice K.M. Joseph in evident frustration, "Is it in Latin?" To which even the senior counsels present had to concede that the order was indecipherable. The order was returned to the aforesaid high court with a request that it be re-written.

While this particular incident might be an extreme example, it is emblematic of a profession in the grip of a malaise of intentional incomprehensibility. We lawyers tend to cloak ourselves in a cloud of jargon so obscure as to be unintelligible to anyone save those well schooled in its peculiarities. We punctuate our sentences with archaic aphorisms and Latin maxims, and construct them to frequently double-back on themselves, so much so that by the time you reach their end, you struggle to remember how they began.

The justification most frequently handed out for why this sort of dense language needs to be used is that it is the only way to ensure that every possible consequence is adequately addressed. Unless they can specify exactly what needs to be done in every conceivable situation, lawyers believe their clients will suffer should things left unsaid actually come to pass.

This maximalist approach to drafting is the reason why legal documents are always so dense. This approach remains with us as we progress through the many stages of our career, starting with the contracts we draft as young apprentices, but then also affecting the legal opinions, arbitral awards and judicial decisions that we issue as we grow in the Bar and eventually graduate to the Bench. It eventually percolates into the laws, rules and executive orders that form the bedrock of our legal system—which are themselves drafted by lawyers trained in the same approach to language.

This is why our laws end up being so hard to comprehend; why laypersons to whom they apply are unable to understand their implications without the assistance of a lawyer. In a world that has increasingly prioritized the democratization of access, this sort of forced ignorance that arises out of unwarranted complexity is understandably viewed with disfavour.

A number of countries have enacted legislations that impose plain-language obligations on government functionaries, requiring them to communicate in words that can be easily understood. In the US, the Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal government agencies to "promote clear Government communication that the public can understand and use." In the UK, the Tax Law Rewrite Project simplified tax laws so that taxpayers could understand them without needing the assistance of lawyers and chartered accountants.

**It is unfair to expect people to comply with laws they can't understand without the aid of lawyers**

India would do well to follow suit. If it is impossible for laypersons to understand our laws, they can hardly be blamed for not complying. However, in addition to simplifying the language of our laws, I would recommend that the government undertake three additional measures to make the country's legal system more accessible and effective.

First, all government departments should be required to publish on their websites a complete list of all laws, rules and regulations that apply to those over whom they have authority, and only enforce those laws. More often than not, government officials invoke obscure circulars to justify their enforcement actions, leaving those on whom they are being enforced with little choice but to quietly pay the fines that have been imposed.

Furthermore, efforts should be made to consolidate all these regulations into a single easy-to-understand code that presents a comprehensive snapshot of all applicable regulations. The Reserve Bank of India regularly publishes Master Directives that consolidate various circulars issued from time to time into a single comprehensive regulation, which is then used for enforcement. Other government departments would do well to learn from this.

Secondly, along with every law that is enforced, the government should publish an official note that describes, in plain language, what that law covers, who it applies to, and the obligations they are required to meet. While the specific legal obligations that bind the regulated entity will continue to be contained within the text of the statute, this note can provide necessary explanations. A good example of how something like this can be implemented is the terms of service of the photography website *500px.com* (*bit.ly/3HCoYiC*), where each clause has been explained in simple layman's language alongside the standard contractual clauses.

Finally, serious efforts should be made to reduce the burden of compliance. Where information is sought from regulated entities, the government should only be allowed to make consolidated information requests instead of constantly harassing citizens with repeated information requests. Where forms have to be filed, they should be designed to only collect new information essential for the regulatory objective, instead of collecting the same data again and again.

Our laws and legal system do not need to be so inaccessible. A few strategic steps in the right direction will go a long way towards democratizing public access to it.

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MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

# How covid altered the financial behaviour of Indian households

*Financial hardships faced in 2020-21 could have lingering effects on household choices of spending, saving and borrowing*

**NIRANJAN RAJADHYAKSHA**
is CEO and senior fellow at Artha India Research Advisors, and a member of the academic advisory board of the Meghnad Desai Academy of Economics.

Indian households faced a massive income shock in the worst months of the pandemic. How did they respond? And will their reaction have an impact on the trajectory of India's economic recovery in the years ahead?

The government recently released revised estimates on national income, consumption expenditure, savings and capital formation for the fiscal year that began soon after the pandemic hit India and ended on 31 March 2021. The new data can be used to get vignettes of how households managed through the crisis, especially their finances. Here are some salient facts.

First, consumer spending in the first year of the pandemic fell compared to the previous fiscal year, more sharply in real terms than in nominal terms. Real personal final consumption expenditure, or consumer spending, came down by ₹5 trillion, or nearly 6%. It fell by a more modest ₹2 trillion (1.7%) in terms of current rather than constant prices.

Second, nominal spending on some items such as food, utilities, health and communications went up, despite the overall decline in consumer spending. The money spent on education remained more or less steady. The data on output suggests that households cut back on items such as clothing, footwear, restaurants and transport, partly because of the restrictions imposed on mobility during various lockdowns.

Third, even as the gross savings of Indian households went up by ₹4.61 trillion in nominal terms, the distribution of these savings between financial and physical savings tells an important story. Gross financial savings increased by ₹7.09 trillion while savings in physical assets declined by ₹2.25 trillion. The money spent on precious metals such as gold and silver was more or less the same. (Note: Households include unincorporated enterprises in the informal sector.)

The sharp increase in gross financial savings by households in 2020-21 was partly forced by the harsh lockdown in the early months of the pandemic. The Reserve Bank of India had estimated that household financial savings had shot up to 21% of gross domestic product in the first quarter of 2020-21, but then came back to their normal level of around 8% once mobility restrictions were eased. The unusually high household savings in the first quarter have undoubtedly bloated the annual numbers, though this also means that the excess savings between April and June 2020 were not spent down.

Why would this be so? The answer is rooted in psychology. Economists generally believe that people respond to severely negative income shocks in two ways. They either borrow to maintain previous levels of consumption or cut their spending to protect savings. A lot depends on whether people expect the income shock to be temporary or permanent. The usual response to a temporary income shock is to smoothen consumption through borrowing, while in the case of a permanent income shock, the household cuts back on spending to protect savings over the long term.

The fact that household debt has not increased significantly in 2020-21, compared to the sharp increase in the two years after demonetization, suggests that Indian households have gradually begun to see income shocks as more permanent than transitory. This is just a guess from reading the macro numbers, but this is an issue that needs more detailed household surveys to understand the underlying behaviour.

It is likely that the gross financial savings rate of households—as a percentage of disposable income—will normalize as the economic recovery deepens. Yet, it is worth pointing out that Indian households seem to have made a decisive switch from physical to financial savings, compared to what they did in the initial years of the previous decade, when physical savings were higher than financial savings as a result of high inflation as well as negative real interest rates.

On the other hand, the savings of private sector companies—or private non-financial corporations, in the precise lingo of government statisticians—actually came down in nominal terms in 2020-21, by ₹1.19 trillion. This fact sits uncomfortably with the overall trend of higher corporate profits plus weak capital spending by companies. Is it possible that the strengthening balance sheets of large companies hides the damage to the balance sheets of smaller companies?

The data cited in this column is on flows rather than stocks. It is quite likely that more savings in 2020-21 has increased the stock of household savings as well, though as this column had earlier argued in another context, a large increase in the stock of household financial savings is not immediately evident in banking data.

In countries such as the US, massive income support for households led to a stock of excess savings that is now being spent down, so an increase in household savings was a mirror image of a higher fiscal deficit. The Indian fiscal response to the pandemic shock was quite different, so the link between a higher fiscal deficit and household finances is less clear.

The Indian economy has recovered from its massive drop in output in the worst months of 2020. It is likely that the difficulties faced by households then could have lingering effects, especially in the choices made between spending, saving and borrowing.

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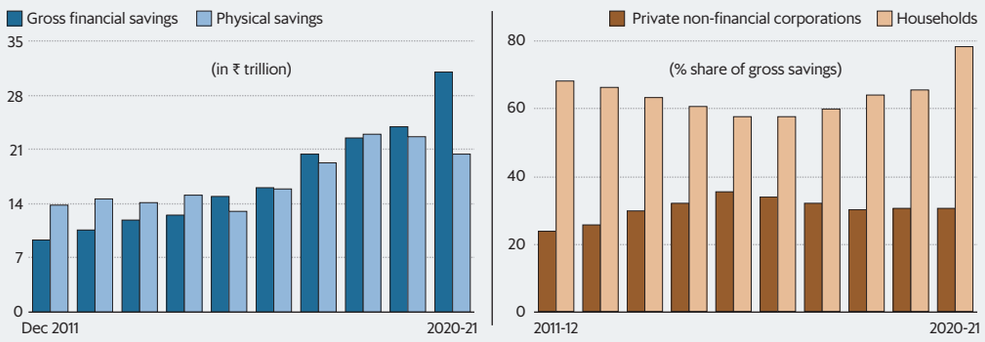
**The pandemic's impact on household finances**

Savings by Indian homes went up sharply but what's most noticeable is a shift from physical to financial holdings.

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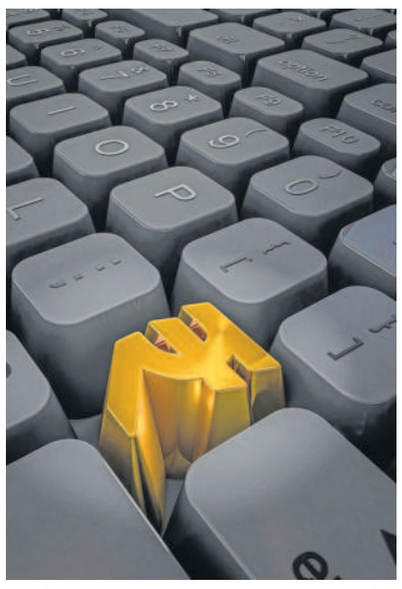
# RBI shouldn't rush the launch of India's official digital rupee

*It could take time to weigh the benefits of its promise against risks*

**ANDY MUKHERJEE**
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies and financial services



The impact of an e-rupee on bank deposits would need to be modelled ISTOCKPHOTO

India has surprised the payments world by announcing that its central bank will issue a digital currency as early as 2022-23, a crucial decision that most major economies are refusing to make in a hurry. According to finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, an electronic representation of India's legal tender will boost its digital economy. How valid is that claim, and how risky is a hasty transition to a central bank digital currency? A digital rupee will be like banknotes, minus ATMs. Users will be able to transfer purchasing power from deposit accounts into smartphone wallets in the form of online tokens, which like cash will be a liability of the Reserve Bank of India.

Retail access to the central bank's IOUs may not be a big deal in countries with well-capitalized financial systems. But this is a major benefit in India. As researcher Bhargavi Zaveri observes, depositors at 21 Indian lenders have been restricted from withdrawing their funds due to bank distress in the last few years: "A CBDC... will mitigate the risk of losses that Indian depositors face when dealing with commercial banks."

Consumers may find an e-rupee to be a safer alternative to bank deposits, which underpin ₹76 trillion in annual real-time payments via apps like Walmart's PhonePe, Alphabet's Google Pay and the homegrown Paytm. But therein lies the risk as well. If e-cash becomes popular and RBI places no limit on the amount that can be stored in mobile wallets, weaker banks may struggle to retain low-cost deposits. And even as they lose that cushion, lenders may be reluctant to shed their loan assets and sacrifice profits. Their less-liquid balance sheets could leave them vulnerable to bank runs.

All economies are mindful of this threat to financial stability. Yet, advanced nations also worry about the dwindling use of banknotes, especially after covid. As purchases go online, the basis of trust in demand deposits, that they convert to cash at face value, may get reduced to a theoretical construct. An e-currency could keep the notion of convertibility grounded in daily reality.

In India, though, there's no such urgency because cash is far from dying. Banknotes account for about 15% of money supply, compared with 1% in Sweden. Yet, Riksbank is in no hurry to embrace a CBDC. After five years of weighing options, the Swedish monetary authority is still to take a final decision on whether to issue an e-krona.

The US Fed is seeking the public's views on whether to provide an official tender to compete against private stablecoins riding on the dollar as the world's most popular unit of account. A digital euro is in a 24-month investigation. If all goes well, the European Central Bank may offer it by 2025. Japan may delay a call to 2026.

India's rushed deadline seems to be at least partly a response to cryptocurrencies, though it's hard to see how an e-rupee can wean the public off the get-rich-quick lure of a speculative asset class. Another reason for hurry may be a desire to head off China, which by early November had some 140 million individuals signed up for its e-CNY. But China has no national roll-out date, and Alipay and WeChat Pay retain their stranglehold on digital payments. Besides, Beijing's intention to promote a rival to the dollar in cross-border trade and finance will only become clear after the digital yuan makes its appearance in Hong Kong.

Any role for a digital rupee in India's fast-growing online economy is fuzzy. Unlike perfectly anonymous cash, most CBDCs will be designed so central banks will be able to trace spending. However, transactions conducted with them may not be visible to payment apps, and fintech firms may lose access to some data being mined for cheap loans to those who don't have collateral. As for gains, [it could eliminate the need of an] expensive network of correspondent banks to settle cross-border payments. For Indians working abroad, sending money home will become simpler and cheaper. This would mean savings for the world's top recipient of remittances, though this could be achieved even without a digital rupee, via a global network like the Bank for International Settlements' proposed Nexus project.

A digital rupee may well be a boon. For one thing, it may not be a bad idea for the monetary authority to use technology to put bank managements on notice: They need to stop taking depositors for granted. Still, that lesson is probably best administered after lenders have put the covid-related stress on their balance sheets behind them.

Besides, RBI must do its homework. The technology, blockchain or otherwise, will need to balance the often-conflicting goals of speed, scalability, auditability, security and privacy, something the Fed is trying to do as part of its Project Hamilton. Given India's still-vast digital divide, a protocol for offline use has to be worked out. Rushing the implementation of what should ideally be a multi-year project may be fraught with unnecessary risks.

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GUEST VIEW

# *The country's quest for scale shouldn't overlook quality*

SABINA DEWAN

is president & executive director, JustJobs Network, and senior visiting fellow, Centre for Policy Research.

With 1.4 billion people, India is well on its way to becoming the world's most populous country, beating China. Our youth population alone is larger than the total population of the US, or that of any other industrialized country. It is understandable then that a quest to achieve scale is among the top priorities of the government's development interventions.

And what better tool than technology to deliver scale? According to the 2021-22 *Economic Survey* and Union budget for 2022-23 released last week, technology will help raise productivity (and wages) in agriculture, foster entrepreneurship, deliver education to our children, impart skills to our youth, and more. In the third decade of the 21st century, we seem to have finally stumbled upon the solution that will, once and for all, solve what has long been a perpetual battle to deliver development at scale.

If this sounds too good to be true, it's because it is. In the quest for scale, we have become accustomed to sacrificing quality for quantity. We pick the convenient metric of unemployment levels being relatively low (even if rising) before the pandemic, while ignoring persistently high informal employment, low quality jobs and deep inequities. We set lofty targets for training youth, thrusting them into three-month training programmes in the hope of long-term dividends. We try to skill at scale, unsuccessfully at that, but can't provide enough employment to our large and growing youth population. If anyone asks where jobs will come from, we point to gig work. After all, "Gig work is growing exponentially and it will provide opportunities for women to work from home." Though instead of providing stable jobs, gig work thrusts more workers into insecure work arrangements. But at least we're achieving some semblance of scale.

No doubt, technology has much to offer in enabling scale. But the road between potential and reality is long and arduous. To begin with, there are tremendous disparities in technology access. According to the International Telecommunications Union, the United Nations' specialized agency for information communication technologies, 53 of every 100 inhabitants in India had active mobile-broadband subscriptions in 2020; 47% did not. And this does not account for differences in usage. Only 15% of India's total female population in 2018 used the internet, as compared to 25% of the male population. The digital divide is real.

In relying too much on technology to deliver outcomes, will we once again trade off quality in favour of a semblance of quantity? Take agriculture, for example. According to finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget speech, public-private partnerships are expected to deliver digital and high-tech services to farmers, and kisan drones will aid in crop assessment and digitization of land records, apart from the spraying of insecticides and delivery of nutrients. Perhaps these are worthwhile efforts, but there is little evidence that such interventions improve agricultural productivity, certainly not to the extent needed to initiate a real structural shift. By contrast, at a time of deep distress, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme, the only safety net for the poorest of households, found no mention in the speech. Its allocation of ₹73,000 crore is lower than the 2021-22 revised estimate of ₹98,000 crore.

**Over-reliance on technology to deliver employment outcomes is not a winning strategy**

When it comes to education, missing nearly two years of school has resulted in substantial learning losses among our children. What children learn from face-to-face interactions with their peers and teachers cannot be replaced by virtual means. The digital divide only made a bad situation worse for children from economically disadvantaged households. But the proposed solution to make up for the lack of physical classes is even more virtual learning. From the 'one class-one TV channel' programme of PM eVidya to the development of high-quality e-content, we are relying on technology to convey content to more children, if not actually deliver learning.

Our skills training system is rife with challenges. Vocational education and training have somehow gotten divorced from education. In the absence of enough formal employment, our pressure to productively engage the youth fuels a skills system that is supply-driven, where skills are misaligned with what the market needs. But rather than addressing these challenges through the much-needed reform of a broken system, the budget speaks of launching a Digital Ecosystem for Skilling and Livelihood (DESH) Stack e-portal to help citizens acquire skills and credentials, and to assist them in finding relevant jobs. Maybe we will finally discover how to impart skills for vocations that require honed physical capabilities without enabling practical, hands-on experience.

At the same time that our demography offers the advantage of a large and growing youth population and a low dependency ratio, the sheer size of our country also poses an enormous challenge for delivering outcomes on such a large scale. But focusing on the size of interventions rather than their efficacy weakens our foundations for economic progress. It pushes us toward sub-optimal solutions. What technology has to offer requires thoughtful deployment driven by a quest to deliver equity and quality, rather than the semblance of scale or quantity alone.

Our neighbour to the north, China, is on track to growing old before it grows rich, but we have a chance to do things differently if we focus on the quality of interventions and don't just chase size.

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Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

# Boost to defence exports

The deal for supply of BrahMos supersonic missiles to the Philippines, the first major military export, comes as a shot in the arm for India's efforts to become an exporter of defence hardware. This is also seen as a strategic move to outsmart China whose belligerent behaviour in the disputed South China Sea has soured the relations with the Philippines. The $375-million agreement for supply of BrahMos, which has a range of 290 km and can carry a 200-kg warhead, is expected to pave the way for other Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia to acquire the sophisticated missile system to balance China's aggressive moves. The Philippine Marine intends to use the BrahMos as a shore-based anti-ship missile, and the South China Sea is one of the potential areas where the system could be deployed. A major advantage of BrahMos, the world-class weapon with a multi-platform and multi-mission role, is that its air variant can be launched from a fighter jet within minutes of being ordered and can hit the target 400 km away with accuracy. Given that some of the Southeast Asian countries are facing a threat from China and have active ongoing disputes with the Asian giant, it will be in the interests of India to help them with the supplies of modern weapon systems. The BrahMos deal is being seen as a game-changer as India's defence exports so far have been confined to items such as avionics, coastal surveillance systems, spares for radars, personal protective items and offshore patrol vessels.

**The BrahMos deal with the Philippines is likely to pave the way for other SE Asian countries to acquire the system to counter China**

India has been essentially known globally to be among the top five arms importers. Of late, however, the government is looking to reduce arms imports by boosting domestic production. New Delhi is seeking to boost defence exports to strengthen defence manufacturing and production. At present, India is the 24th largest arms exporter in the world and the target is to expand the defence manufacturing sector and become a bigger arms exporter generating a revenue of $5 billion by 2025. The latest BrahMos sale enables India to ensure its place as a reliable defence partner to its Southeast Asian neighbours. Since the Galwan Valley clash of June 2020, India has been deepening its ties with the United States and with the allies of the US like Australia and now the Philippines. India is engaging in proactive defence diplomacy in response to China's naval incursions in the Indo-Pacific and also China's encroachments in the disputed land border with India. This deal will undoubtedly have an impact on the India-China, India-Asean as well as the Philippines-China relations. This provides the perfect leeway for India to develop a strong defence linkage and partnership with countries of the Asean region.

It is because of the Congress there is space for opposition and dissent and that a party of two MPs is today ruling the country. The Congress is there and that is why Babasaheb's Constitution is there, Bapu's thoughts and ideals are alive, nuclear power and the technological revolution is there

**Randeep Surjewala**
Congress chief spokesperson

How brave these men are and how macho they must feel while targeting a lone young lady! Hatred for Muslims has been completely mainstreamed and normalised in India today. We are no longer a nation that celebrates our diversity, we want to punish and exclude people for it

**Omar Abdullah**
National Conference leader

The then Railway Minister Piyush Goyal had talked about operating 125 special trains in March 2020, Devendra Fadnavis has thanked the Centre for operating special trains to ferry migrant labourers to Uttar Pradesh. Still the PM claims that Maharashtra sent back migrant labourers to other States

**Supriya Sule**
NCP MP

Schools need to reopen and be kept open as far as possible but that is not going to be enough. Addressing the issue of dropouts to ensure they return to school and also having a plan for reintegrating children back into the school system is very important. Not measuring learning losses will be an absolute recipe for disaster

**Abhijit Banerjee**
Nobel laureate

Healthy Minds

# Living amid mental health crisis

It is imperative to have enough funds as well as professionals who can use the money rightly

**MOITRAYEE DAS**

The current times have witnessed an increase in mental health policies and programmes as well as mental health being as an integral part of the sustainable development goals. But is India doing enough to deal with the mental health crisis of its people?

There is no doubt that the pandemic has taken a severe toll on people's mental health and this seems to be the ongoing trend since the start of the pandemic. According to a survey by the WHO, the pandemic has completely disturbed or stopped essential and urgent mental health services in 93% of the countries worldwide. Unfortunately, the demand for mental health services is exponentially growing and not many countries are in a position to meet this ever-growing requirement of their people. There have been umpteen reports stating how mental health diseases such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression have skyrocketed since the beginning of the pandemic and it does not seem to be stopping anytime soon.

### Horrifying Statistics

A Lancet study published in 2019 reported that 14% of India's population lives with some form of mental illness and the situation is very likely to worsen. The treatment gap is extremely wide in India with only 0.29 psychiatrists for every 1,00,000 people (Mental Health Atlas, 2017). According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2016), there exist treatment gaps of 72-92% for various mental disorders. These statistics come from the pre-pandemic times, the numbers during and post-pandemic will definitely be much more horrifying than what is stated!

The positive news amidst the gloom surrounding us all has to be the launch of the national tele-mental health programme announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman while presenting the union Budget, and the mental health initiative 'Karnataka Brain Health Initiative', launched by Dr K Sudhakar, Health Minister of Karnataka, on January 25. It is definitely a much-needed move being undertaken by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in association with NITI Aayog. The Health Minister has emphasised the need to train general physicians in this area as well as the importance of screening newborn babies for mental health issues.

**The estimated economic loss due to mental health conditions in India between 2012 and 2030 is expected to be Rs 75.84 lakh crore (WHO)**

### Calls for Attention

In September 2020, the government of India launched the multilingual 24/7 mental helpline — 'KIRAN' — to address emerging and ongoing mental health concerns. According to a report by India's Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry, it was seen that a majority of the calls (75.5%) were from the 15-40 years age group. This is an interesting fact because 15-34-year-olds make up close to 35% of India's population, and as per Lancet Global Health Study, suicide was the leading cause of death among young people between the age groups of 15-39 in 2016. The shocking facts about the mental health state are proven through the records of the National Crime Bureau, which state that India reported 381 suicides every day for the year 2019. Every single day!

The report also states the numerous reasons for which the calls were made. For example, 28.5% and 25.5% of calls were for anxiety and depression-related conversations respectively; pandemic-related calls, suicidal tendency, substance abuse and miscellaneous calls stood at 7.8%, 2.8%, 3.4% and 32% respectively. Interestingly, it was also seen that 78.2% of the callers were seeking help for themselves while 21.8% called to seek advice for their family and friends.

While there is enough information about the poor state of mental health for the people in India, the question is what is being done for the same? Are we doing enough to deal with this situation? Or is it only on paper with zero execution?

### Limited Budget

The worrisome fact is the disproportionate budget allocation for mental health in India. Given the state of poor mental health, this needs to be urgently addressed.

The union Budget 2022-23 has reserved a grossly insufficient amount of only Rs 40 crore for the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), similar to the years 2021-22 and 2020-21. The mental healthcare requirements are definitely going to become more acute due to the pandemic. The limited budget for the NMHP restricts the States' need to meet the requirements of its people.

According to an article published in *The Diplomat*, the healthcare budget of India in 2018 was Rs 52,800 crore, and the allotment for mental health was Rs 50 crore. The following year, it was reduced to Rs 40 crore. Meanwhile, India's actual expenditure on mental health was only Rs 5 crore annually! It is not surprising that the estimated economic loss due to mental health conditions in India between the years 2012 and 2030 is expected to be Rs 75.84 lakh crore (WHO).

While it is great that we have mental health initiatives and policies by the Central and State governments, it is imperative to see that there are enough budgets and also qualified, licensed and trained professionals who can make the right use of the allotted budget to meet the mental health requirements of the public. Looking back, one sees that the actual expenditure on mental health is appalling and many a time, it is less than 7% of the total allotted amount.

While conversations around mental health may or may not be the elephant in many rooms, it is true that we have a long way to go to understand the nuances and intricacies of this crucial field. It is high time to invest substantially in the rightful growth of this field so that the right people treat people in need and we can do our bit in saving the many lives that are lost every day due to undiagnosed and untreated mental illnesses.

*(The author is Assistant Professor, Department of Psychological Sciences, School of Liberal Education, FLAME University)*

*If the fire in your heart is strong enough, it will burn away any obstacles that come your way*

**Letters to the Editor**

We invite your views and comments at
letters@telanganatoday.com

### Willpower

Your esteemed daily deserves fulsome praise for publishing the saga of a humble tea seller (February 6) in successfully cracking the NEET exams for securing admission in the prestigious AIIMS-Delhi. The sheer grit and perseverance of Rahul Das in overcoming the odds and adversities in his path must serve as a beacon of hope for the economically and socially disadvantaged sections of society. Amid the plethora of grim narratives and negative vibes circulating all around, such real-life achievement comes as a breath of fresh air, infusing new hopes and assurances for a better and brighter tomorrow. For the indomitable human willpower, there is always a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. In this context, it is worth recalling the immortal words of Suzy Kassem, the famous unconventional writer-cum-poet 'If the fire in your heart is strong enough, it will burn away any obstacles that come your way'.

**Amit Banerjee,** New Delhi

### Lata's legacy

Lata Mangeshkar, the nightingale of India, who charmed the people of India and the world with her melodious voice, will continue to rule our hearts. Her death marks the end of an era in music. Perhaps, she must have been the most recorded voice in the history of this century. She ruled the world of music for decades and the magic of her voice will live forever. She had a voice suited to more soothing, mature, melodramatic and patriotic songs. She inspired and motivated many in the world with her devotion and dedication. Her singing journey became a success story for a lot of singers in India. Her songs have been a part of all of us and her voice engrained in every Indian. We will all cherish her forever.

**Vinod C Dixit,** Ahmedabad

### A political ground

It is a pity that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who described Parliament earlier as a 'temple of democracy', had made it a political ground now (Congress leader of tukde tukde gang; Modi, February 8). Modi's frequent claim that all good things happened only during his regime and that earlier the Congress regime spoiled the country is not acceptable. How can one undermine the Congress party's role in banks nationalisation, industrialisation, science and technology, reforms in the financial sector and so on? The Prime Minister should realise that people cannot be fooled at all times and his failures of growing bad loans, farm crisis, unemployment, falling GDP and rupee cannot be concealed by criticising the Congress founder leaders repeatedly.

**Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,** Hyderabad

## India the hotspot

THE DIPLOMAT
Read The Diplomat, Know the Asia-Pacific

### India has a problem with election handouts

With seven Indian states heading for assembly polls soon, political parties are scrambling to manipulate the voters' choice by offering them irresistible "freebies." Carefully curated gifts are being dangled in front of voters. They may range from hard cash to e-scooters to mobile phones, laptops, gas cylinders, government jobs, or even gold jewelry for daughters' marriages.

theguardian

### Adani becomes Asia's richest after solar energy drive

The Indian coal mining tycoon Gautam Adani has become Asia's richest person thanks to a push into green energy that has boosted his fortune to $88.5bn. Adani has overtaken Mukesh Ambani to enter the top 10 of the world's richest, according to Forbes and Bloomberg. Among the mega-rich whom Adani has leapfrogged to reach the world top 10 include Zuckerberg.

The New York Times

### Hate speech in India nears dangerous levels

The police officer arrived at the Hindu temple with a warning to the monks: Don't repeat your hate speech. Ten days earlier, before a packed audience, the monks had called for violence against the country's Muslims. Their speeches, in one of India's holiest cities, promoted a genocidal campaign to "kill two million of them" and urged an ethnic cleansing.

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The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Canadian colleges

### Trudeau govt should intervene to bail out Indian students

THE abrupt closure of three colleges in Montreal has left about 2,000 international students, mostly from India, high and dry. More than 1,100 of them are based in Canada, while the rest are attending online classes from home at their native places. The institutions have cited financial problems triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic for their decision to shut shop. Some of the students had paid the pending fee, running into lakhs of rupees, before the colleges closed for the winter vacation late last year. There are reports that the Quebec government suspended the licence of these colleges following the detection of financial and academic irregularities.

The number of Indian students opting for higher education abroad has been rising steadily and is expected to reach 18 lakh by 2024. Their annual overseas spending is also estimated to grow from nearly $30 billion at present to $80 billion by 2024. Canada has overtaken the US in recent years as the most preferred destination for students from India. Most of them take admission in Canadian institutions with the long-term objective of working and settling down in the Maple Country. Disruption of their studies adversely impacts their career prospects and can force them to look for other options or even return to India. The families which have taken hefty loans or sold/mortgaged their property to send their children abroad find themselves on the brink of ruin.

With the latest developments putting the future of many students in jeopardy, the Trudeau government should make alternative arrangements for the completion of their studies or ensure that their tuition and visa fee is refunded. It's unacceptable to abandon these young people who are contributing handsomely to Canadian economy. At the same time, the system of checks and balances needs to be firmed up so that overseas education aspirants don't fall into the trap of dubious colleges that are out to make a quick buck. Close coordination between the Indian and Canadian governments can go a long way in weeding out the black sheep and saving students from career-threatening shocks.

## Avoidable seasonal loss

### Precious foodgrains rot as proper storage elusive

IN the latest such incident that unfortunately occurs with wretched regularity, three open plinths in Karnal, Haryana, have been found with tonnes of foodgrains meant for public distribution rotting in the rain. It will not be surprising if the quality inspections of the stored stuff reveal more such cases, both in Punjab and Haryana. For, this avoidable calamity, sadly, has become a seasonal affair befalling the beleaguered states and the nation. Despite the tall claims and promises made by the authorities over the years, the control of this tremendous loss by ensuring scientific storage facilities remains elusive.

Foodgrains decaying due to lack of proper and adequate silos or godowns is particularly heart-wrenching as our country is still home to millions going hungry every day. The grains degrade as, horrifyingly, rats gnaw at them and rain damages lakhs of sacks full of the essential commodity, rendering it inedible. Taking note of this abjectly apathetic situation, the Supreme Court had a few years ago been constrained to direct that if it was not possible to save the precious grains from decomposition and waste, they better be distributed to the poor. It would have saved lakhs of citizens from dying of hunger or malnutrition.

In May 2021, when wheat procurement had touched an all-time high, the Centre had assured of 100 per cent scientific storage in the two key producing states of Punjab and Haryana by July-end. But the Karnal case is a pointer to the bitter fact that there is a lot of ground still left to cover before the produce of the hardworking farmers and the staple of the citizens get an augmented cover against the vagaries of weather and rodents during storage and other post-harvest operations. We have definitely not seen the last of such guarantees. For, rather than stringent accountability fixed at the highest levels for the avoidable seasonal losses, such reports generally evoke the standard insipid replies ('an inquiry has been ordered' or 'notices seeking explanation issued to inspectors') before it's business as usual. What a pity!

# Russia, China closing ranks

## Deepening ties complicate India's foreign policy challenges

SHYAM SARAN
FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY AND SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

**TRADE-OFF:** While China is backing Russia's position on Ukraine, Moscow is supporting Beijing on Taiwan. AP

IT is an important axiom in foreign policy that you do not provoke an adversary on an issue in which the latter has greater stakes than you do. This applies even in a situation where the adversary is less powerful. This was demonstrated earlier in the case of Georgia and later in the occupation and incorporation into Russia of Ukraine's Crimea. In neither case were the US and its western allies prepared to go to war to prevent Russian aggression. In the events leading up to the Crimean crisis in 2014, the US supported an anti-Russian movement, the so-called Maidan revolt in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, but failed to resist Russian resort to arms in retaliation, in Ukraine's Donbas region populated mainly by ethnic Russians. Economic sanctions can only take you so far. A similar situation has arisen in the latest crisis in Ukraine, with Russia having deployed more than 1 lakh troops along that country's borders. Russia is demanding 'legal guarantees' that there will be no further expansion of the EU or NATO towards the east. Neither the EU nor NATO have any plans to admit Ukraine in the foreseeable future but do not want, as a matter of principle, to be seen formally conceding to Russian demands. The danger of a military offensive against Ukraine, therefore, remains a distinct possibility whose aim may be to replace the current government in Kiev with a pro-Russian alternative.

One may witness a similar scenario unfolding in the Indo-Pacific in the context of China's increasingly aggressive and threatening moves against Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province which must eventually be united with China. A prominent Chinese political scientist, Jin Canrong, recently declared that a military offensive to unify Taiwan may be unavoidable and may take place by 2027. He also asserted that China had enough capabilities to defeat any US attempt to intervene militarily.

> India may have to think of other ways to prevent a China-dominated Asia becoming an uncomfortable reality.

The question is whether the US would intervene to prevent a Chinese take-over of Taiwan? Does China have a greater stake in the Taiwan issue than the US? The answer is yes. The US says it has a policy of 'strategic ambiguity', that is, it will leave China guessing whether it will intervene or not, and hope this will deter Chinese action. But strategic ambiguity signals that the issue is not so important to US security as to demand a clear commitment to Taiwan's defence. There is a certain parallel, though not an identical situation, here compared to the Ukraine crisis. And to take on two adversaries both with greater stakes in these outstanding issues than the US does, might be a strategic miscalculation on the latter's part.

It is against this background that one should analyse the joint statement issued at the close of the Putin-Xi summit on February 4. It signals a significant geopolitical shift, with Sino-Russian relations moving towards a deeper security alignment, with each anticipating a potential payoff in respect to what they consider their 'core interests'.

The language of the statement is indicative of this shift. To state that 'friendship between the 2 countries has no limits, there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation' is unprecedented and sweeping and should not be dismissed as rhetoric. Alexander Gubanev of the Carnegie Centre in Moscow has observed: 'It looks like the most sensitive areas of cooperation have been moved into stealth mode. They are the underwater part of the iceberg.'

China has made an important shift in its policy towards Europe and this is reflected in the support it has voiced for Russia in its current confrontation with the US and western Europe over Ukraine. Contrast this with China's discomfort over Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in 2014. It abstained rather than vote against a UN resolution condemning Russia on the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. China had been careful not to get involved in Russia's confrontation with Europe but this has changed. In their joint statement, China has, for the first time, joined Russia in opposing the enlargement of NATO but stopped short of opposing the enlargement of the EU which is included in Russian demands. While Ukraine has not been named, China declares that it is 'sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.'

Russia, in return, has supported Chinese positions on Taiwan and against Quad, AUKUS and the US Indo-Pacific strategy. It has, however, stopped short of endorsing Chinese claims in the South China Sea. There is a quid pro quo apparent here. Both Russia and China sense that the current geopolitical scenario offers them an opportunity to undermine the US and western dominance of the international order and reshape it in line with their own interests. There are several opening paragraphs which dwell upon the notion of democracy, contesting the western version of a liberal democracy. There is clearly a meeting of authoritarian minds on this question!

These latest developments will shrink India's room for manouevre and call into question its assumption that Sino-Russian alignment is mostly tactical; that growing Chinese influence in Central Asia and eastern Europe is what threatens Russian interests in the latter's 'near neighbourhood' and that this would put a limit on how far Sino-Russian relations could advance. We need to revisit these assumptions.

Should the Russians in Ukraine and the Chinese in Taiwan succeed in asserting their 'core interests', the credibility of the US, including its Indo-Pacific strategy, will be severely undermined. This will call into question the efficacy of Quad as a countervailing coalition. India may have to think of other ways to prevent a Chinese-dominated Asia becoming an uncomfortable reality. Several other major powers in the region will confront similar dilemma and India should engage with them to manage an altered geopolitical landscape in our region.

# Magic of India prevails

RK SABOO

MY granddaughter Shivani (23) came to India after almost five years. Born and living in the US, she was inquisitive about the culture, history and the changing scenario of India, the country of origin of her parents.

My son and daughter-in-law shifted to the US in the late 1980s. They frequently visited India but the pandemic had restricted their trips. However, Shivani could not come earlier as she was in college, then in a new job, followed by the pandemic. Now with the Covid situation improving, they came to Chandigarh in December.

We went to Amritsar the next day. Shivani and her father, both photography enthusiasts, went to the Golden Temple, taking photographs of the rising sun and the temple. We joined them later. It was a memorable experience for her to be in the sanctum sanctorum. While walking around the sarovar, we visited the 'Guru ka langar' hall. She was amazed to see the volunteers preparing meals in huge utensils, serving hundreds of people at a time, collecting and cleaning the used *thalis* and glasses, keeping them ready for the next round.

People were sitting together on the floor and eating wholesome vegetarian food, regardless of religion, caste, gender or ethnicity. She had never seen such voluntarism – kar seva. It made an indelible impression on her young mind.

From the Golden Temple, we walked over to the Jallianwala Bagh, where she took her time to see how history was created when a peaceful crowd was made the target of shooting by the British-led soldiers, killing and injuring more than 1,500 hapless people. Here, she got a mixed feeling of pain, anger and pride. From the epitome of religion to the place of martyrdom, Shivani saw a slice of India's glorious history.

In the afternoon, we drove to the Attari-Wagah border between India and Pakistan to watch the Beating Retreat ceremony. The atmosphere was charged with nationalistic fervour and constant shouting of slogans for the country. Just as the sun was about to set, the bugles sounded on both sides and the flags of the two countries were lowered for the day simultaneously. This was a climax of heightened nationalistic sensitivity.

The two evenings, we went to traditional dhabas for dinner. We had to manoeuvre our way in small lanes, between rickshaws, motorcycles and pedestrians. But it was fun and we had simple, delicious, vegetarian food — hot crisp *naans*, *paranthas*, *dal* and a vegetable. Shivani could not believe that the whole meal cost just $3 per person. The following day, we returned to Chandigarh. My elder son and daughter-in-law got together for a family reunion.

Before leaving for the US, she mentioned that she had loved every moment and experience of the trip and said firmly, 'I have to come regularly every year to see more of India, our great nation.'

The magic of India had worked!

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The heart of manipulation is to empathise without being touched. — **Vernor Vinge**

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1922

### THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA'S REPLY-II

WE now come to the more important parts of the Government of India's reply to Mahatma Gandhi's manifesto, the part in which they explain and defend their present policy, and that in which they endeavour to show that the demands made in the manifesto are incapable of being acceded to. "Since the inauguration of the non-co-operation movement", they write, "the Government of India, actuated by a desire to avoid anything in the nature of repression of political activity, even though it was of an extreme character, have restricted their actions in relation thereto to such measures as were necessary for the maintenance of law and order and preservation of public tranquility." If it were a correct statement of the policy of the Government of India, they would deserve no credit whatever for that policy. No Government can in these days and under modern conditions claim to do more in relation to political activities, no matter how extreme, than to adopt measures necessary for the maintenance of law and order and the preservation of public tranquility. But the statement is not correct. The Government undoubtedly did less in the early stages of the movement than they could lawfully have done, and for this they both deserved and received credit from the public. They undoubtedly have done more during the last two months, and that is why public opinion all over the country has condemned their policy. Of course when we speak of law, we mean the ordinary law of the land, and not such laws as the Seditious Meetings Act, the Press Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act which, in the words of a distinguished jurist, are only lawless laws, the negation of all laws and which, if strictly enforced, would make an end of all political activity, no matter how moderate or constitutional, as they have practically done in some of the areas in which they are in force.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Bending the law

Refer to 'Lawbreaker lawmakers?', we should not forget that no one is allowed to break the law in the country, even if they are lawmakers. The increase in criminal cases against MPs and MLAs in the country day by day and the pendency of such cases in the courts at all levels for a long time is also a matter of concern, for which the Central and state governments, the Election Commission and all the national and regional political parties should think unitedly and resolve the issue at the earliest in the interest of the country.

**SHAKTI SINGH,** KARNAL

### Politics of hate

Reference to 'Culture of hate'; by invoking a law to ban hijab, the Karnataka Government makes space in school separate, unequal. It violates the Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to equality, the right to education, and the right to practise their religion. It seems pertinent to question our disregard for the attack on Asaduddin Owaisi. His controversial views notwithstanding, he is a citizen and a legislator and deserves as much sympathy as any other person in his place would have. The EC has already cautioned political parties over hate speeches but takes no action if the ruling party activists are involved. The top leadership in the country needs to crack the whip and make it clear that it stands by the core constitutional values of the land.

**SS PAUL,** NADIA

### Canada colleges closed

Apropos of '3 Canadian colleges shut, Indian students in lurch', the future of about 2,000 Indian students is at stake. Their parents have lost their life's savings. Many of them had raised loans to pay fee and travel expenses of their wards. Though these colleges have played a big fraud, parents, in their enthusiasm to send their wards abroad in search of greener pastures, did not verify the antecedents of these institutions through reliable sources. India should immediately take up the case with Canada to ensure that such frauds do not take place again and also to help the victims receive the refund of tuition fee, visa and also an opportunity to complete their studies. This fraud should serve as an eye-opener to all those seeking to go abroad for higher studies.

**NK GOSAIN,** BATHINDA

### Timeless treasure

Lata Mangeshkar was given a befitting farewell with two-day national mourning. She was a voice in a million, the voice of a billion. With her legacy of countless songs sung in over 30 languages, it would be impossible to fill the void in the music industry left by her. Her sweet, velvet voice was versatile. She has left an indelible impression on the sands of time. We have lost a precious gem, and in her, we had found a timeless treasure. Her lilting voice will be echoed and remembered in her song, '*Naam gum jaayega, chehra yeh badal jayega*'.

**GURPREET SINGH,** BY MAIL

### Voice will resonate

The demise of Lata Mangeshkar is an irreparable loss for the nation. Her soft and melodious voice attracted appreciation and attention worldwide. She sang with grace and sensitivity and left a lasting imprint with her exquisite voice. Despite her fame and adulation, she remained a humble person. Her voice will resonate forever in the hearts and minds of music lovers. Lata will be an inspiration and a guiding light for many.

**DEVENDRA KHURANA,** BHOPAL

### *Abhi na jao chhod kar...*

Refer to 'Lata's timeless melodies'; Lata *didi* was a lioness who braved innumerable hardships. She was as peaceful as her melodies and her songs, as promising as a benediction. The demise of the 'Nightingale of India' is the end of an era. It feels harsh to write 'she was' or 'had been' because her voice still resonates in millions of ears. She has been, and will always be an inspiration for generations to come, and specially those who perceive art as bliss. Her multilingual melodies gave a new life to Indian music. Let us now hear the same songs from the Heaven above.

**ANUSHKA JAISWAL,** UJJAIN

### Use funds wisely

Refer to 'Focus on spending'; I will not mind if the government increases more taxation, provided the money is spent on the following projects: hydel and water resources development; recycling of waste water and solid wastes; solar energy development; establishing modern technology parks along coastal areas to attract FDI; sanitation programme; population control measures; running more trains on 55% grossly underutilised tracks, allowing states to run trains in their state boundaries, the railways to run only interstate trains; and allowing the private sector to set up iron plants in iron ore-rich states. The allocation of Rs 7.5 lakh crore capital expenditure is likely to be spent on the transport sector only. It is also not indicated whether the 25,000 km of proposed highways will include the length of highways under construction.

**RN MALIK,** GURUGRAM

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

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# Democracy should bridge economic chasm

NEERA CHANDHOKE
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

ACCORDING to the 2022 Oxfam Report, 'Inequality Kills', in 2021, 4.6 crore Indians fell into extreme poverty. In the same year, the wealth of billionaires increased from Rs 23.14 lakh crore to Rs 53.15 lakh crore. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy reports that 95 per cent of 3.05 crore Indians, of which 95 per cent are below the age of 29, are unemployed. As many as 1.8 crore of this number is graduates. If we care about our fellow citizens and about how they live, we should take serious note of these numbers.

Poverty is not mere statistics. Statistics indicate that our people live in destitution. There is more, for poverty breeds multiple deprivations. The poor are not only denied access to basic needs, they are socially marginalised, politically insignificant in terms of 'voice' as distinct from the 'vote', dismissed and subjected to intense disrespect in and through the practices of everyday life.

There was a time when policy-makers, charged by notions of redistributive justice, focussed on progressive taxation, land redistribution, right to work, employment generation, quality of work, education and health of the working class. After the collapse of the socialist world in 1989, they casually abandoned grand visions of a decent society in which people encountered each other as equals, and not as members of two different worlds defined by garish wealth and mind-numbing poverty, respectively. We entered an era marked by the victory of political liberalism; a liberalism that had been pounded out of shape by the economics of neo-liberalism.

Across the world, the state withdrew from commitment to the well-being of its citizens, and transited to what has been called the 'entrepreneurial' state. The belief that citizens have to create their own jobs, irrespective of the quality of work, is integral to neo-liberalism. The ideology simply does not recognise that the state throws needy individuals onto the not so tender mercies of the market.

Generations of socialist thinkers have told us that the market has place only for those who can buy, and for those who can find buyers for the commodities they offer. It has neither compassion nor need for those who are born into poverty, and who spend their time looking for a handful of grain. We forget these lessons. And defenders of the market forget that a society that is indifferent to the needs of the deprived breeds its own contradictions. We witnessed an instance of this frustration last month when thousands of restless, thwarted and angry young people set train compartments on fire. Their rage is understandable; they cannot find a place in the lower-rungs of government services, while other young people drive past in flashy cars, live lives of luxury and inhabit opulent neighbourhoods.

Defenders of the market forget that a society that is indifferent to the needs of the deprived breeds its own contradictions. We witnessed an instance of this frustration last month when thousands of restless, thwarted and angry people set train compartments on fire. Their rage is understandable. This is perhaps the beginning of a crisis. The crisis of unemployment will relentlessly exacerbate political discontent.

**THE DIVIDE:** Policy-makers should take into account that a substantial chunk of the population lives beyond the pale of market forces. PTI

This is, perhaps, the beginning of a crisis. The crisis of unemployment will relentlessly exacerbate political discontent. The former cannot be resolved by sops to reduce poverty. The latter can hardly be resolved by promises of cash transfers during elections. In the debate on equality, the philosophical school of sufficientarianism suggests that people should be given enough to eat; how does it matter if they are unequal? Egalitarians insist that the challenge is not only about giving people enough to eat; it is about the right of everyone to participate in social, economic and political transactions as equals. The objective of equality is to enable people to be authors of their own lives. People can hardly write their own history if they are told condescendingly during elections: 'Give me your vote and I will give you a thousand or so rupees.' Is this all India's power elites owe the poor? Not structural change?

It is time we take a once valued concept out of the closet, dust it, refashion it to suit our times, and present a picture of the world we should be living in, instead of the world we do live in. The concept is that of social democracy. Social democracy is, as all concepts in political theory are, contested. The most persuasive case for social democracy is offered by Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009). The concept, he said, offers no ultimate solution for humankind. It merely speaks of 'an obstinate will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering, oppression, hunger, wars, racial and national hatred, insatiable greed and vindictive envy.' These ills of the human condition have to be fought through forms of collective action. Collective action has to concentrate on the antidote to poverty and inequality: social democracy which promotes well-being. Leaders cast, but an occasional eye on the suffering, and charitably extend a thousand rupees here and a thousand there as a personal favour. In a democracy, citizens do not need charity, they have rights to freedom and equality. They do not need the largesse of a medieval monarch, nor do they need to thank him repeatedly.

Social democracy lacks the fire and thunder of regressive right-wing politics. It lacks the romantic imagination of a post-revolutionary, perfectly egalitarian world. But it does tell us that a world where little children do not have to beg for cast-off food in bare feet and tattered clothes, is far, far better than the one in which people's life chances are shaped by inequality. An individual who is unequal to others in society can hardly write her own history. Inequality fosters unfreedom. In history, revolutions have been inspired by freedom, but also equality.

# India can't afford to lower the guard at LAC

LT COL PAVITHRAN RAJAN (RETD)
DEFENCE COMMENTATOR

The case for a military solution as Xi faces growing economic and political headwinds is strong. With the US focused on Russia, there is an increasing possibility that Xi would rely on the PLA to help him in his continued bid for power by a quick military victory that can raise his stature as a great leader on the lines of Mao and Deng. An analysis of options reveals that retaking Taiwan is beyond the PLA's capability. This leaves only the disputed LAC, where the current military build-up can give an option to exercise.

THE 14th round of the India-China corps commander-level meeting was held on January 12 at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh. Despite a "frank and in-depth" exchange of views, the talks failed to make any headway in the 18 month-long military standoff between the two armies. The LAC stalemate has settled into a new normal and the state elections in India have taken centre stage in the national discourse. In New Delhi, there is a feeling that the Indian Army is now better prepared to handle the PLA with emergency purchase of military hardware and faster execution of long-pending infrastructure upgrade, having improved the Army's combat potential.

What has perhaps not been fully appreciated are two unconnected events in distant Europe and Beijing that might have serious repercussions on the LAC. In Europe, long simmering tensions with Russia because of NATO's expansion plans have now come to a head with the Russian military mobilised on the Ukraine border and the West ratcheting up both diplomatic and military signals. There is a possibility that the situation could spiral out of control, resulting in the focus of the United States shifting from the Indo-Pacific to Europe.

In Beijing, multiple subtle signals indicate that the power struggle between Xi and rival CCP factions has intensified. An article in the December 2021 issue of the *China Discipline and Supervision* journal talked of "self-righteous cadres...who openly express views contrary to the dangzhongyang (central party authorities)" while "others even harbour inordinate ambitions and act contrary to the dangzhongyang, either openly or surreptitiously". Dangzhongyang is a term that is synonymous with Xi Jinping. The competing factions are the Shanghai faction led by ex-president Jiang Zemin and the Communist Youth League faction led by ex-president Hu Jintao, both of whom oppose Xi's bid for additional terms in office at the 20th Party Congress scheduled later this year. All the factions are using the 'anti-corruption card' to target each other.

**ALERT:** Power game in China makes India prone to PLA aggression on its borders. REUTERS

Members of the Xi Jinping group, mostly from Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, have also suffered setbacks. The most notable example is the former party secretary of Zhejiang's provincial capital Hangzhou, Zhou Jiangyong, who was placed under investigation last August. Apart from accepting huge bribes, Zhou was being investigated for "collusion" with a handful of private entrepreneurs in the province (Xinhua, August 21). Another member is Xu Liyi from Zhejiang, who was reprimanded for his poor handling of severe flooding in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province.

These political setbacks, along with the Chinese property sector crisis sparked by the financial difficulties of the Evergrande Group and the crackdown on Chinese tech companies, provide a now or never opportunity for rival factions to challenge Xi's bid for continued grip on power. To come out a victor in this power struggle, Xi could turn towards the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Xi has consolidated his hold on the military with the rapid promotion of 38 officers to the rank of General since 2019. A Jamestown Foundation report by Willy Wo-Lap Lam points out that this is "extraordinary in that it breaches long-standing military convention", like a minimum period of 24 months service as Lieutenant General and only one promotion board per year.

The case for a military solution as Xi faces growing economic and political headwinds is strong. With the US focused on Russia, there is an increasing possibility that Xi would rely on the PLA to help him in his continued bid for power by a quick military victory that can raise his stature as a great leader on the lines of Mao and Deng. An analysis of the options for use of military force indicates that retaking of Taiwan, despite the historic rhetoric for reunification, is presently beyond the PLA's capability. This leaves only the disputed LAC, where the current military build-up gives Xi an option that could be exercised at an opportune time.

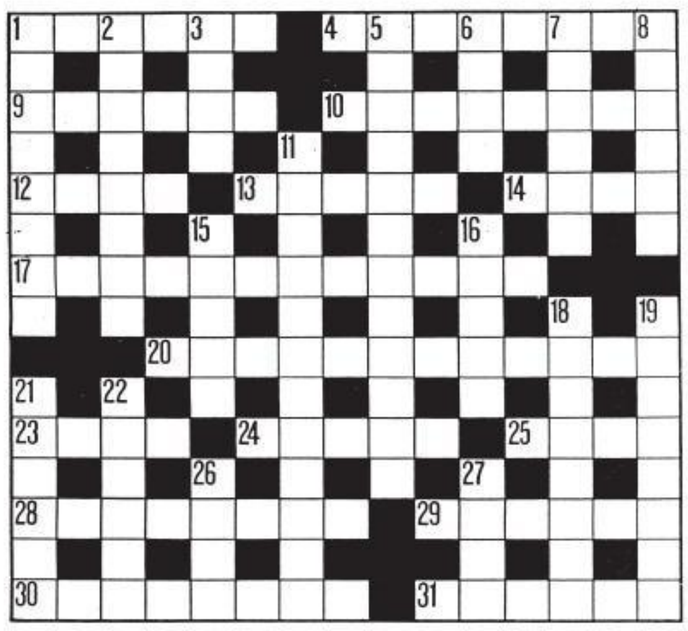
The easiest opportunity for a military victory at minimal cost is in RALP (Rest of Arunachal Pradesh). In this area, the lack of communication infrastructure on the Indian side gives the PLA a very clear tactical advantage. Although not as strategic as eastern Ladakh or as politically sensitive as Tawang, RALP guarantees a high-visibility occupation of some territory that will help cement the rallying of the Chinese population and the CCP. The recent land border law that came into effect on January 1 is an enabling provision that can easily be weaponised to justify a limited military action. According to Chinese claims, complete Arunachal Pradesh is part of Southern Tibet, and hence, Chinese territory. China has recently renamed parts of Arunachal Pradesh and the new law makes China's borders "sacred and inviolable". The passing of the law in the midst of the ongoing standoff signals a hardening of Chinese stance with regard to the settlement of the border disputes.

It is not entirely certain that a major India-China conflict would erupt, and multiple factors could deter its course. However, to be unprepared for this contingency could have serious consequences. Recent media reports indicate that the Army has spent approximately 40% of its capital budget for the ongoing financial year, while the Indian Air Force has spent around 70%. This shows that the military bureaucracy is not fully awakened to the Chinese threat.

In 1962, Mao seized the opportunity of the Cuban Missile crisis to teach Nehru a lesson and establish China's military superiority. With the US and Europe distracted by Ukraine, Xi may see this as a time to cement his place in history and also consolidate his political fortunes. Any military victory against India could also lead to the political weakening of Prime Minister Modi and affect his image as a leader who picked up the gauntlet that Xi threw down in Ladakh.

Even a small tactical victory by China would have an immense strategic and geopolitical impact. Both the political and military leadership must be cognisant of the risks and work to minimise them.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



**ACROSS**
1 A salad vegetable (6)
4 Very successful show (5,3)
9 Unlucky accident (6)
10 Supporting framework (8)
12 Properly (4)
13 Commonplace (5)
14 Small monastic room (4)
17 Having natural aversion (12)
20 To delight (4,8)
23 Loud deep sound (4)
24 Outspoken (5)
25 Business concern (4)
28 Athletics field event (4,4)
29 Choice (6)
30 US national legislative body (8)
31 Superfluity (6)

**DOWN**
1 Curative (8)
2 Forlorn (8)
3 Influence (4)
5 Follow most direct route (4,1,7)
6 Soft lustrous fabric (4)
7 To this place (6)
8 Slight stinging sensation (6)
11 Worsen existing ill feeling (3,3,6)
15 A flowering branch (5)
16 Full of life (5)
18 Person fleeing (8)
19 End of the line (8)
21 Gambol (6)
22 Automatic gun in aircraft (6)
26 Slightly open (4)
27 Highest point (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

**Across:** 1 Cycle, 4 Inhibit, 8 Sum, 9 Have words, 10 Accused, 11 Venus, 13 Drench, 15 Primer, 18 Venom, 19 Flannel, 21 Small talk, 23 Map, 24 Relaxed, 25 Waste.
**Down:** 1 Custard, 2 Come clean, 3 Ethos, 4 Invade, 5 However, 6 Bar, 7 Tusks, 12 Name names, 14 Complex, 16 Relapse, 17 Afraid, 18 Visor, 20 Askew, 22 All.

## SU DO KU

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| | | 3 | | | | 8 | 7 | 5 |
| | 6 | | 8 | | | | 3 | |

EASY

## CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 9, 2022, WEDNESDAY

- Vikrami Samvat 2078
- Shaka Samvat 1943
- Magh Shaka 20
- Magh Parvishte 27
- Hijari 1443
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 8.31 am
- Brahma Yoga up to 5.51pm
- Kritika Nakshatra up to 12.23 am
- Moon in Taurus sign

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

## FORECAST

SUNSET: WEDNESDAY 18:06 HRS
SUNRISE: THURSDAY 07:07 HRS

Sunny | Partly Cloudy | Cloudy | Rainy | Foggy

| CITY | MAX | MIN |
|---|---|---|
| Chandigarh | 18 | 07 |
| New Delhi | 22 | 13 |
| Amritsar | 15 | 06 |
| Bathinda | 19 | 06 |
| Jalandhar | 15 | 08 |
| Ludhiana | 17 | 07 |
| Bhiwani | 17 | 10 |
| Hisar | 19 | 11 |
| Sirsa | 19 | 11 |
| Dharamsala | 15 | 04 |
| Manali | 06 | –02 |
| Shimla | 09 | –01 |
| Srinagar | 06 | 01 |
| Jammu | 20 | 12 |
| Kargil | –01 | –12 |
| Leh | –01 | –12 |
| Dehradun | 18 | 09 |
| Mussoorie | 07 | 02 |

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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## Pegasus vs Netanyahu

The former Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is under a cloud yet again with the reported allegation that the country's police had used spyware on the phone of one of his sons, and of members of his "inner circle", activists and officials. Sophisticated spyware was alleged to have been used by the police against protesters and other Israeli citizens, provoking condemnation from across the political spectrum. The allegation could arguably undermine Netanyahu's corruption trial in the context of reports that a key witness was under spyware surveillance. "Very serious," was the reaction of the incumbent Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett. A government inquiry commission, headed by a retired judge, has been constituted to "investigate in depth the violation of civil rights and privacy in the years in question". The alleged violations appear to have been carried out under former officials in previous governments. The report in *Calcalist* stated that the police used spyware against a phone registered to Netanyahu's son, Avner, as well as two communications advisers in one of the three corruption cases against the former PM. They happen to be among several prominent figures to have been targeted with spyware, including business leaders, former directors of ministries and mayors. Also targeted were the organizers of demonstrations on behalf of disabled people and Israel's Ethiopian minority. Police used the powerful Pegasus software developed by the Israeli firm, NSO Group, which is mired in controversy after its spyware was linked to eavesdropping on journalists, activists and politicians in several countries. Police allegedly used the spyware to gather intelligence before any investigation had been opened and without judicial warrants. Bennett, who replaced Netanyahu as Prime Minister last June, said Pegasus and "other products are important tools in the fight against terrorism and severe crime," but they were not intended to be used in what they call 'phishing campaigns' targeting the Israeli public and officials. "Which is why we need to understand what exactly happened," Mr Bennett said in a statement. Altogether, the episode mirrors the conduct of the government in Tel-Aviv. Echoing the call for an investigation was Isreal's President, Isaac Herzog, who said "We must not lose our democracy." Not wholly unrelated is the new proposal, articulated by Israeli and Palestinian "public figures", on a two-state confederation that they hope will offer a way forward after the stalemate in the Middle East peace talks. The plan bristles with controversial proposals and it is far from clear whether it has any support from leaders on either side of the fence. The plan envisages an independent state of Palestine in most of the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, verily territories seized in the Mideast war on 1967. The plan, which will be advanced to the United States and the UN Secretary-General, also envisages separate governments for Israel and Palestine; both will coordinate on security, infrastructure and other issues that can impinge on the populations of both countries.

## International initiative

International efforts to defuse the standoff over Ukraine intensified on Monday with President Emmanuel Macron of France holding talks with his Russian counterpart in Moscow and the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, in Washington to coordinate policies as fears of a Russian invasion mounted. Mr Macron expressed optimism that a deal to avoid war is possible while accepting that it was legitimate for Russia to raise its security concerns, the first sign that the West may be ready to blink. Meanwhile, President Joe Biden said that America and Germany are "in lockstep" on confronting Russia over Ukraine, after a meeting with Mr Schulz. Indeed, Europe is going through its most dangerous moment since the Cold War amidst the increasingly resonant beating of war drums. The statement was advanced as President Macron held talks in Moscow with President Vladimir Putin in the highest-profile intervention yet by a Western leader to ease the crisis. Russia has amassed tens of thousands of troops near the Ukraine border, with Western leaders raising alarms of a potential attack. Russia denies it is preparing for an invasion.

Mr Biden said after a meeting with Chancellor Scholz, "We're working in lockstep to further deter Russian aggression in Europe" as well as in meeting "challenges posed by China." Mr. Scholz, on his first trip to the White House since taking over from long-time German leader Angela Merkel, said their countries were the "closest allies and working intensely together." In parallel, the European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stressed a diplomatic solution with Russia over Ukraine remained "possible" at a joint news conference in Washington with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "We are living, to my understanding, the most dangerous moment for security in Europe after the end of the Cold War," Mr. Borrell told reporters. America and the European Union have pledged to work to ensure gas supplies can respond to disruptions in pipeline gas flows to the continent by Russia, its biggest supplier. "We're working together right now to protect Europe's energy supply against supply shocks, including those that could result from further Russian aggression against Ukraine," Mr Blinken said. Europe's dependence on Russian gas has come under scrutiny in recent months because of lower than expected supplies and rising tensions on the Ukrainian border. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has warned Moscow against trying to split Kiev from its Western allies. "No one, no matter how hard anyone tries in Russia, will be able to drive a wedge between Ukraine and its partners," Mr Kuleba said at a press conference with his German counterpart Annalena Baerbock in Kiev. "We have … jointly prepared a series of tough measures against Russia for this eventuality; these sanctions are unprecedented and have been coordinated and prepared with all partners," Ms Baerbock said. In the ultimate analysis, though, the way to peace may lie in Mr Macron's admission about Russia's security concerns.

# Trouble in the Isles

**Three years into power, the President Solih-led government in the Maldives is facing multiple domestic issues like sexual harassment cases, graft charges and above all, pandemic related slowdown. This has reignited the relevance of the principal opposition party, the Islamist Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), led by Abdulla Yameen and has expectedly led to a brazen 'India Out' campaign, despite the widespread acknowledgement of India's role in rushing Covid-19 vaccines, testing-kits and PPE material in trying times**

On 3 November 1988, a coup d'état attempt with Tamil Sri Lankan mercenaries was attempted against the Maumoon Abdul Gayoom government in Maldives. Mercenaries had taken over almost all major buildings, and desperate SOS messages to Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Singapore, US and UK elicited no positive response, till India was finally requested. With turmoil in India's perceived 'backyard', New Delhi reacted swiftly, and Operation Cactus was launched.

Within nine hours of the appeal, Indian Air Force flew non-stop from Agra and landed its 50th Para Brigade in Male. Within hours, the situation was restored and mercenaries fleeing back to Sri Lanka were successfully intercepted by Indian Navy frigates.

The vulnerable island nation heaved a sigh of relief and was highly obliged, whereas the inherently non-expansionist Indian government withdrew its troops as soon as the situation was handed over to the Maldivian authorities. The reciprocal sentiment of 'India-First' held good for decades.

On 17 November 2013, former leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's half-brother, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, took over as the President. Abdulla's run-up campaign had borne contrarian positions ~ he was clearly anti-India and decidedly Islamist in his appeal, with a manifesto pledging death penalty under Sharia and strengthening relations with Muslim nations.

One of the first casualties of his ascendancy to Presidentship, was the decades long 'India-First' policy that had survived the earlier and rival administrations of Mohamed Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, respectively.

Almost immediately, annulation of key contracts to Indian firms was followed by the parallel grant of the same to Chinese parties, and the Chinese footprint by 'friendly visits' of Chinese naval vessels, tourists, and flurry of officials, followed. New Delhi was horrified.

The tilt towards Beijing was more than compensated in terms of largesse, and the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge became the visible symbol of the 'new-normal' in Male. But like all authoritarian-usurpers who invoke religiousity, the Abdulla dispensation became increasingly intolerant, illiberal, and harsh on the opposition, so much so that by the 2018 elections, he was heading an unpopular regime.

The relatively moderate, Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), made a return and by this time, Abdulla's half-brother, previous leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom had switched sides to the incoming MDP dispensation, calling India its 'closest and most trusted ally', with memories of the 1988 coup d'état still resonating. Since 17 November 2018, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih as President of Maldives (and former President Mohamed Nasheed as Speaker), have restored the 'India-First' stance and brought back the historical warmth to Indo-Maldivian ties.

**BHOPINDER SINGH**
The writer is Lt Gen PVSM, AVSM (Retd) and former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

Collateral moves of moderating the religious temper on the islands, with President Solih expressively calling out 'terrorist and extremist groups that undermine religion and culture', run contrary to the previous Abdulla government which pandered to religious extremism, as a means of political legitimacy. The pro-China policy of the previous Abdulla dispensation was aligned to domestic expressions of hard religiousity, as is practiced dually, in the neighbouring country of Pakistan.

Now, three years into power, the President Solih-led MDP government is facing multiple domestic issues like sexual harassment cases, graft charges and above all, pandemic related slowdown. This has reignited the relevance of the principal opposition party, the Islamist Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), led by Abdulla Yameen.

This has expectedly led to a brazen counter 'India Out' campaign, despite the widespread acknowledgement of India's role in rushing Covid-19 vaccines, testing-kits and PPE material in trying times. The role of India in developmental-infrastructural projects, medical care/ facilities, and education opportunities for outbound Maldivians, as indeed, India's burgeoning contribution towards life-sustaining inbound tourism, makes it extremely critical for sustenance.

So, this leaves former President Abdulla to only play up the emotional angle of 'sovereign surrender', as he rakes up the issue of Indian pilots and technicians manning the aircraft (India-gifted Dorniers and helicopters), which are often engaged in humanitarian emergencies and natural disaster SOSs. He then slyly dials up the loaded 'no need for Indian military presence' notions that are half-truths and intended to convey deliberate malintents.

The oldest formula of knowingly mixing hyper-nationalism with religion is fertile ground for Abdulla to appropriate, as religious invocations have timeless appeals and faith transcends logic, especially when pitted against the more moderate, progressive, and secular agenda of incumbent President Solih. This vile appeal towards personal beliefs can galvanise, stir and contextualise all related and unrelated angst, towards finding succor and trust in the words of the 'true believers.'

While, Abdulla has retained the tempo of the 'India Out' spiel for the last few months, it has not gained much traction beyond his cadres, who swear allegiance towards PPM in any case.

These pro-or-anti perceptions of political parties in India's neighbourhood is a slippery slope that must not be perpetuated. Partisan politics of countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are deeply divided on these lines of perception which makes for extremely difficult situations, whenever the ostensibly 'anti-India' parties come to power.

Occasionally certain ill-advised moves that seem clearly intrusive and meddlesome from India's side e.g., during Nepal's adoption of its new constitution in 2015, have inadvertently fed such perceptions.

Meanwhile the nimble Chinese always lurk on the sidelines to jump into any situational-opening offered by such divisive politics of the so-called pro-or-anti India parties, like they did in Nepal or Sri Lanka.

That there is an increasing global consensus on the 'debt-traps' that accompany any Chinese largesse, and that is a factor that needs to be amplified diplomatically ~ the Sri Lankans with Hambantota port and the almost-indebted Maldivians are testimony to the ensnaring phenomenon of the Chinese embrace.

Equally, the narrative of India's domestic politics also has ramifications that can be exploited by certain political parties outside. Thus, if there are concerns pertaining to the Indian regime's perceived discrimination against any religious group, it can be exploited by the likes of Maldivian former President Abdulla.

This can undo all the support and aid that the same Indian regime may have offered Maldives. Care to remain sensitive to all citizenry in neighbouring countries without any preference to a group, party or ideology would be helpful to avoid the 'India Out' type of campaigns.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

## Protecting small investors

The local financial community was stunned last week by the unexpected decision of Dito CME Holdings Corp., the parent firm of the third telco player owned by Davao-based businessman Dennis A. Uy, to abort its P8-billion stock rights offering that had been ongoing for about a month.

The deal was pulled out due to weak demand from institutional investors and "other perceived risks," and came just months before President Duterte ~ who considers Uy a friend aside from being a prominent campaign donor ~ leaves Malacañang.

Philippine Stock Exchange (PSE) president Ramon S. Monzon was among those who immediately demanded an explanation from Dito CME. Last Jan. 13, Dito CME had sought a one-week extension of the offer deadline to Jan. 25, claiming it needed more time because of the recent COVID-19 surge.

On Jan. 29, however, the PSE published Dito CME's notice stating it would postpone the offer due to "less than ideal" market conditions and that the firm would refund those who had already paid for shares. The PSE imposed a trading halt on Dito CME on Jan. 31 in order to get clarification from the company.

Market analysts said a troubling

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

sign for investors was the failure of Uy's flagship Udenna Corp., Dito CME's parent firm, to step in and save the deal. In the prospectus on the rights offering, Udenna had pledged to China Bank Capital Corp., which solely handled the fund-raising exercise, that it would take up all the offer shares that wouldn't be bought "to ensure the offer shares are fully subscribed."

But this it did not, and one reason could be that Udenna has already become very highly leveraged ~ it had much more debt than equity. Udenna's assets range from energy, logistics, telecommunications, property, infrastructure to restaurants. It undertook an aggressive debt-fueled acquisition binge during this administration, getting the label "Duterte crony" from the President's critics.

Nikkei Asia recently reported that Udenna's assets jumped to P310 billion in 2020 from just P31 billion in 2015. But during the same period, debts swelled to P255 billion from only P22 billion.

According to Nikkei Asia, Udenna's losses in 2020 worsened to P8.6 billion from P3.3 billion in 2019 as it was similarly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Monzon expressed to the Inquirer his concerns about the cancellation of the stock rights offering, which is a type of fundraising wherein a company sells new shares to existing stockholders.

A first in recent PSE memory, he pointed out that a number of minority stockholders likely incurred an "actual loss" if they sold Dito CME shares when the price was adjusted lower after the Dec. 20, 2021, ex-rights date (the first day when new buyers of Dito CME stocks on the bourse are no longer entitled to join the rights offering).

"This is not a theoretical loss. There is an actual loss to investors who sold after the ex-rights date because they have sold at a lower price," Monzon explained. He said the PSE already received several complaints during the weekend when the news went public.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

## Flagging areas of concern

**SIR**, The World Economic Forum's Global Risk report 2022 gives a picture of mixed prospects for the world, with shadows dominating patches of light and casting uncertainty over the future.

The 17th edition of the report builds on the difficult outlook presented last year, and notes that the continuing grip of the Covid-19 pandemic on the world has given rise to newer concerns. It seeks to look at the challenges and risks in various fields like the economy, society, governance and technology and predicts that the post-pandemic recovery, whenever it comes, will increase disparities and create new problems.

The report finds climate change the most serious long-term risk, and recommends that strengthening climate action, enhancing digital safety, restoring livelihoods and societal cohesion should get priority nationally and internationally. The struggle of some countries to cope with the pandemic will make the progress made by others unreal and even useless. The report also takes note of the implications of the various risks on individuals, communities and governments.

Significantly, the report details disillusionment among youth, digital inequality, the fracturing of interstate relations, debt crisis, and failure of technology governance as the top five risks for the country. The disillusionment of youth and their loss of trust in existing structures and institutions will have serious consequences if the challenges are not tackled well and in time. These are not matters to be handled in the future but risks that exist now.

There was a view that India's demographic dividend, arising from a youthful population, would give it a great advantage, but that opportunity seems to have passed the country by.

The dividend has become a divide and a burden because most of the youth are uneducated or undereducated and unskilled, and unable to make use of the opportunities.

The country is not able to provide the youth education, or jobs to those who have secured education. This situation has created disillusionment.

Disillusioned youth are prone to political exploitation and may get attracted to radical ideologies. They may be swayed by populist passions and negativism. There are signs of this even now. Inequalities can aggravate the sense of loss and disentitlement. All this can lead to increased political and social conflict. These are difficult times for all communities and societies, and they call for perceptive and skilful management by governments, leaders and other stakeholders.

Yours, etc., Shovanlal Chakraborty,
Kolkata, 4 February.

### QUEEN'S ENGLISH

**SIR**, The article 'The Queen's Tongue' by AK Ghosh (15 January) was very interesting but at the end it seriously misled your readers. He stated that a decade ago, the Queen's English Society collapsed. It did not. The press reported that we were about to give up but failed to report that we survived. In 2012, broadcaster Peter Barker OBE and Gareth Hardwick took over the running of the Queen's English Society with a new and keen committee. This year we are happily celebrating our Golden Anniversary, with a special lunch in July and the publication of a book outlining our history.

There are very many people in India with excellent English and an enthusiasm for the language. I suggest that they look at our website, queens-english-society.org, and we would be delighted to welcome new members. They could participate in our Zoom meetings and receive our journal, Quest.

Yours, etc., Dr Bernard Lamb,
President of the Queen's English Society,
a registered charity founded in 1972, London, England.

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# Now or never moment for the human race

A. K. MERCHANT

At the turn of the 20th century, the astonishing advances in science emboldened humanity, giving rise to confidence that science could as the fountainhead of truth provide the wherewithal for a stable and equitable social order for a sustainable future. In such a world, God was dead and religion regarded as a bundle of superstitions and blind faith. Many brazen experiments were shaped by this perspective.

Yet, from the certainty of modernity to the stark nihilism of postmodern doubt, through the 20th century right up to the opening decades of the new century, entire populations have been buffeted by wave after wave of massive disillusionment and man-made catastrophes in the backdrop of natural disasters.

Top scientists responsible for the "Doomsday Clock" have issued a stark warning, for the third straight year - humanity is just 100 seconds away from a global catastrophe due to the climate emergency, nuclear weapons, and "disruptive technologies in other domains."

The recent COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, plunged the world into uncharted territory with renewed pledges by countries to fight the climate emergency. India's commitments are Net Zero by 2070 and increasing its installed renewable energy generation capacity to 500 GW by the year 2030. On the last day of the debate, India tweaked a crucial clause on phasing out use of coal for energy generation that was not appreciated by Western nations. It was countered by the continuing failure of the developed world to fulfil its financial commitments promised at earlier COP summits. Technology transfer is another crucial issue,

because transition from fossil fuels to renewables can only come through a quantum leap in technology.

It is a now or never moment for those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether capitalism or socialism, to give an account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the stable and just world promised by science? Where is the promised heaven on earth prophesied in the Sacred Scriptures of religions? Why is there a resurgence of fanatical religious fervour occurring in many lands? Indeed, one of the strangest and saddest features of the current outbreak of religious fanaticism is the extent to which it is undermining not only the spiritual values which are conducive to the unity of humankind but also fueling greater skepticism and pessimism worldwide, particularly among the younger generations.

Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization but also the capacity to contribute towards its construction through the fundamentally humanitarian idea of committed and selfless service to others. All share the same atmosphere. All readily accept that this planet is our only home; a pale blue dot of earth, water, air and clouds, floating around in the vast incomprehensible universe. All readily acknowledge that cooperation among all nations is needed in order to address the pressing, existential questions that we are now facing.

The planet's climate is driven by heat and the energy it carries, influencing its weather, causing rainfall, droughts, intense tropical cyclones and more. The anthropogenic nature of crises has resulted in several extreme examples of how excess heat in the ocean and atmosphere have caused often devastating, sometimes unexpected, disasters in different parts of the world.

The year just past, 2021, was tied for the sixth warmest year since the time data on temperature rise began to be recorded. This can be correlated to human activities, like burning fossil fuels which adds to greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide to the atmosphere where they trap more heat. Since about 1850, humans have raised atmospheric CO2 by nearly 50 per cent. Current mechanisms to coordinate aspects of humanity's relationship with the natural world appear to be inadequate in dealing with the climate emergency as seen from the results of COP26 with its antecedents in the Paris Accord of 2015.

Covid-19 pandemic has shown the power of local action by individuals. The spirit of altruism manifested in action by families, friends and neighbours working in tandem with government agencies has saved thousands of lives and provided succour to millions of suffering people. Such transformation of consciousness requires a new mindset in how we view humanity itself. A global ethic cannot be fully realized until we adopt and are imbued by a consciousness of oneness based on the truth that humanity is one.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India has appointed Prajakta Koli aka Mostly Sane, a celebrity on YouTube, as the first UNDP India Youth Climate Champion. She will interact with young minds to create awareness on the adverse impacts of climate change, global warming and biodiversity loss. Through videos, campaigns and on-ground events, she will address the need for collective action by sharing inspirational stories of how governments, communities and individuals are taking steps to make a difference.

Prajakta joins international stars like Leonardo DiCaprio, Gisele Bündchen, Don Cheadle, Adrian Grenier and Ellie Goulding in their fight against climate crisis and believes it is up to the youth to take actionable measures for a better tomorrow. "The youth need to be the torchbearers of this revolution who will work towards the common goal of an enriched and empowered future where the human species doesn't become endangered. We have created this problem, but we can solve it too," she asserts.

As an optimist and a practitioner of inter-faith values, I believe that humanity regardless of one's religion, caste, creed, class, nationality and race, and wherever one resides, whatever may be one's educational background, whether scientist or religionist, must strive to reverse the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalisation and demonstrate the human capacity for compassion, justice, reciprocity and happiness.

Let these questions raised by a famous ecologist, Richard St. Barbe Baker, Man of the Trees, and the answers he provides define our humanity: "…Are we fit to exist on the earth? Can we unite to stem the oncoming tide of destruction, which, by our folly, we have let loose on ourselves?" "The answer to these questions will decide the future of our race - the human race. The tasks which confront us are sufficiently great in themselves to need the thoughtful and concerted action of every country on this globe. Erosion must be checked; oncoming deserts must be stopped. Air and water pollution must be stopped. Land must be made fertile again with the help of trees of mixed species, and the earth once again be clothed in a green mantle of trees. The balance of nature must be restored. Paradise must be regained."

The writer is a social worker and an independent researcher . He can be contacted at akmerchant@hotmail.com

# Whither Anglo-Saxon nonsense?

JAWED NAQVI

There was this gangly gentleman, the sweet Mr Saleh, Egyptian translator at the Gulf News in Dubai who incessantly amused the morning meetings headed by the editor, Aziz Siddiqui, the late Pakistani scribe of leftist politics with an impish sense of humour. Turning over the pages of Al Bayan, Ittehad, Al Khaleej etc. to scour for Arabic news that the English-speaking journalists from Britain, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other places could find useful, Mr Saleh would almost without exception dismiss each page with a suspicious grunt: "Nonsense!"

One can imagine a similar reaction from President Putin, were he to scan the English media every morning, as he did the other day but with an added description. Responding to the UK's accusation that Russia was plotting to replace the regime in Ukraine with a Moscow-friendly government, Mr Putin flicked off the question dismissively: "The Anglo-Saxon nonsense!"

You turn to the Chinese spokespersons and they would be scoffing at persistent Anglo-Saxon 'plots', one apparently currently on to disrupt the Winter Olympics in Beijing. The city is now unique in hosting both the Winter and Summer Olympics. Four miffed countries are diplomatically boycotting the Beijing show although their players are participating. Again, the churlish quartet baiting China comprises Anglo-Saxon nations — Australia, Britain, Canada and the US. What is their grouse? Human rights! One would take them seriously had they not been inflicting humanitarian cata-

strophes around the world. To cite just one, helping the daily dastardly bombings of a proud Yemeni people, killing, maiming, starving them callously, these sticklers for human rights.

There's a tendency one has noticed about the cultures, which Russia and China see as essentially Anglo-Saxon in nature. They love to turn a perfectly normal secular challenge to their authority into a communal, religious one. Behind all the fluff about Houthi religiosity that their media proclaim to give the conflict a religious colour, there's the cold fact that Aden was the capital of the only Marxist government in the Arab world ever. That memory needs to be crushed.

Likewise, the Anglo-Saxons have led the complete destruction of a secular Iraq to produce clerical rule there. They destroyed the syncretic PLO to give the Palestinian struggle for self-determination a religious hue under Hamas. Gone are the fighting Christian Palestinians like George Habash and their supporters of other faiths, including the better-informed Jewish intellectuals. They turned a secular Libya into a religiously fractured wreck. And they raised and armed religious fanatics in Syria and Afghanistan to dismantle secular adversaries. Closer home, the Anglo-Saxon rulers used religion to divide and rule India, a ploy they had used to produce unending bad blood in Ireland. Their victims are still suffering the consequences of the perfidy.

Should their unwitting allies, say, Germany or France oppose their reckless quests, the Anglo-Saxon club could resort to cheap tricks, not least spying on them with sophisticated devices, as recently happened with Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. So, the Anglo-Saxons belong to themselves, almost like a secret society. In fact, that is what they set out to be: The Five Eyes, a club of post-war snoops, exchanging notes and sharing them with each other, exclusively. If a British citizen has to be snooped on, as they did with Charlie Chaplin in the US, they would get the other to do the job so as not to break their own rules, keeping up the pretence of human rights.

Let's step back. It's 1980. Moscow was planning to host the Olympics when a call went out from Margaret Thatcher and Jimmy Carter to boycott the Games. The Soviets had raided Afghanistan. And the British? Had they just recaptured the Falklands from the English Channel? And what were the Americans doing in 1980, ahead of the Lake Placid Winter Olympics they hosted? They were weighing their chances between two 'defenders of human rights', the Shah of Iran and the Shia clerics. The clerics sided with Ronald Reagan to extract revenge on Carter for daring to mount the ill-fated Dasht-i-Lut rescue operation to free American hostages in Tehran. What followed was the Iran-Contra arms deal with Reagan, the mascot of human rights defenders!

It was 6 September 1993. I was travelling to Beijing from the airport with a Chinese minder as part of Narasimha Rao's media convoy. I asked my interlocutor whether the impressive display of flags and buntings was to welcome Rao. He said: "Sorry. This is for our Olympics campaign." The Chinese were preparing to host the 2000 Olympics in 1993. Everyone was certain they would get it. The Chinese signed a deal with Rao apart from a landmark agreement on peace and tranquillity along their borders. They bought a bunch of buffaloes from India. The idea was to start a dairy programme, hitherto alien to Chinese culture, to welcome milk-guzzling foreign athletes. How did Sydney suddenly get that Olympic, leaving the Chinese delegates to clap politely at the decision? The Manchester votes were transferred at the last minute, in the third round of voting, to boost fellow Anglo-Saxon Australia. The world of sports was stumped. Human rights was the fronted issue to deprive Beijing of its due claim.

Did China then tweak its human rights policy to get the Olympics eventually, hosted so impressively too, to the chagrin of its detractors? There's no answer to these questions. Now, President Macron appears to have seen through the "Anglo-Saxon nonsense" as he openly believes that Russia has a legitimate security concern in the Ukraine stand-off, and that it could be resolved peacefully. In the meantime, the US embassy is pressing its staff to leave Beijing citing rigorous anti-Covid measures, something the Chinese see as an attempt to disrupt the Winter Games. Like Mr Saleh, they too would be wondering when, if ever, the nonsense will stop.

Dawn/ANN

## CROSSWORD

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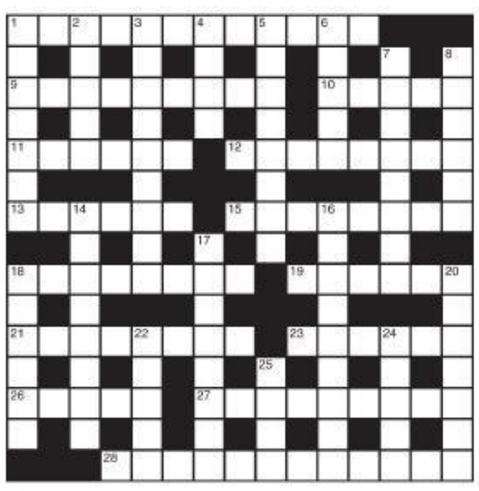

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

**ACROSS**

1 So, a chosen few can be forced to make an appearance (4,4,4)
9 Was easily converted, creating divisions in church (9)
10 Country in which Queen nearly overthrown (5)
11 Change lover, to inspire lust, from time to time (6)
12 According to Spooner, scientific adviser expressed disappointment throughout London? (8)
13 Terrible batter runs slightly around back of hob (6)
15 Order to retire, or continue with job? (4,4)
18 Vital to stop British doctor creating visible injury (5,3)
19 Timber expert was backing you (6)
21 Sit on the throne with it close to backside, and burn again (8)
23 Prancer video shows this? (6)
26 Compares final five members of football and netball teams (5)
27 Intend to quietly act bit of Loot out in show (9)
28 It requires strength, being honourable with idiot (5-3-4)

**DOWN**

1 Celebrity adopting Frenchwoman`s speech impediment (7)
2 Knock down walls of Durham steel town, for a start (5)
3 Give too much consideration to visible tattoo featuring husband (9)
4 Dash from cycling path (4)
5 Outrageous fat Elvis celebration (8)
6 Clever Johnny! (5)
7 Adult working in dirty church steeples? (8)
8 Research into the work of Picasso, say, is to stop (6)
14 American wearing corset meets a British folk hero (8)
16 Prize toad has broken bone (9)
17 Nobody stop Ian describing the worst of all worlds (8)
18 Prevent plot being designed to wound (6)
20 End up overwhelmed by desire for uneducated labourer (7)
22 In-laws call regularly about Hooters (5)
24 Oscar enters into prostitution, say (5)
25 About to support popular South American (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with **The Independent, London**)

## 100 YEARS AGO

### OCCASIONAL NOTE

The nine prominent Indians in the Gorakhpur district who have been to Chauri Chaura to ascertain precisely what happened there last Saturday emulate the courage and directness of the 49 Indian citizens of the same district whose appeal to the Government for firmness was published in our paper of January 26. "At a time, when the lives, property, and honour of the people are at stake," said the 49 signatories of the Gorakhpur manifesto, "we would certainly deem fit and proper such laws and regulations as would effectively deal with such a movement, and we are prepared to lend our helping hand to the Government in this difficult situation." How true their words were and how desperately the authorities stood in need of help is proved by the details of the Chauri Chaura outrage now forthcoming. "We cannot help observing", write the nine Indian signatories of today's report, "that these acts of violence, these brutal fiendish murders, and the roasting to death of living human beings can on no account be justified, and are the results of carrying on a propaganda among the inflammable masses with the avowed object of destroying respect for law and authority, by persons posing as apostles of non-violence." These nine Gorakhpur citizens, of whom one is a non-cooperator, "trust that the Chauri Chaura horror will open the eyes of all, if they are not already opened, to the grave danger with which the country is confronted."

## NEWS ITEMS

### PLANS TO CONQUER EVEREST

Speaking before the Geographical Society, Sir Francis Younghusband announced that the Tibetan Government had definitely sanctioned the Mount Everest expedition. General Bruce, he said, was going to India to make initial preparations, and especially to organise a corps of Himalayan porters at Darjeeling. He would be assisted by his cousin, Captain Geoffrey Bruce, of the 6th Gurkhas, whose services had been secured owing to the interest of Lord Rawlinson. A second Gurkha officer would be asked for, and there would also be six climbers, namely Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt, Major Merton, Dr. Wakefield and Mess, Mallory, Finch and Somerwell, all first class mountaineers. Dr. Longstaff would be doctor and Major Noel photographer. The entire party would arrive at Darjeeling before the end of March and would reach the base early in May.

### HEALTH AND WELFARE EXHIBITION

The Health and Welfare Exhibition was opened this afternoon by Sir P.C. Roy. Mr. G.S. Dutt, Collector and President of the Exhibition Committee, in his opening speech, explained that it was more an exhibition of ideas than objects. He laid special stress on the urgent necessity of solving the problem of irrigation by the re-excavation of the very large number of irrigation tanks in the district and of the utilisation of the water streams by erecting dams across them. Sir P.C. Roy dwelt at length on the appalling mortality of Bankura and ascribed it to the laziness of the people and periodical famines, due to the undulated and arid nature of the soil. He advocated strongly the improvement of agriculture through the introduction of new crops and the adoption of scientific methods.

### WIRELESS FROM MADRAS TO RANGOON

RANGOON, FEB 8

At a meeting of the Rangoon Municipal Commissioners last evening, a letter was recorded from the Government of India to the Director of Posts and Telegraphs, a copy of which was sent to the President of the Municipality for information, dealing with commercial wireless communication between Rangoon and Madras. The project involves the construction of a twenty-five kilowatt continuous wave high duplex station at Malegaon, near Rangoon, where the golf links are situated, and where it is proposed the new military cantonment shall be constructed. The letter mentions the amounts sufficient for carrying through this important improvement in communication which have been sanctioned by the Government of India. The Public Works Department are responsible for the projects.

### CITIZENS' PROTECTION LEAGUE

Over 2,500 names have been received by the joint-Secretary of the Bengal Citizens' Protection League and arrangements have been made to begin work immediately. At a recent meeting of the General Committee an executive committee, with power to apportion its functions to sub-committees, was elected. Interviewed by a representative of The Statesman yesterday, the joint-Secretaries stated that it was not, at present, desirable to outline the exact form of the League's activities, but it was likely that one part of its functions would consist of propaganda work, as a result of which it was hoped to impress upon the masses what they stand to lose by civil disobedience and also that civil disobedience meant ruin to them just as much as to anybody else.

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*Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.*
-Charles R. Swindoll

TheHitavada

*They are slaves who dare not be In the right with two or three*
Lowell

Bharatiya sour month Magh
Nakshatra Krutika 24H 22M
Moon Vrishabh (Rajandekar Panchang)
Magh Shukla Paksha Tithi Ashtami 8H 30M
Muslim Rajab 7th Hijree 1443

# PM'S ANGUISH

PRIME Minister Mr. Narendra Modi's anguish over the Congress party's "blind opposition " to whatever the Government does, is quite understandable. Giving the concluding speech of the debate on Motion of Thanks to the President's address to the joint session of Parliament, Mr Modi asked repeatedly what benefits does the Opposition in general and Congress party in particular derive by its irresponsible political positioning. No matter its outward shape, it was hardly a political speech, so to say. It expressed a grief that the Opposition was only squandering opportunity after opportunity to participate in the activity of nation-building through some of the most important challenges. This anguish the Prime Minister has felt is far beyond and above politics.

True, as Mr. Narendra Modi said, the Congress party has been making itself irrelevant -- which reflects in its political and electoral performance over time. The Prime Minister listed names of many States that have rejected the Congress party decades ago and have not given it another opportunity. He even prophesied that the Congress party is working hard to ensure that it would not return to power for a hundred years -- and then chuckled, in effect, 'We, too, will not allow it to do so'.

Referring to some of the irresponsible statements in the speech of Congress leader Mr. Rahul Gandhi (without naming him so many times), Mr. Modi quoted extensively from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's speeches and writings to prove how his own party was destroying his own ideas and thoughts. Obviously, Mr. Modi had prepared his assertion with much care -- to have an intended effect on Parliament as well as on the nation. Sum and substance of the Prime Minister's speech, however, seemed intended to express an anguish over squandered opportunities of united action by all beyond political trappings.

Mr. Modi's sense of frustration was being highlighted in the House by the very behaviour of the Opposition members. There was not only minute when the Opposition members kept quiet and heard the Prime Minister's statement in rapt attention. They kept shouting and raising slogans that made little sense. They even did not bother to understand the Prime Minister's personal requests to let him make his statement. They also ignored the appeals and warnings by Speaker Mr. Om Birla, too, to stop conducting themselves with responsibility. On a few occasions, the Prime Minister even sat down, expecting the Opposition members to keep quiet and then resume. All that decent expectation was useless, to say the least.

In fact, this is how the Opposition has been behaving all along for the past seven years since Mr. Modi assumed prime ministership. On very rare occasions, they -- the Opposition members -- might have conducted themselves well. But the overall impression they have been giving has been one of utter unruliness that defies logic and decorum of the House. In Mr. Modi's speech, all these kept cropping up as points of grief and anguish. Mr. Modi's anguish must be seen as something well beyond politics. He did score many political points over the Opposition during his 100-minute speech, all right. Yet, the crux of his statement was his sense of deep grief that the Opposition was hardly behaving responsibly not only on that one occasion but all along.

One of the most damning attributes of the Opposition's behaviour is utter childishness in making statements or raising issues or disturbing the proceedings of the House. This was on display during Mr. Modi's speech, too. Even though Mr. Modi urged them to behave sensibly, they ignored his appeal and even kept insulting him. Despite all that uncouth conduct, the Prime minister did not lose his cool even once. He did raise his voice a few times, but that did not mean that he was losing his cool. Much to the contrary, he tried to cloud the Opposition's behaviour many times in light-hearted comments. That resort to humour, too, made little impact on the Opposition's behaviour.

No matter how the Opposition may interpret the Prime Minister's speech, it was obvious that it lost a golden opportunity to pay full attention to the all-important statement. And by doing so, the Opposition only proved that the Prime Minister was right.

# Inspiration

DO YOU find all the pressures of modern life can tire you and reduce your strength? Is it really possible to feel great even when facing challenging times and situations? Competing in the fast pace of life, most of us today including children, have accepted anxiety, anger, fear, guilt, depression as a natural way of living. This is affecting our physical health, our relationships, career and study patterns. Whenever we thought about the cause of our emotional disturbances, we always had someone to blame.

The most common fatal belief is - It's not me, it's them. This is the illusion that someone else is responsible for what we think, feel and do. The truth is - It's not them, It's me. Always. It doesn't matter what happens, regardless of the nature of the event or the sharpness of the words intended to insult us, our response is always our own creation. A powerful soul awakens within their consciousness, the awareness that they have a choice in their every response. They realise they can maintain a calm, positive and stable attitude, regardless of what happens around them and even to their physical body.

At the core of the soul there is pure spiritual power of peace, love, truth and happiness. This power provides us with the inner strength needed to change. But how do we access this power? Meditation is the method – it allows this power to come to the surface of our consciousness and into our minds to colour our thoughts, feelings and personality. When we get access to our own personal source of spiritual power, we become free of any dependency and our addiction to others acceptance and approval reduces.

FOCAL POINT

# PAKISTAN'S DIPLOMATIC DEBACLE IN CHINA

■ By ASAD MIRZA

PAKISTAN Prime Minister Imran Khan was on a four-day visit to China last week. Apparently the visit was billed as to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. But Khan was accompanied with a huge delegation including Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Finance Minister, Planning Minister, Information Minister, National Security Advisor, Commerce Advisor and Special Assistant on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

However, the Pakistan Prime Minister and his team were left red-faced when they were informed that one of the key meeting would be held in virtual mode, though the Pakistani delegation was present in Beijing.

The meeting with He Lifeng, chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference was held virtually. This indeed was a completely undiplomatic step by China and was perhaps taken by it to show Pakistan and its leadership its place.

Khan's China visit comes at a time when Pakistan finds itself in a quagmire of issues. On one hand, Pakistan's economy is turning from bad to worse, and on the other the security scenario within the country particularly in the restive Balochistan region and Afghan border has added to Khan's troubles.

Pakistan is currently facing severe economic difficulties due to high inflation and no foreign aid. To ease the pain, Khan has requested for a $5 billion loan from China and pushed for increased trade and cooperation along the CPEC. The Corridor, an infrastructure project initiated in 2015, to promote trade and development, has so far performed below expectations. It also suffered a jolt when China stopped the work on the Dasu Hydropower Project after 9 Chinese nationals were killed in an explosion in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Launched in 2015, the CPEC is the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It was expected to bring in massive investment from China, creating thousands of job opportunities for the people of Pakistan. However, Khan's regime has witnessed the stalling of the CPEC projects owing to the dire economic situation and non-cooperation of the bureaucracy due to the prevailing fear of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

Other reports state that Pakistan plans to seek $5 billion from China and $1 billion each from Russia and Kazakhstan. It is pertinent to mention here that Pakistan has also been striving to get the suspended loan programme worth $6 billion revived from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

However, these loans are unlikely to help, as they will only add to Pakistan's growing debt obligations. Beyond loans, China will likely promote its own agenda. Also it may do little to solve Pakistan's long-term economic problems. Instead, it may burden it with public discontent and protests, as the Government and the CPEC has so far been unable to deliver the promised benefits, particularly to the local populace in provinces where CPEC footprint is stronger.

*In a completely undiplomatic step, Chinese authorities held one of the key meetings with visiting Pakistani delegation, led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a virtual mode even as the Pakistani delegation was present in Beijing last week*

*Pakistan is currently facing severe economic difficulties due to high inflation and no foreign aid. To ease the pain, Khan has requested for a $5 billion loan from China and pushed for increased trade and cooperation along the CPEC.*

Prior to his China visit, Imran Khan had done his homework and tried to address the Chinese criticism of delays in CPEC projects. Khan had ordered the removal of 37 regulations hindering the pace of the CPEC projects, and reaffirmed his commitment to the timely completion of different projects.

The ambitious CPEC connects China's north-west Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region and the Gwadar port in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, covering a distance of 3,000 kilometres and a range of new infrastructure projects. India has repeatedly protested to China over the CPEC as it is being laid through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Last year, a report by US-based international development research lab AidData had reported that a substantial chunk of Chinese development financing under the CPEC comprised loans which have been given at current commercial market interest rates as opposed to grants, which is a norm for bilateral infrastructural projects.

The Pakistani daily 'Dawn' had earlier printed excerpts of the report, according to which Pakistan received about half of all Chinese development finance in the form of 'export buyer's credit' and was to be used by Pakistan to pay Chinese implementation partners and purchase of equipment by them.

In its editorial in September last year 'Dawn' had commented that the nature of Chinese financing for infrastructural schemes merits greater transparency for the projects executed in Pakistan since 2015. It further said that after coming to power Imran Khan's Government has also kept the matters under wraps, just as his predecessors had done.

In his meetings with the Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, Khan also briefed them on his geo-economics vision and the Government's policies for sustained growth, industrial development, agricultural modernisation and regional connectivity.

Regarding Afghanistan, both leaders acknowledged that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan would promote economic development and connectivity in the region and called on the international community to promptly assist the Afghan people in averting a humanitarian catastrophe. He recalled that Pakistan in the past had played a role in building bridges and remained ready to do so again.

During the visit, Pakistan also signed a new agreement with China to start the second phase of the $60 billion CPEC. The Prime Minister showered praise on the controversial projects under CPEC, saying it has strategic significance for both the countries and delivering tangible benefits to the people. This is in contrast to his earlier views on CPEC before coming to power criticising its secret nature and investments.

In his statements in Beijing, Khan didn't utter a word about the Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang province of China and the atrocities committed against them by Chinese authorities. Last year, in an interview he had said that the Pakistan Government understands the Chinese policy in Xinjiang very well, which is for the betterment of its people and is more concerned about the situation on its borders i.e. Kashmir.

One fails to wonder why Khan who was a critic of OPEC earlier, is now endorsing it. Perhaps he doesn't fathom that through CPEC China wants to manage a foothold in Afghanistan via Pakistan, as most of the Chinese companies, which are involved in developing CPEC are related to mining, infrastructure development, minerals and mine technology, and they might have plans on how to tap the mineral reserves of Afghanistan which is reported to be around $1.3 trillion. ■

*(Asad Mirza is a political commentator based in New Delhi)*

TIME & TIDE

## THE QUEEN'S NEW MILESTONE

A WAY on the tour of Africa, little did a young English princess know that she would be returning home as the Queen of Britain. Seventy years ago, Queen Elizabeth II assumed the throne after her father, George VI, passed away at home. On Sunday, the Queen marked 70th anniversary of accession to the throne thus becoming the first British monarch to celebrate a platinum jubilee of service to the people of the United Kingdom.

The milestone moment has added a new aura to the Queen's charismatic life of 95 years where she witnessed tides of triumphs and turbulence in equal measure while holding the prestige of British monarchy aloft in the United Kingdom's thriving democracy. Tributes have been pouring in from across the world even as her own country has shown great reverence to the Queen's inspirational sense of duty and dedication to the nation.

While the world hails the longevity of the Queen, the Britons must rise in appreciation for the lady's grit and perseverance even during biggest of political as well as financial storms. She always acted as an anchor of stability while presenting to the world the British way of mingling democracy with responsible monarchy. Let it be the latest storm of Brexit or the havoc caused by coronavirus pandemic, Queen Elizabeth has remained a stoic but solid force of guidance for the United Kingdom. The 70th anniversary of her rule has provided the UK a chance to hail the remarkable life journey of a princess who effortlessly slipped into the biggest assignment of her life.

The unprecedented reign of the monarch, spanning the post-World War II era, has become a legendary composition. The Queen has been served by 14 Prime Ministers, starting with Mr. Winston Churchill till Mr. Boris Johnson. A 15th may soon be serving her if the lockdown party scandal devours Mr. Johnson. All the while the Queen balanced her royal life, her family and State affairs with great aplomb thus keeping the institution of monarchy throbbing in company of modern-day political equations. The way she handled the Prince Harry-Meghan Markle marriage and the subsequent estrangement of the couple from the Royal family shows the steel in her personality. Despite controversies surrounding the marriage, the Queen remains popular in the Kingdom. The popularity ratings effectively sum up what a haloed institution the Queen has become.

## Every Man in his Humour | Letters to the Editor

### *Respond to China's mischief*

Sir,

China on Sunday pledged closer cooperation with Pakistan under the $60 billion CPEC investment programme and called for resolving the Kashmir issue properly and peacefully while opposing any 'unilateral actions' that could complicate the situation as Prime Minister Imran Khan held talks with the top Chinese leadership, including President Xi Jinping. During his meetings, Khan said, the persecution of minorities in India were a threat to regional peace and stability. He said that rapid militarisation of India was undermining regional stability.

Whether it is China or Pakistan, both are India's enemies. Despite having huge lands of its own, China is grabbing the lands of other countries. China has also set its sights on Tibet. It is advancing in South China Sea even though it is facing opposition from almost all other countries excluding a few. So, this advice from China is nothing but hypocrisy. India should respond to such mischiefs of China in a language that it understands.

**Aparna Jagtap**

### *Queen of melody*

Sir,

In 1949, the song "aayega aanewala" from Mahal was almost on every Indian's lips. There were a flood of request letters and also phone calls to All India Radio, Bombay, to seek the identity of this new singer. Again, on a lazy Sunday morning 72 years later, on 6th February 2021, almost every Indian's heart was deeply touched with the ending of an era, when Lataji passed away suddenly. Millions became teary eyed. The voice of the nation had become history. She has had her musical presence since most of us were infants, later children, and then youths, thereafter as the not so young Indians.

Lataji credits Raj Kapoor for introducing the seamless playback age for Hindi films with "Barsaat" (1949). Right from the musical genre of Khemchand Prakash, Husanlal Bhagatram, Naushad, S D Burman, C Ramchandra, Shankar Jaikishan, Khayyam, Madan Mohan till the Kalyanji Anandji, Laxmi Pyare, R D Burman, Jatin Lalit, A R Rehman, Shantanu Moitra and Shankar-Ehsan-Loy generations, she has had her very unique and towering presence.

Be it any Indian language, Lataji has adeptly rendered her songs and people following the respective dialect felt that she was one amongst them. Likewise, her numerous Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Punjabi, Telegu, Gujarati, and other language renditions would very much show her fluency and affinities with the respective regions.

Lataji belonged to India. No amount of words of praise can do justice to this colossal and larger than life character, Lataji was. Her songs will be endeared for many, many more decades.

**Dr Anjan Chatterjee, Nagpur**

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ANALYSIS

# How RLD a major factor in Uttar Pradesh elections

Western Uttar Pradesh, RLD's Jayant Chaudhary's family bastion, is turning out to be a focus of attention for the ruling government. Chaudhary, who has been leading the party since his father and party's founder president Ajit Singh died due to Covid in May last year, came out openly in support of the farmers' movement since January 2021.

OPINION

PROF. VED PRAKASH

The forthcoming assembly elections in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur are now significantly becoming more interesting and more complex in a variety of ways than one might think. Of them, Uttar Pradesh is the star attraction of the show because of its momentous contribution in determining the future of the national government in 2024. The state of Uttar Pradesh had been ruled by the Indian National Congress for about 42 years, which continued intermittently until 1988. The oldest party of the country was relegated to the background since 1989 with the triumphant entry of new players like the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the Bhartiya Janata Party.

This time there is hardly any region, be it the Western Uttar Pradesh, Awadh, Bundelkhand, or Purvanchal, which has not caused unprecedented political tremors in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The immediate focus of attention which has shattered the confidence of the ruling dispensation has been western Uttar Pradesh. It is primarily because of the combination of the rising popularity of Jayant Chaudhary as the leader of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and the antipathy of the vast mass of peasantry and townsfolks towards the incumbent government.

Western Uttar Pradesh has been Jayant Chaudhary's family bastion. His grandfather Chaudhary Charan Singh, two-time Chief Minister and the Former Prime Minister, had remained unchallenged and undisputed leader of the area from the early times of 1937 until his demise in 1987. After his death, his son Chaudhary Ajit Singh took command of the party and steered the affairs of the RLD until his passing away in May, 2021. The mass base of the RLD party somehow got shifted to the BJP since 2014 general elections. The peasant class overwhelmingly supported the BJP on the promises of help for Muzaffarnagar's riot victims on the one hand and on the other hand to provide remunerative prices for their agricultural produce as well as jobs for the youth. After waiting for seven long years, they became completely disillusioned with the leadership of the incumbent government and decided to switch over to another outfits. The farmers' movement against three farm Acts that were passed by the Parliament of India in September 2020 became a rallying point for the peasant class to come out in open against the policies of the present dispensation.

Bhartiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait's emotional outburst on the evening of 28th January 2021 and Jayant Chaudhary's unstinted support of RLD to him at that moment proved to be a major turning point not only to the farmers movement but also to Jayant Chaudhary.

Since January 2021, Jayant came out openly in support of the farmers movement. He organized a number of Mahapanchayat (assembly of people) in the western belt wherein he started raising pertinent issues affecting the life of every common man. He especially focused on a couple of pertinent issues like payment of outstanding dues to sugarcane farmers, remunerative prices of farmers' produce, unemployment, rising prices leading to inflation, unabated crime rates, corruption in the public sector and electricity tariff rates for domestic and borewell consumers which have caught the imagination of the masses. Another significant initiative that Jayant undertook has been organizing a number of Yatras for the promotion of brotherhood with a view to mitigating the bitterness that had arisen during 2013 Muzaffarnagar's riots between Hindus, especially the Jats and Muslims. In addition, he started voicing his support for all those who were oppressed, be it Lakhimpur Kheri episode or Hathras episode where police force threw lathi blows on him when he stood in support of justice for the Dalit girl victim.

Within a couple of months, Jayant, who was living under the shadow of his father until May 6, 2021 emerged as a leader as prudent and courageous like his grandfather. He has successfully been able to attract the youth as well peasants towards his agenda. A series of his recent interviews reveal beyond doubt that he has been continually evolving in his thoughts, convictions, principles and beliefs. He speaks his mind openly without brutalising others or causing undue offence. He appears to have learnt the art of blending all the three ingredients-confidence, humility and skill. It seems that he has understood fast that in democracy people may be mobilized through persuasion and logic.

Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav, Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) chief Jayant Chaudhary, along with others, raise hands during a public meeting ahead of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, in Mathura on Saturday. ANI

The kind of enthusiasm that he has infused amongst the youth and the peasantry is like that of his grandfather's when he had formed the Bhartiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in 1967 and won 98 seats in the UP Assembly. It is quite obvious that his incredible work dedication and fighting spirit will pay richer dividends to the RLD and the SP alliance. Although Jayant's and Akhilesh's fathers did not pull along well, the young Turks seem to have a good deal of faith in socialism.

The supporters of Jayant feels that he has not been given his due in terms of number of seats by Akhilesh. But the compromise that he has made without sacrificing his dignity also portrays his vision and maturity which in the long run would produce desired results. If the SP-RLD alliance crosses the magic number, it is going to be a turning point in UP politics for times to come.

The growing support base of Jayant in the western UP which is going to the poll on the 10th of February has become a matter of concern for some. Efforts made to placate Jayant have not yielded anticipated results. As of now, his refusal to rise to the bait has demonstrated his political maturity and adherence to his own principles. Only time will tell if these presumptions will change.

It would have been a cakewalk for the incumbent government had it taken care of the payment of outstanding dues of sugarcane farmers, completed the recruitment of teachers, constables, patwaries, etc. in time and brought down the electricity tariff rates at par with other neighbouring states. These were the doable propositions without drastic repercussions to endure the present imbroglios. Another significant aspect that has obviously remained missing in the western belt has been the identification and promotion of a creditable leadership.

As is believed by some political pundits that the western belt will give an edge to the RLD- SP alliance but that alone is not sufficient as much will also depend upon Awadh, Bundelkhand and Purvanchal which have sizable number of seats. In any case the outcomes of the present elections will have serious consequences for Jayant. In either situation it will not be a cakewalk for him. He will have to display more matured leadership to keep his flock together besides creating a team of sensible and experienced people around him who could ensure the implementation of the promises of his high-voltage manifesto. And, with his father gone, he will have to be his own protector.

*The writer is former Chairman, UGC. The views expressed are the writer's personal.*

**PERSPECTIVE**
MISSING A STAR CAMPAIGNER

## MODI SHUNS PHYSICAL RALLIES IN UTTAR PRADESH DESPITE BJP'S EAGERNESS TO WIN POLLS

Election excitement is at an all-time high with a few days to go before the first round begins in Uttar Pradesh. First off the block is western Uttar Pradesh, and I am told that the BJP had tried to prevail upon the Election Commission to ensure that the polls begin from eastern Uttar Pradesh this time around, since the first few rounds usually set the tone and tenor of the election. However, the Election Commission refused. And with the backdrop of the farmers' protests, the Lakhimpur Kheri massacre, and the farm bill rollback, this Jat and farmer-dominated belt will set the tone of the election. (As an aside, one wonders why the Budget which was announced literally on poll eve did not offer any sops to the farmers. Has the BJP written off this vote bank, and is instead appealing to the Jats to vote as Hindus first and not just as farmers? It would seem so).

The BJP campaign is being led by Yogi Adityanath in tandem with Union Home Minister Amit Shah who has been touring the state. Amit Shah was also present along with Yogi Adityanath when the latter filed his nomination from Gorakhpur and the two shared the dais when the BJP manifesto was released.

It is also Shah who is taking on both Akhilesh Yadav and Jayant Chaudhary in his campaign speeches and setting the poll tempo. It was Shah who hinted that Jayant and the RLD could tie up with the BJP post polls, which had Jayant doing damage control for the next few days denying this move. In fact, Jayant scored one when he pointed out that instead of reaching out to him and the RLD the BJP should instead reach out to the 700 families of the farmers who lost their lives during the protests.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually addresses a rally for the people of Uttar Pradesh, in New Delhi on Tuesday. ANI

Amit Shah kicked off his campaign from Kairana which saw violent Hindu-Muslim clashes in 2017 and became notorious for the alleged exodus of Hindus from the area. Amit Shah - and other BJP leaders taking their cue from him - are focusing their campaign on issues of law and order and appeasement politics of the Samajwadi Party instead of the plight of the farmers. On their part, the SP-RLD combine is also raising question marks on the law and order track record of the Yogi government, as well as focusing on the farmers.

In all this, where is the Prime Minister? He was very visible in the cow-belt during the initial phase of the campaign as he presided over the Kanshi Viswanath corridor opening. But, after that, his presence has been reduced to virtual rallies. He recently cancelled his plans to address a physical rally in Bijnour, in western Uttar Pradesh, citing bad weather.

What marks a traditional BJP campaign in the Modi era is the blitzkrieg of rallies by the PM at the fag end of the campaign. Such is the force of the PM's campaign that it can turn an election around; some feel that it was this that contributed hugely to the BJP campaign in the 2019 Bihar assembly polls recently. But so far the PM is yet to give that last-minute push in this round of assembly polls. And it is an open secret that one state the BJP is desperate to win is Uttar Pradesh. Then why is this state's most high-profile MP missing from the poll campaign?

Interesting questions, some of which may be answered on March 10th.

PRIYA SAHGAL

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ANALYSIS

# BREAKING DOWN THE UNION BUDGET 2022-23

SHREYA MASKARA
NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented India's Union Budget last week, terming it growth-oriented and pro-development. All eyes were fixated on the budget as citizens were looking for respite as the country continues to struggle with the third wave of the Coronavirus pandemic and state elections for Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa are right at the helm. India's Union Budget 2022-23 aimed at laying down the foundation of the economy for the next 25 years. Repeated waves of the Coronavirus pandemic have continued to disrupt supply chains globally and spark inflationary pressures on the economy. However, the Indian economy is expected to register a growth rate of 9.27 per cent in the current financial year, implying that the overall economic activity has recovered from the pre-pandemic levels. With the major aim to boost domestic manufacturing and create jobs to combat the rising unemployment in the country, the Union Budget revolves around four key pillars: inclusive development, productivity enhancement, financing investments and PM *GatiShakti*. Let us take a deep dive into the policies and changes being introduced by the budget, what the experts think about the same and whether the budget leaves anyone behind.

**Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitaraman announces plan of PM Gati Shakti Programme - a ₹20,000 crore national logistics infrastructure development plan.**

Source: Toss Hub

**In a major boost to the e-vehicle segment in India, Budget 2022 provides for a new battery swapping policy to be unveiled soon.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

## KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY CHANGES

One of the most talked about elements of the Budget was the emphasis on the PM *Gati Shakti* Master Plan, launched last year, which has been cited as a transformative approach to boost economic growth and sustainable development driven by its seven engines. This includes mass transport, waterways, railways, roads, airports, ports, and logistics infrastructure. Projects relating to transport and logistics infrastructure in the National Infrastructure Pipeline will be aligned with the PM *Gati Shakti* framework, including the construction of around 25,000 kilometres of national highways and expressways at a cost of INR 20,000 crores, 400 new trains, 2,000 kms of rail networks, 100 cargo terminals, and multi-modal logistics parks. Industry observers say the government's endeavour to encourage integrated logistics and multimodal connectivity through the Master Plan will improve the fragmented logistics industry in India.

Additionally, as part of the inclusive development pillar of the budget, some of the key developments included the aimed coverage of 3.8 crore households in the *Har Ghar, Nal Se Jal* scheme in FY23, the PM-DevINE scheme to fund infrastructure and need-based social development in the North East, the aspirational blocks programme, vibrant village programme, and digital banking in post offices and commercial banks programme. As part of the productivity enhancement front, important steps such as the integration of central and state level systems through IT bridges, end-to-end e-billing system and utilising surety bonds in government procurement, support to 5G, and opening defence research and development for industry, start-ups and academia were also announced.

Taxation is another widely watched element of any Union Budget. For 2022-23 on the direct tax front, no changes have been introduced to the basic income tax exemption limit, income slabs, and tax rates. The surcharge rate on all long-term capital assets have been capped at 15 per cent. Apart from this, the government also announced a 30 per cent tax on income from the transfer of virtual digital assets. This move was welcomed by companies in the sector who think this offers clarity on the future of cryptocurrency in the country, but heavily criticised by investors. This was reflected in the statements issued by industry leaders such as CEOs of Indian crypto exchange platforms including WazirX, CoinCDX, etc. Additionally, the surcharge on the tax payable on long-term gains from capital assets other than equity funds and stocks, (like property, unlisted shares, artefacts, etc.) is proposed to be capped at 15 per cent (as opposed to the previous 37 per cent). The move has been introduced to benefit high net worth investors (HNIs) and startup investors who hold equity in unlisted companies. Some tax benefits for startups and new companies engaged in manufacturing were also introduced, including the option for a tax holiday for three years if startups can incorporate by 31 March 2023.

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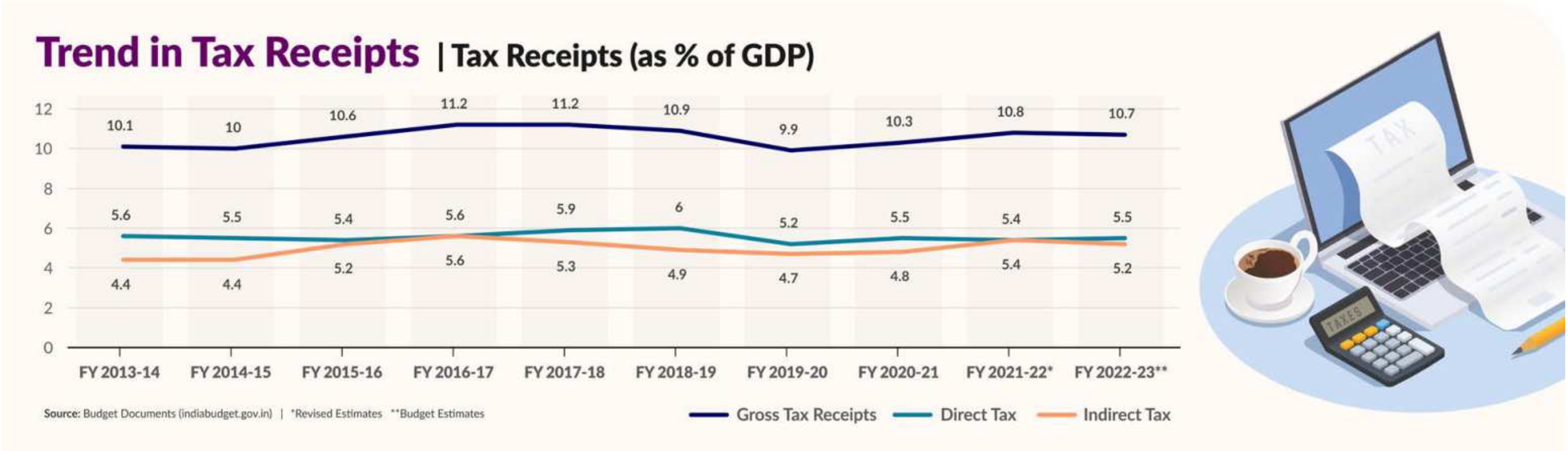
In a move towards cooperative federalism, State Governments are to receive ₹ 1 lakh crore 50-year interest-free loans to fund PM Gati Shakti-related projects.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

FM announces increase in employer contribution to National Pension Scheme for State Government Employees from 10% to 14% saving the state government employees from paying additional tax.

Source: Wikimedia Commons




## WHERE IS THE UNION BUDGET 2022-23 LACKING?

While several initiatives and measures introduced in the 2022-23 budget have been lauded by financial experts and industry leaders, several stakeholder groups, including farmers, and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have registered a negative response to the budget. Some of the key criticisms include the lack of significant increase in government spending on healthcare, particularly in light of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the move to lower the allocation of key schemes, including food and fertiliser subsidy and allocations for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), and PM-Kisan schemes as compared to last financial year has been criticised. In particular, the allocation of only INR 73,000 crore to the flagship rural jobs scheme, MGNREGA, which is 25 per cent lower than last financial year, has been widely criticised.

Various financial and policy experts have also noted the lack of a comprehensive employment policy. This is of particular importance in light of the large-scale unemployment being induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ravi Srivastava, Director of Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, has said there is a need for an employment-centric growth strategy, not the constant fetishising of GDP growth which acknowledges the importance of the informal sector and MSMEs in job creation and hence, the budget should offer initiatives to promote such enterprises. The budget has also evoked a negative response from farmers who said provisions for agriculture were disappointing and even silent on their key demands. Key demands included the implementation of the recommendations of Swaminathan Committee Report on Agriculture or statutory guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for agricultural produce and abolition of GST on ingredients supplementing agricultural activities like power tiller, insecticides, pesticides, fertilisers, and tractors.

Financial and credit advisory firm, Moodys, also highlighted in its analysis that the budget lacks any concrete measures to increase revenue generation. Although capital expenditure plans have increased significantly, the fiscal deficit estimates suggest the government is relying on strong growth to help drive fiscal consolidation. Various spending initiatives are not accompanied by any significant announcements related to further increased revenue generation, causing alarm. Jeremy Zook, the director and primary sovereign analyst for India at Fitch Ratings, has also raised concerns about fiscal deficit targets and the lack of major structural reform announcements.

**Contributing reports by Damini Mehta, Junior Research Associate at Polstrat and Aakarshan Singh, Anurag Anand, Siddharth Malik, Interns at Polstrat.**

Budget 2022: FM announced allocation of Production Linked Incentives worth ₹19,500 crores for solar modules.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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PRIVACY & LAW

# Post-humous Privacy: Should India re-think Privacy after death?

ANALYSIS

PULKIT MOGRA

The expectation of privacy has been evolving over the centuries. In previous eras, people enjoyed little privacy, even though information about their private lives hardly used to escape from the confines of their family or community. However, as society developed along with the technological advancement of social media, disseminating information beyond the local community was no longer an impossibility. Privacy has been an area of law that has continuously seen an evolution-based society's progression. Over the last two decades, in the majority of nations, the evolution of privacy as a right has majorly focused on striking a balance between the public's right to know and an individual's right to privacy. In addition to this, nations have exclusively taken into account a viewpoint of privacy of the living, leaving us with a question, if there should be privacy for the dead as well?

Post-humous privacy invokes several ethical, philosophical, moral and legal issues. It has been a topic of debate globally for granting it as a status of the "right" of a citizen. This also brings us to dwell on whether "citizenship" expires post-death. Until the past two decades, mainly celebrities and politicians have been amongst the population whose existence were documented in a manner for whom a reputation emerging through public data was a point of concern. However, with the exponential growth of digital technologies and social media platforms, individuals developed a complex relationship with their personal data available in the public domain. That has now resulted in digital footprints that shall not only outlive them but also those data debris will persist in the online space for years post-death of an individual.

The standpoint of Indian law-making bodies has failed to consider the growing need to bring in post-humous privacy rights. Neither the upcoming bill nor the Indian judiciary has considered the post-humous aspect of privacy. Supreme Court in the case of Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) & another v. Union of India specifically limited the privacy rights merely to living human beings, until one breathes last. Hence established that the right to privacy extinguishes along with the person's life. The primary argument against the recognition of post-humous privacy is the notion that "the deceased cannot be harmed or hurt." However, this line of reasoning is inconsistent with the principle of freedom of testation. Therefore, denying control to a person over online data on the grounds of no harm caused would be analogous to denying the rights of the testament; as Edina Harbinja quotes, "the deceased should not be interested in deciding what happens to their property on death as they would not be present to be harmed by the allocation."

While most nations, including India, are yet to discuss the same on the legislative front, some companies have taken initiatives to protect post-humous privacy. Google in 2013 launched 'inactive account manager,' and Facebook's 'memorialization' and 'legacy contact' are some such examples. However, such solutions have proven to fall short of clarifying the rights of a legacy contact over the rights of kin. Hence, the existence of privacy interests post-death of an individual is still muddled and requires to be explored in detail. One of the generic questions that build upon post-humous data is over its impreciseness on "who owns the data."

A civilizational question

Currently, no legal protections exist to stop one from getting digitally resurrected. Because of the non-recognition of post-humous privacy, there is no way to 'opt-out' of the system and, in turn, to protect the data of the deceased. Nevertheless, at the same time, there is a growing graveyard of deceased, outlasted by digital footprints. A study by Oxford University has claimed that by 2100, Facebook itself will have 4.9 Billion deceased accounts, and by 2070, the dead would already outnumber the total number of living. Hence this bank of data is going to take on an important role for not only historians, anthropologists and sociologists but also for the for-profit organizations that are thriving on human research. Hence, what happens to our data after our death, is a question we may have to answer sooner. Oxford University's study's highlight the need for overarching changes, and it raises several pertinent questions such as, Is it time that we should think of appointing social media executors? If our passwords should form a part of our wills and should be explicitly included? Moreover, can our Instagram accounts and their data can become a part of archives and public records in libraries to make future civilizations aware of #OurLivesOurRulz #SquadGoals.

Under the law, the deceased do not enjoy or possess any personal rights even if any false or malicious statement has been made; there exists no legal recourse. Nevertheless, reputation is a component that exists even beyond deaths where the living heirs manage posthumous legacies of the deceased through post-humous. Furthermore, the law duly recognizes intentions in the last will and is defended as a contractual obligation. Airing of embarrassing evidence cannot merely be justified under the transparency umbrella or vicarious drama. Such one-sided robbery of reputation with nobody alive for justifications hurts the deceased individuals and living heirs and, at times, the entire community. Hence, history is not merely gossip about the deceased. Edmund Burke's in his enduring work, "Reflections On the Revolution in France," believed society as a partnership that is based on the contributions of living, dead and unborn. This idea brings along the debate on the methodology that furthers to induce historians to interpret personages from the past, even the one that may comprise mortal failings, with similar notions of justice as we extend to the living.

**THE ROAD AHEAD...??**

There is a reason why we all draft our wills before our deaths and divvy up all of our possessions. These drafts mostly accommodate the claim on tangible and material objects in practice. Hence, making these decisions before death is one way of avoiding arguments over how the deceased person would have dealt with the mentioned objects of the will. However, social media accounts, digital data, records and emails are rarely afforded similar protections. Principally, limiting privacy on death is because traditional notions of the law tie privacy to the life of the right-holder. So, once life ends, privacy rights end simultaneously. However, there might be valid reasonings for limiting privacy as the claimant will not be available to exercise the decisions and rights post-death. At the same time, now, due to technological advancements, we have reached on to a point where our information legacies have extended the boundaries where the impact of information available of deceased can extend on to the life of survivors.

The right to privacy and data protection "for the living population" is already one of the most contested rights in India, and the nation is still in the process of implementing the Personal Data Protection Bill. However, when upcoming legislation is at the implementation and discussion front, the expectations of the legislations being at the "state of the art" level become multi-folds. In the meantime, before countries understand the severity of the claims and extend this right as a subset of privacy rights, social media networks, messaging applications and data collectors, as their social responsibility, must consider an option of "digital living wills." That would not only bring in a safer online community standard with appropriate mechanisms to accept a choice to delete or memorialize their information upon death but would also bring in the data under data protection regime since the deceased's data shall have a heir as a legacy owner.

This article has been written by Mr Pulkit Mogra, PhD in Law candidate at the University of Ottawa's Centre for Law, Technology & Society and an Assistant Professor at University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India.

IN COURT

# Tolerance should be shown towards other religious practices; this country takes pride in unity in diversity: Madras HC

ANALYSIS

SANJEEV SIROHI

At a time when hate speeches are becoming very common in our country and intolerance has been peaking high, it would be instructive to take a serious note of what the Madras High Court has in an extremely commendable, cogent, composed and convincing judgment titled Paulraj Vs. District Collector and others in W.P(MD).No.11276 of 2020 and W.M.P(MD). Nos. 9856, 9857 and 9860 of 2020 and 15125 of 2021 delivered recently on January 10, 2022 wherein it has underscored about the dire need to show tolerance towards other religious practices. In this context, we should never be oblivious of what Deanswift had once famously said that, "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another but not enough to make us love one another." It must be mentioned here that the Court was dealing with a writ petition filed by a Hindu man who was challenging the permission that was granted by the Kanyakumari District Collector to construct a church against which the petitioner complained of nuisance due to the use of loudspeakers throughout day and night.

At the outset, the single Judge Bench of Madras High Court comprising of Justice CV Karthikeyan who has authored this noteworthy judgment mentions about the prayer made that, "Writ Petition filed under Article 226 of the Constitution of India, praying this Court to issue a Writ of Certiorari, to call for the records pertaining to the impugned order, passed by the first respondent herein in Pa.Mu.Ci-3/28581/2016, dated 06.03.2020 and the consequential impugned proceedings passed by the fourth respondent herein in Building Plan No. 17/2021 dated 07.07.2020 and quash the same as illegal."

To start with, it is first and foremost put forth in para 1 of this recent, refreshing, robust and remarkable judgment that, "In the preamble to the Constitution of India, we the people have resolved to Constitute India as a secular Republic. Article 15(1) is as follows:

15. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth

(1)The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

Article 51 A (e) is as follows:

51A.Fundamental duties it shall be the duty of every citizen of India

(e) to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women."

Needless to say, the Bench then states in para 2 that, "The Fundamental Rights and Duties are sacrosanct and binding on the Courts which adjudicate issues relating to the religion."

As we see, the Bench then discloses in para 3 that, "The writ petition has been filed in the nature of Certiorari calling for the records of the impugned order passed by the first respondent/District Collector, Kanyakumari District, dated 06.03.2020 and consequential proceedings passed by the fourth respondent/Executive officer Pacode A Town Panchayat, Vilavancode Taluk, Kanyakumari District, dated 07.07.2020 and to interfere with the same."

Quite laudably, the Bench then points out in para 4 that, "The petitioner is a resident of Neduvilai, Kodaivilai, Maruthancode Post, Kanyakumari District. He says that he is a Hindu. One of the basic tenants to be followed by every Hindu is tolerance. Tolerance must be his own community or religion and in particular, to also to every other religious practice."

Of course, the Bench then states in para 5 that, "The petitioner, however, has raised objections particularly against the fifth respondent herein, who had apparently build a church, which in the eyes of the petitioner is causing nuisance because the respondent conducts prayers using loudspeakers through out day and night."

To put things in perspective, the Bench then envisages in para 6 that, "The petitioner herein had earlier filed W.P.(MD).No.9127 of 2019 and it is claimed that it is pending. The relief in that writ petition was to direct the first and second respondents therein namely, the Superintendent of Police, Kanyakumari and the Inspector of Police, Marthandam Police Station, Kanyakumari District to ensure that the third to sixth respondents therein, who are private individuals cannot use their house for prayer purpose by using loudspeakers and to remove the CCTV cameras put by the third to sixth respondents in their house facing the house of the petitioner herein."

As it turned out, the Bench mentions in para 7 that, "W.P.(MD).No.9127 of 2021 had already been disposed of based on an undertaking of the fifth respondent herein that he would not use loudspeakers. I am informed that learned Single Judge of this Court had examined the particular relief sought and had also directed to remove or refocusing of the CCTV cameras."

Truth be told, the Bench then discloses in para 8 that, "However, that is not the grievance in the present writ petition. The present has been filed owing to the fact that the first respondent had passed an order of approval granting building permission for the church and consequential orders have been passed by the fourth respondent therein. It is stated that prior to the issuance of confirmation of such permission, the petitioner was not heard."

No doubt, the Bench then quite rightly points out in para 9 that, "The petitioner is a resident in the area and building permission is issued only to the person who applies for such permission. The petitioner being a resident is not directly involved with the construction. He may have grievances over the activities which are being conducted or for which the building is put to use."

Furthermore, the Bench then brings out in para 10 that, "The learned counsel for the petitioner had relied on a judgment of learned Single Judge of this Court and the Hon'ble Supreme Court wherein, permission granted to run a church had been examined. In W.P.No.11903 of 2003, South India Assemblies of God Vs the District Collector, Kanyakumari District and others, the relief sought was of negative nature seeking a Mandamus restraining the right of the petitioner, Assemblies of God to Church situated at Kanyakumari. The learned Single Judge had passed an elaborate order and had dismissed the Writ Petition. Therefore, the District Collector had refused to give permission to put up a Church."

Most significantly and also most remarkably, the Bench then holds in para 11 what forms the cornerstone of this notable judgment stating that, "In the instant case, the District Collector quite apart from examining all aspects had finally granted permission to the fourth respondent to put up a Church, or rather to convert the existing house into a church. It is complained by the learned Counsel for the petitioner that the building or now the Church, is in a residential area. However, it is seen that there is also a temple in that particular residential area. The petitioner should learn to live with everybody else around him. This country takes the pride in unity in diversity. There cannot be diversity in unity. The petitioner should accept the group of people living across, and around with him and he should also accept that people of various faith and various caste, creed and religion and given rights under the constitution. The country is a secular country recognising practice of religion. The petitioner cannot make compliant against the same. The District Collector, Kanyakumari District, may by himself/herself or through the Sub Collector, Padmanabhapuram have a meeting with the fourth respondent and impress upon the fifth respondent that it is only prudent to be restrained and it is not required that a prayer should put forth in loudspeakers for the God to hear. Let the fourth respondent also realise his responsibilities and appreciate that liberty has been granted to him to respect the residence in that area. Let the prayers be conducted in a gentle manner."

While being sanguine about the peaceful settlement of the contentious issue, the Bench then minced no words to state in para 12 that, "Therefore, if the first respondent/District Collector either by himself/herself or through the second respondent/Sub Collector, Padmanabhapuram, were to impress upon the fifth respondent to practice tolerance and respect, then I am confident that sense and sensibility would prevail over pride and prejudice."

Finally, the Bench then holds in para 13 that, "The Writ Petition is disposed of. No costs. Consequently, the connected Miscellaneous Petitions are closed."

In sum, the single Judge Bench of Justice CV Karthikeyan of Madras High Court has been most forthright in advocating that tolerance should be shown towards other religious practices. It also very candidly and graciously conceded that this country takes pride in unity in diversity. To put it differently, we will not become small if we show not just tolerance but also love and respect for people following different religion from ours. If we do so then this is the best form of worship.

It goes without saying that no country can ever truly progress where people don't have the basic respect for the people following different religion from theirs! We will not become less in stature if we respect people following different religions from ours. So it merits no reiteration that we all Indians must pay heed to what the Madras High Court has held so explicitly, elegantly and eloquently in this leading case! Only then our country move ahead on the road to progress, prosperity and emerge as a powerful country.

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IMPORT-EXPORT

# Exports of millets to increase exponentially as Indian exporters find new markets

ANALYSIS

TARUN NANGIA

With demand for nutria-cereals rising steadily globally, the Department of Commerce expects millets exports to increase exponentially in the coming years as Indian exporters find new markets abroad.

Currently, India is the fifth largest exporter of millets in the world, according to 2020 data, with exports continuously increasing at around 3% CAGR in the last five years ending with 2020.

In 2020-21, India exported millets worth USD 26.97 million against USD 28.5 million in 2019-20.

World export of Millet has increased from USD 380 million in 2019 to USD 402.7 million in 2020.

Major exporter of millets are USA, Russian Federation, Ukraine, India, China, Netherlands, France, Poland and Argentina. Together, their millets exports stood at USD 221.68 million in 2020. Global exports of millets in 2020 stood at USD 466.284 million.

The top three importers of millets from India in 2020-21 were Nepal (USD 6.09 million), UAE (USD 4.84 million) and Saudi Arabia (USD 3.84 million). The other seven destinations in the top-ten list of India's millet export are Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, UK, Yemen, Oman and Algeria.

Altogether, these ten countries imported millets worth USD 22.03 million from India. Other countries accounted for millets imports worth of USD 5.13 million from India, taking the grand total of imports from India in 2020-21 to USD 27.43 million, according to DGCIS data.

Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) has been aggressively working towards facilitating shipments of millets by Indian exporters and helping them make inroads into new markets. Since organizing physical exhibitions and international trade fairs is not possible on account of the Covid-19 outbreak, APEDA has developed its own Virtual Trade Fair (VTF) application to facilitate interaction among exporters, producer organizations and international buyers.

In March 2021, APEDA organized its first Virtual Trade Fair – India Rice and Agro Commodity Show, which saw the participation of millet exporters also. A series of Virtual Buyer-Seller Meets (BSM) with Embassies, importers, exporters and product associations from India have been organized.

The top importers of millets along with their share in world import are Indonesia (8%), Belgium (7.36%), Germany (4.65), Mexico (4.1%), Italy (4.02%), United States of America (3.35%), United Kingdom (3.25%) Brazil (3.24%) and Netherlands (3.14%) in 2020. Top ten importers accounted for USD 221.7 million in 2020 out of the world import USD 466.3 million in same year.

India is the world leader in the production of millets with share of around 41% of total world production in 2020. India produces around 12 million MT of millets annually, according to Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare data.

The various kinds of millets include sorghum (Jowar), pearl millet (Bajra), finger millet (Ragi), little millet (Kutki), small millet (Samai), foxtail millet (Kangni), proso millet (Barri), barnyard millet (Jhangora), kodo millet (Kodra), two pseudo millets (buckwheat and kuttu), Ameranthus (Chulai) and other millets.

To give impetus to the export of potential products as well as to remove the bottlenecks in the supply chain of nutria-cereals, APEDA has created Nutri Cereals Export Promotion Forum which also included millets exports. It has also organized a sensitization programme for millet start-ups to familiarize them about export opportunities.

APEDA has signed an MOU with Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR) for making a strategy for promotion of millets and millet value added products. It has initiated a study on 'Refinement of Millet Value Chain for Export Markets: Preparation of export strategy in wake of International Year of Millets, 2023' through IMMR.

**TOP DESTINATIONS FOR INDIA'S MILLETS EXPORTS**

| Country | 2016-17 | | | 2017-18 | | | 2018-19 | | | 2019-20 | | | 2020-21 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Qty In MT | Rs. Crore | US$ Mil l | Qty In MT | Rs. Crore | US$ Mil l | Qty In MT | Rs. Crore | US$ Mil l | Qty In MT | Rs. Crore | US$ Mil l | Qty In MT | Rs. Crore | US$ Mil l |
| Nepal | 12002 | 17.67 | 2.64 | 12857 | 23.45 | 3.64 | 15605 | 27.82 | 3.98 | 15936 | 30.69 | 4.29 | 22095.7 | 45.07 | 6.09 |
| U Arab Emts | 13931 | 25.92 | 3.87 | 14898 | 25.51 | 3.96 | 13991 | 27.12 | 3.89 | 8407.7 | 22.15 | 3.1 | 15556.7 | 35.77 | 4.84 |
| Saudi Arab | 13985 | 26.66 | 3.98 | 9045.1 | 15.17 | 2.35 | 7689 | 13.73 | 1.97 | 10554 | 25.98 | 3.67 | 13516.5 | 28.62 | 3.84 |
| Libya | 3803 | 7.94 | 1.18 | 3347 | 6.59 | 1.02 | 4246 | 10.42 | 1.46 | 3283 | 9.37 | 1.31 | 5142.63 | 12.19 | 1.65 |
| Tunisia | 5529 | 12.45 | 1.86 | 5552 | 11.17 | 1.73 | 6618 | 14.42 | 2.05 | 5216 | 13.12 | 1.83 | 5549 | 12.1 | 1.63 |
| Morocco | 2528 | 4.87 | 0.73 | 3329 | 5.43 | 0.84 | 1759 | 3.83 | 0.54 | 2652 | 6.73 | 0.94 | 3915 | 7.89 | 1.07 |
| U K | 1080.8 | 3 | 0.45 | 1206.7 | 3.6 | 0.56 | 1172.2 | 3.76 | 0.54 | 1467 | 5.79 | 0.81 | 2102.85 | 7.34 | 0.99 |
| Yemen Republic | 4092 | 7.81 | 1.17 | 8688 | 14.03 | 2.17 | 7053 | 13.34 | 1.88 | 4301 | 9.88 | 1.37 | 3138 | 5.79 | 0.78 |
| Oman | 1190.1 | 2.45 | 0.37 | 1145.5 | 2.34 | 0.36 | 1093.8 | 2.55 | 0.37 | 976.19 | 2.6 | 0.37 | 2337.16 | 4.91 | 0.66 |
| Algeria | 1120 | 1.93 | 0.29 | 765 | 1.25 | 0.19 | 1777 | 3.93 | 0.57 | 1406 | 3.41 | 0.48 | 1761 | 3.65 | 0.49 |
| **Top ten** | **59260** | **110.7** | **16.54** | **60834** | **108.5** | **16.82** | **61004** | **120.9** | **17.25** | **54200** | **129.72** | **18.17** | **75114.5** | **163.3** | **22.04** |
| **Other Countries** | **23,602** | **59** | **9** | **20,625** | **54** | **8** | **21,683** | **71** | **10** | **20,806** | **73** | **10** | **11,371** | **37** | **4.93** |
| **Total** | **82,862** | **170** | **25** | **81,458** | **162** | **25** | **82,687** | **192** | **28** | **75,006** | **203** | **28** | **86,486** | **200** | **26.97** |
| **Share of top ten in India's export** | **71.52%** | **65.24%** | **65.30%** | **74.68%** | **66.91%** | **66.93%** | **73.78%** | **63.04%** | **62.64%** | **72.26%** | **63.84%** | **63.82%** | **86.85%** | **81.58%** | **81.72%** |

- Government working aggressively to facilitate and boost exports
- India is the fifth largest exporter of millets
- In 2020-21, India's millets exports were valued at USD 26.97 million

In a major boost to production and exports of nutri-cereals like millet, Finance Minister Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, in her union budget (2022-23) speech, announced assistance for post-harvest value addition and branding of millet products in the domestic as well as global markets.

16 programmes are being planned by APEDA for promotion of Millets and Value Added Products of Millets in UAE, Indonesia, USA, Japan, UK, Germany, Australia, Republic of Korea, South Africa and Saudi Arabia. During the promotion programme, Buyer Seller Meets, Road Shows and participation in major international events will be organized to promote Millets and Value Added Products of Millets.

DIGITISATION

# J&K becomes the first Union Territory to be integrated with National Single Window System

LG, Shri Manoj Sinha launches the J&K Single Window Clearance System integrated with NSWS.

ANALYSIS

TARUN NANGIA

In a historic achievement, Jammu & Kashmir became the first Union Territory to be onboarded the National Single Window System (NSWS). This marks a major leap in Ease of Doing Business (EoDB) in the Union Territory.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha launched the J&K Single Window Clearance System integrated with NSWS yesterday in the presence of Shri Arun Kumar Mehta, Chief Secretary, Govt of J&K, Ms. Sumita Dawra, Additional Secretary, DPIIT, Shri Ranjan Thakur, Principal Secretary Industries & Commerce, Govt of J&K.

NSWS is linked with India Industrial Land Bank (IILB) which hosts 45 industrial parks of J&K. This will help Investors to discover available land parcels in J&K.

The NSWS, a 2020 budgetary announcement of the Government of India, is a digital platform that serves as a guide for investors to identify and to apply for approvals as per their business requirements. The platform was soft launched in September 2021 by the Union Minister for Commerce and Industry, Textiles and Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Shri Piyush Goyal.

NSWS will eliminate the need for investors to visit multiple platforms/offices to gather information and obtain clearances from different stakeholders.

Twenty Ministries / Departments have been integrated on NSWS including Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare amongst others. Currently 142 central approvals can be applied through the NSWS portal.

*NSWS is linked with India Industrial Land Bank (IILB) which hosts 45 industrial parks of J&K, will help Investors to discover available land parcels in J&K*

14 States/UTs onboarded on NSWS include Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

The Know Your Approval (KYA) module on NSWS guides investors to identify approvals required for their business based on a dynamic intuitive questionnaire. Currently, the module hosts more than 3,000 approvals across Centre & States.

As on date, the portal has 16,800 visitors, out of which 7,500 KYA journeys have been serviced. More than 1,250 investors are registered on the portal.

The NSWS platform can be accessed at www.nsws.gov.in.

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MENTAL STRESS

# HORMONE IN BRAIN SENSES ISOLATION, DRIVES CONTACT-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

CORRESPONDENT
WAKO

The Covid-19 pandemic made everyone well versed with the feelings of loneliness, or perceived social isolation. This was also major stress for those who socialised a lot and increased the risk of various mental and physical health issues such as depression, substance abuse, obesity, and premature death in them. A new study opened up about the indicator of social isolation in animals.

Kansai Fukumitsu and others at the RIKEN Center for Brain Science (CBS) in Japan found a molecular indicator and regulator of social isolation in female mice. Their study was published in 'Nature Communications'. The study reported that social contact-seeking behaviour in mice was driven by the peptide amylin in the medial preoptic area (MPOA) of the forebrain and that being alone decreased the amount of amylin in this brain region.

Previous research by the RIKEN CBS group, led by Kumi Kuroda has shown that in mammals, the drive for maternal care also came from the MPOA. Specifically, the amylin-responsive neurons in the central MPOA (cMPOA) are required for maternal motivation. As is often the case in scientific discovery, the initial connection between amylin and loneliness was inadvertent. "While studying amylin signalling in maternal care, we noticed that the amount of amylin in the cMPOA depended on the housing conditions of the mice," explained Kuroda.

Loneliness can lead to depression, obesity, substance abuse and even premature death .

That observation led to the new study that examined behavioural and neural responses to social isolation and social reunion in female mice. The researchers found that six days of isolation led to an almost complete disappearance of amylin, which returned to normal two weeks after the mice were reunited with their cage-mates. This was true even when the mice were separated from cage mates by a windowed divider within the same cage, indicating that female mice needed to make free physical contact with other mice to maintain amylin expression in the cMPOA.

Then the researchers carefully eliminated the possibility that amylin levels were regulated by other factors such as boredom, general stress, physical contact with humans, or contact with other mice for defensive purposes. They also found that amylin-expressing neurons in the cMPOA are deactivated upon isolation, and activated upon reunion.

When female mice were separated from their cage-mates by the windowed divider, they first bit the bars of the divider vigorously. This biting behaviour was only observed when other mice were across the divider, and thus the mice seemed like they were trying to break the window and reunite with the other mice. This contact-seeking behaviour was increased by specifically activating amylin-expressing neurons using chemo genetics, biotechnology that allows artificial control of neuronal activity. In contrast, contact-seeking behaviour decreased after knocking down amylin in the cMPOA.

"Among other reported molecules, amylin is the one that responds the most to isolation and reunion, and itself facilitates contact-seeking behaviours," said Kuroda. "With all these results, we became confident that amylin is the major player in the brain that is needed for sensing and seeking social contacts."

Since Darwin's time, scientists have postulated that social affiliation among adults originally evolved from parental care. This study provides molecular evidence that supports this notion. "Both parental care and female-female social contact depend on amylin and augment its expression," KurodaV said, "This synergy might facilitate cooperative parenting, in which multiple females care for young together, as is observed in mice and humans."

RESEARCH

# Simulation training helps docs perfect complex surgical skills

CORRESPONDENT
SAPPORO

Practice makes a person perfect, but what if the practice itself is life-threatening? Dangerous professions, such as aviation or the military, require extensive simulation-based training to assist the person till they learn to do the job. With advances in technology, simulation-based training is an option to improve skills in even more fields, including surgery.

A large-scale study has found that simulation-based surgical training produced an increase in surgeons' skills for more complex surgeries. The results were published in the journal 'European Urology'. An international research team leading a randomised controlled trial across 10 countries found that while simulation-based training did not statistically improve initial learning curves regarding surgeon's general proficiency, it did produce an increase of skills in more complex surgeries, with fewer total complications and ureteric injuries in the simulation group.

"To date, there have been limited data, mostly from small-scale studies conducted with medical students, assessing the transferability of surgical simulation," said one of the paper's authors, Takashige Abe, Associate Professor of Urology at Hokkaido University's Graduate School of Medicine in Japan. "The aim of this multicenter international randomised controlled trial was to evaluate whether surgical residents who undergo additional simulation training are able to achieve proficiency sooner and with better patient outcomes when compared to standard operation room-based training."

The trial followed 65 participants in 10 countries for 18 months or to completion of 25 procedures. Split relatively evenly by location, a total of 32 participants received simulation-based training and 33 received conventional apprenticeship-style training. Both remained supervised by more experienced surgeons. Altogether, the participants performed a total of 1,140 surgeries, either semi-rigid or flexible ureteroscopy to remove ureteral or renal stones, respectively, demonstrating "mixed results" in proficiency. "For our primary outcome measure, while we showed what might be deemed a clinically meaningful difference, it was not statistically significant," Abe said. "However, when stratified to each procedure type, there were higher rates of proficiency in the simulation-based training group when it came to the more technically challenging flexible ureteroscopy procedure." Abe also noted that those who underwent simulation-based training outperformed the other group, scoring higher on a standard assessment for each surgery. "Simulation-based training led to higher overall proficiency scores than for conventional training, and fewer procedures were required to achieve proficiency in the complex form of the index procedure, with fewer serious complications overall," Abe said. "It is expected that the results of the trial will have a positive impact for advanced procedural training beyond the fields of surgery and urology in order to promote patients' safety as well as better surgical outcomes."

Simulation-based training can improve skills among medical practotioners

*Simulation-based training led to higher overall proficiency scores than for conventional training, and fewer procedures were required to achieve proficiency in the complex form of the index procedure, with fewer serious complications overall.*

STUDY

# Colorectal cancer in humans raises defensive barrier in response to chemotherapy

CORRESPONDENT
BARCELONA

Colorectal cancer occurs when tumours develop in the colon or rectum. Adenocarcinomas are the most common type of colorectal cancer, often growing from the cells that constitute the mucous lining of the tissue. A new study has said that drugs that are commonly used as the first line of treatment for colorectal cancer cause the tumour cells to oversecrete proteins known as mucins.

The study was published in the journal 'eLife'. The proteins altered the mucous layer, forming a physical barrier that prevented drugs from reaching their intended target.

Using different techniques involving genetic manipulation and the use of chemical inhibitors, the research team were able to experimentally regulate mucin secretion in cancer cell lines and patient-derived organoids, paving the way for the development of future treatments that can be used alongside chemotherapy to target drug-resistant forms of colorectal cancer. The experiments also revealed potential new biomarkers for the prognosis of the disease.

The researchers studied mucins, which are heavy, sugar-coated proteins that are secreted by specialised cells in the linings of the eye, nose, airway and digestive tract, including the colon. On average, humans secrete up to a litre of mucins per day. Mucins have gel-forming properties that mix with other biological matter to form mucous, a thick liquid that acts as a lubricant, preventing tissues from becoming dehydrated and also forming a barrier to protect cells from pathogens and other external factors.

The researchers studied whether the overexpression of mucins could create a barrier for drugs reaching the tumour cells. Experiments with fluorouracil and irinotecan, two drugs given in combination as the first-line treatment for colorectal cancer, revealed that cancer cells respond to the treatment by secreting copious amounts of mucin.

Colorectal cancer drugs cause tumour cells to oversecrete proteins known as mucins

"15-20 per cent of colorectal cancers are linked to the overproduction of mucin. In some of these cases, this is a problem because it will block drugs from reaching their intended target. What we were surprised to find is that chemotherapy itself triggers mucin secretion, potentially trapping patients in a vicious cycle requiring increasingly higher doses. This can be stopped if chemotherapy is combined with treatments that inhibit mucin secretion," said ICREA Research Professor Vivek Malhotra, Coordinator of the Cell & Developmental Biology Programme at the CRG and author of the study.

The researchers studied different ways of blocking mucin secretion to make tumour cells more sensitive to the drugs. They first attempted to genetically manipulate levels of the protein KChIP3, previously shown by Dr Malhotra's research group to regulate mucin secretion. They found that colorectal cancer cells depleted of KChIP3 were four times more drug-resistant compared to cells with normal levels of KChIP3. In contrast, cells with higher-than-normal levels of KChIP3 were ten times more sensitive to chemotherapeutic drugs.

According to Dr Lluis Espinosa, Coordinator of the Molecular Mechanisms of Cancer and Stemness at Hospital del Mar Medical Research Institute (IMIM), a researcher at CIBER Cancer (CIBERONC) and co-author of the study, "the downside of using KChIP3 as a therapeutic target is that it requires the use of gene therapy, a technology that is still in its developmental stages and also very expensive to use."

The authors of the study then assessed KChIP3's potential as a biomarker for the prognosis of colorectal cancer. By studying publicly available datasets following the progression of patients with the colorectal cancer patient, they found that high levels of KChIP3 indicated a longer period of time for disease-free survival, the length of time after primary treatment for cancer ends that the patient survives without any signs or symptoms of that cancer.

According to Dr Espinosa, further work must be carried out to develop KChIP3's potential as a prognostic biomarker. "One of the main barriers for looking for KChIP3 in clinical settings is that we don't have the antibodies needed to measure their levels. To include this biomarker in routine practice requires more research to develop ways of measuring it in the first place."

The researchers studied other methods to block mucin secretion without resorting to genetic manipulation, such as using chemical inhibitors. Previous work by Vivek Malhotra's research group had shown that inhibitors that block the function of sodium and calcium channels, known as NCX blockers, also inhibit the secretion of mucins.

The researchers chose an NCX blocker known as SN-6 for their experiments, which has previously been studied for its potential in treating heart arrhythmias. They tested SN-6 in organoids derived from patients, finding that it made colorectal cancer cells 40 times more sensitive to chemotherapeutic drugs.

According to Dr Gerard Cantero, who performed this work at CRG and presently served as principal investigator at Vall d'Hebron Research Institute (VHIR), said, the findings highlighted a potential new treatment strategy. "SN-6 is a highly specific inhibitor, meaning it's less likely to result in side effects compared to other NCX blockers. We found that SN-6 specifically inhibits the secretion of the mucins that are triggered by chemotherapy. Clinical trials are needed to confirm our findings, but combining SN-7 with chemotherapy is of great interest to overcome the side effects of chemotherapy."

Though this study addressed the problem of colorectal cancer cells, the approach could benefit patients with mucinous cancers or adenocarcinomas in general. "Mucin is produced in many parts of the body, not just the digestive tract. Further research should explore whether the inhibitors can affect the treatment of other types of chemotherapy-resistant cancers that involve a mucous layer," concluded Dr Cantero.

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WEDNESDAY 9 FEBRUARY 2022
CHANDIGARH

# EDITORIAL

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma which is living with the results of other people's thinking."
STEVE JOBS

## ONE MORE MILESTONE

OVER FIVE crore of the total eligible beneficiaries in the 15-18 age group have received their first dose of vaccines against Covid-19. As per the CoWIN portal, a total of 5,93,36,861 youngsters have been so far administered the first dose of Covid vaccines. Congratulating the youngsters on the occasion, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said that the young India is fighting the pandemic with full vigour. "Congratulations to the youth power. More than 5 crore youth in the age group of 15-18 got the first dose of the vaccine. Young India is fighting the pandemic with full vigour. Great going, my young friends!" said Mandaviya in a tweet. The Health Minister in Rajya Sabha on Tuesday said that about 67 per cent teenagers in the age group of 15-18 years have been vaccinated so far.

"The vaccination drive is being implemented in a speedy manner. The future decision will be taken based on the expert group's suggestion," Mandaviya said on Tuesday. He said that the current surge of Covid-19 cases in the country is showing a sustained declining trends. Responding to a question on alarming rise in the spread of Omicron variant of Covid-19 cases in the country, Mandaviya told the House: "Omicron is the dominant variant in the country presently. The current surge of Covid-19 cases in the country is showing a sustained declining trend since January 21." India's vaccination drive against Covid-19 achieved another milestone as it crossed 170 crore mark on Monday. With the administration of more than 55.78 lakh vaccine doses in the last 24 hours, India's Covid-19 vaccination coverage has exceeded 170.71 crore. It includes 95,34,19,861 shots as first doses of vaccines, 73,88,08,713 second doses and 1,49,06,565 as precautions doses.

## Matter of synergy

INDIA GOT got its Independence some 75 years ago but it still looks like a 'nation in making', judging from the in-terminate debate on 'the idea of India', narratives built on the charges of 'majoritarianism' and abandonment of 'secularism' against the Narendra Modi government and perpetuation of anti-India lobbies that deprecated the very concept of 'patriotism' -- the sentiment fostered by the Indian Constitution itself when it commended respect for National Flag and National Anthem. All this is happening because of injection of 'party politics' in the interpretation of nationalism and the imparting of 'communal tint' in the practice of known democratic norms. This needs elaboration.

It was in October 1945 -- after the Nazis had already surrendered in May, effectively ending the Second World War -- when the United Nations was established with the express aim of not letting another war inflict the world, and encouraging sovereign nation states to exist in harmony with commitment to global peace. It was universally accepted that democracy was the best form of internal governance for a nation -- big or small -- and that any international disputes would better be resolved through a UN mediation. The Cold War soon setting in because of the tense ideological and military divide between the two rival Superpowers representing International Communism and Western Capitalism, did not take away from the merit of democracy over dictatorship as a system of governance. Independent India began its innings on a note of complete democratic freedom by decreeing 'one man one vote' for election -- abolishing at one stroke distinction of caste, community or gender among citizens -- something that developed democracies of the West would achieve only after lengthy internal struggles.

It is a matter of concern that distorted politics came in the way of India, the largest democracy in the world, flourishing as a nation state -- even after the lapse of several decades. Divisions of caste, community and region that India inherited as a legacy of the past were kept going by political parties for vested interests, in clear violation of the Directive Principles of the Constitution pertaining to socio-economic equality, abolition of Untouchability and adoption of a Uniform Civil Code. India's political parties providing the very substratum of democracy fell for the temptation of appealing to minority sentiments, catering to caste groupings and fomenting regional identity, to gain numbers. The history of Partition kept alive the Hindu-Muslim discord in India, particularly because the Muslim elite and Ulema continued to politically lead the community on the basis of communal identity.

## River-linking plans push fault lines to the fore in South India

/ NARENDRA PUPPALA /

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's announcement on river linking projects, while presenting this year's Union Budget, has once again put the spotlight on the contentious issue of river water sharing between neighbouring states in the southern part of the country. The river linking projects in the south deal with the Godavari, Krishna, Pennar and Cauvery rivers. The idea is to transfer waters of under-tapped rivers to over-exploited rivers, thus utilising water that would have otherwise flown into the sea. However with claims and counter-claims over river water shares from various states, the situation threatens to turn muddy sooner than later.

The Cauvery river takes birth in Karnataka and flows through Tamil Nadu. The Pennar too takes birth in Karnataka and traverses Andhra Pradesh, on its way to the East Coast. The Godavari, India's third largest river, is born in Maharashtra, passes through Telangana, Chattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh before joining the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, the Krishna river, also originating in Maharashtra, passes through Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. However, with its waters fully exploited, there is hardly any water left in the Krishna by the time it reaches its journey's end. It's a similar situation so far as the Cauvery and Pennar rivers are concerned.

At the moment, Godavari is the only river with surplus water reserves. And the river-linking plans hinge upon using its waters to replenish the remaining rivers in the peninsula. According to the National Water Development Agency, out of an estimated 324 tmcft of surplus Godavari waters in Chhattisgarh, 247 tmcft water can be diverted to the Cauvery through the Krishna and Penna rivers. As predominantly agrarian states, and coupled with growing drinking water needs of urban populations, the clamour for the 'rightful' share of river waters has been growing with every year. Under the circumstance, neither Andhra Pradesh, Telangana or Chattisgarh seem keen on letting go of their potential claims to the Godavari rivers. In the relatively new state of Telangana, Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao literally scoffed at the proposal on the day it was announced in the Union Budget.

**"A Bachawat Tribunal verdict says that once Godavari enters the Telugu States, they have all rights on its waters." he reminded.**

"A Bachawat Tribunal verdict says that once Godavari enters the Telugu States, they have all rights on its waters." he reminded. In Andhra Pradesh too, the ruling as well as opposition parties have given a tepid response to the proposal. Over the years, the interstate water wars in south India have roused passions, incited violence, led to courtroom battles, and resulted in setting up of tribunals. The most bitter water wars are probably the ones between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the Cauvery waters, several years ago. In the past, Karnataka has also had tussles with erstwhile Andhra Pradesh over Krishna river water sharing. In the recent past, new neighbours, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have been sparring over their rights on previously common river waters.

Predictably, the BJP-ruled Karnataka government is treading cautiously on the issue. It is stuck between party loyalties and local sentiments. Chief minister Basavaraj Bommai has planned to reach out to the party's central leadership over the state's concerns. However, smelling an opportunity to capitalise on emotions, the opposition Congress party has begun cornering the state government on the issue.

Congress LOP and former Chief Minister S. Siddaramaiah went so far as accusing the finance minister of siding with Tamil Nadu because she hails from there. Incidentally, the union minister is a Rajya Sabha member representative from Karnataka. Talking to IANS, water expert Prof C Narasimhappa said that the river interlinking project will not benefit Karnataka at all. The interlinking of rivers will benefit Tamil Nadu state and Andhra Pradesh will be benefited to an extent. Andhra Pradesh has interlinked River Godavari to River Krishna. The interlinking of projects would benefit Tamil Nadu to a maximum extent, he stated. While the draft Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) have already been finalised as early as 2020, things will move on the ground only after the stakeholder states reach a consensus. Captain Raja Ram, a Karnataka water rights activist feels that Karnataka should use this opportunity to safeguard its interests. "Karnataka should see to it that its share is announced before the DPR is done for interlinking of rivers. The basic idea of interlinking of rivers is to provide water from river basins which have surplus water to deficit basins. Our state should not sit quietly but demand and get our share of water otherwise we should not agree to the project."

At the moment, Tamil Nadu is the only southern state to have welcomed the announcement. Chief Minister MK Stalin has been demanding the Centre for fast-tracking river-linking proposals. Pointing to the strong Tamil Nadu lobbying, political observers feel that the entire river-linking exercise seems to be tailored for helping the state.

However, with none of the other states willing to let go of their rights in view of their own future requirements, river-linking may not be so easy to execute either. Meanwhile, concerns have been raised in other quarters, especially on the ecological impact river-linking could lead to. Speaking to IANS, Prof Kshitij Urs at the National Law School University of India, said: "Building small deviations like canals may not have much of an impact, but diverting an entire river's natural course can have potentially disastrous consequences for the surrounding eco-system. It could lead to adverse impact at the river source as well as the end-points." / IANS /

## D'you suffer from damaged skin barrier?

N. LOTHUNGBENI HUMTSOE

While skin barrier gets slapped on products and thrown around a lot on social media, unless formulated correctly ceramides don't aid much in barrier repair. It can in fact, delay barrier repair if formulated incorrectly. The founder of the d'you, Shamika Haldipur shares her insights on 'barrier protection'. How do you stand out from similar product competitors? Shamik: While there are a plethora of ceramide products in the market, not all products have been developed to mimic our skin's natural lipid ratio - the Golden Ratio of 3:1:1. In most products, ceramides have been either used in isolation or combined with cholesterol and fatty acids in the wrong ratio which actually impedes (delays) rather than accelerates the barrier recovery. Most products have an extremely low concentration of ceramides which provide very few functional benefits to the skin. The research done on ceramides indicates that 0.8 to 2 percent is effective to promote the recovery of the barrier. However, the ceramide complex that is commonly used in the industry yields a mere 0.015-0.05 percent or at best 0.1 percent ceramide content which is approximately 10-20X lesser than what in my defence contains. Many ceramide products are unable to use ceramides inadequate concentration because ceramides are: (i) a very expensive ingredient, and (ii) a very thick, waxy and unstable molecule to work with. So, brands prefer to use them in lower doses to control the feel, texture, and stability of the end product. We overcame this issue in in my defence by using a patented dispersion technology that allows us to use pure ceramides in a highly stabilised form and at a high dosage while still making a very lightweight formula with a pleasant texture. We made in my defence by using ceramides in a high dosage of 1 percent pure concentration and in the optimal ratio of 3:1:1 to ensure lipid penetration into the stratum corneum (top layer of the skin barrier) such that it actually repairs your skin barrier over time and gives it resilience and strength to defend itself on its own. With continued usage, your skin's barrier is fortified to reduce its own water loss, and retain more moisture on its own.

What is the meaning behind the collection 'In My Defence"? Shamik: With in my defence, we want to indicate that in the long term this product is going to enable your own skin to defend itself and that this product and your skin is going to stand "in your defence" against all external stimuli.Why D'you? Shamik: d'you is phonetically derived from the word "dew". We wanted to indicate healthy and dewy skin. But at the core of the brand ethos is the customer i.e. YOU. So, we decided to play on the spelling of the word to write it as d'you instead of dew. The apostrophe in the word and our logo indicates a dewdrop. What process do you use to determine which products best fit the needs of a customer?

Shamik: With the skincare and beauty market saturated with so many products at the moment, we as a brand try to look beyond what's already available to the customer and see what customer needs are still not being met by these available products and then develop products that could add some value which they aren't already getting. In essence, we look for gaps in the market and find pain points that the consumer is facing and then make innovative products that provide solutions and address these pain points. How would you advise a difficult client on a more suitable product than the one she or he has chosen? Shamik: When a client asks us for consultation on product recommendations, we speak to them honestly by first explaining to them how their skin functions and how products work on the skin. We break it down to them in simple terms so they understand how their skincare ingredients are actually working for them. Basis their concern we advise them if a product we are recommending to them will be more beneficial than what they are already using. Sometimes we also tell them that the product we offer may not work for them basis what concern they are looking to address. When clients see the honesty and transparency with which we approach them and advise they mostly tend to believe us. / IANS /

Bird'seyeview

IANSLIFE

## *Kitchen tip: retain natural goodness of cold pressed virgin coconut oil*

Our health has suffered as a result of the fast-paced lifestyle dictated by our ambitions. With the passage of time, most people are shifting away from sedentary lifestyles and toward fitness. There appears to be a noticeable increase in the availability of healthy products, which, in turn, play an important role in overall wellness. Even the various products found in the kitchen are of a niche nature but are more beneficial.

Speaking about items found in our kitchen, one of the most important things we store is our cooking oil. The technique of obtaining these oils, however, is extremely important in terms of their health advantages. Cold-pressed oil is gaining popularity since the method of preparation ensures that the antioxidant content, as well as the flavour and nutritional value, are preserved. On the contrary, refined oil is treated using alkalis, bleaching agents, and acids, which provide consistent viscosity to the final product. The healthiest oil is cold-pressed virgin coconut oil, which can augment energy and improve HDL (good) cholesterol. MCTs (Medium Chain Triglycerides) are abundant in coconut oil, which aids in weight management.

**The technique of obtaining these oils, however, is extremely important in terms of their health advantages.**

Consuming cold-pressed virgin Coconut oil which is pure, unrefined, and extracted from freshly harvested coconuts is an ideal choice for cooking, healthier than other refined vegetable oils. The cold pressing technology helps preserve and retain the natural goodness, vital nutrients, rich aroma and flavour of fresh coconuts. Coconut Oil contains healthy fatty acids that help boost energy and are also known to raise HDL (good) cholesterol in your blood, which is good for your overall. Coconut oil is also high in MCTs (Medium Chain Triglycerides) that help in overall weight management. Dolly Kumar, Founder and Director, Gaia good health shares the benefits of using cold-pressed coconut oil:

Overall Fitness: Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs), a kind of saturated fat, are abundant in coconut oil. MCTs have the potential to boost the number of calories burned by your body. As a result, it may help people lose weight.

Antimicrobial qualities: Lauric acid is a fatty acid found in coconut oil that accounts for nearly half of the MCTs. It has antibacterial properties that fight against disease-causing germs. Thus, lauric acid proves to be an effective bactericidal agent which can effectively destroy bacteria. Due to this cold-pressed coconut oil offers antibacterial and antifungal characteristics.

Natural energy booster: There are many energy drinks available on the market, but none of them is better than what naturally cold-pressed coconut oil can provide. MCT's found in cold pressed coconut oil are transferred straight to our livers and act as carbs, providing an expansive and ready supply of energy. MCTs have been widely used to formulate sports nutrition diets and are taken by many athletes around the globe.

Skincare expert: Cold-pressed coconut oil can care for your skin with more efficacy than any moisturizer that uses many artificial ingredients. Cold-pressed coconut oil, due to the preservation of all the nutritional properties, provides a therapeutic therapy for the skin, which can aid in the cure of skin diseases like atopic dermatitis. It enhances the moisture retention of chapped and dry skin and also helps in the better functioning of the skin by proving to be a shield against infectious agents, chemicals, and allergens.

Improves oral health: Streptococcus mutans is a round bacterium found in the oral cavity. Oil pulling is often used to improve dental hygiene in a cost-effective approach. Swishing cold-pressed coconut oil effectively eliminates S. mutans bacteria from our mouths in comparison to regular mouthwash.

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> It is not God who made man wicked. It is man who makes himself wicked by separating himself from God.
>
> **THE MOTHER**

# Opposition Bashing

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is known for his gift of the gab and he displayed it once again during his over an hour-long reply February 7 to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address. He is also known to be an expert in sidestepping main issues with theatrics, twisting facts, conveniently forgetting his own actions in the past and ridiculing the Congress. For, he lashed out at the Congress and its leader Rahul Gandhi instead of answering Opposition's charges on the high inflation rate, unprecedented unemployment and alleged mismanagement of the pandemic. He used the Parliament, as he has done in the past, to deliver emotive election speeches without offering concrete evidence to counter the Opposition's allegations. The PM glibly went on bashing the Congress and comparing his government's performance with the record of previous Congress rule starting from Jawaharlal Nehru down to the UPA government.

The Opposition too is failing badly. For instance, when Rahul Gandhi tries to taunt the government on its crony capitalist policies of encouraging just a couple of industrial houses who are favourites of the Prime Minister, he does not dare to clearly spell out how he would do it differently, or change what he thinks are current mistakes, if he ever comes to power. An example is the way Rahul spoke about the Modi government offering all ports and airports all over the country to only one company. He tried to point out this monopolisation but did not spell out if he would take back the public funded infrastructure units from the singular private player if he came to power. This kind of namby-pamby smoke drill will obviously leave no impression in the minds of the average young Indian voter about any alternatives.

People across the length and breadth of this country are aware that voting for BJP is voting for Hindutva and all its side effects. On the other hand, no one is certain what voting for Congress would imply. The side-talk that is doing the rounds about the Gandhi family, including Robert Vadra, being protected and paid for by the BJP leadership to remain as they are, no more seems to be a joke.

The country is infinitely larger than a political entity called the Congress and the PM's speech should have been on addressing grave problems facing the country such as inflation, joblessness, a collapsing economy and monumental sufferings of the people due to inept government handling of the pandemic. The PM did not speak directly on what had caused inflationary pressures on the Indian economy, but merely mentioned how supply chain and logistics support systems across the world have collapsed. He even went as far back in history as the Korean war and said that Jawaharlal Nehru had supposedly claimed that inflation in India was because of the war in Korea. While the mention of such invaluable historical statements could be amusing to a student of history, those who support such inane opinions probably could argue that Nehru's faulty policies were responsible for the Indian economy fairing badly today. Somehow, these people conveniently forget that the present party in power takes great pride in its singular achievement of scrapping thousands of outdated laws. If that is an achievement, then all the bad laws of Nehru era should have also been done away with by now.

On the all-important issue of increasing joblessness, Modi skirted Opposition criticism that his government's decisions over the last few years such as Demonetization, a flawed Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime and lack of support to MSMEs were primarily responsible for precipitating the largest-ever unemployment rate in over 50 years. Instead of taking the Opposition head-on on this matter, Modi spoke of his government's 'vision' and blamed previous governments for propagating the idea that the government is the only 'bhagya vidhaata', meaning that only the government can shape people's lives by creating job opportunities. "The thought has impeded Indian youth's 'kaushal' (skill) and dreams. The political class has only encouraged such an egotistic thought. No, the government doesn't have to do everything," he said. Although this idea is very reasonable, this is also a classic case of the government disowning its responsibility to provide livelihood to the people leaving them at the mercy of private capital.

The PM's intention to turn the Parliament into a platform for electioneering was most evident in his unfounded claim that the Congress, the Aam Aadmi Party and the Shiv Sena were responsible for spreading the coronavirus by providing train and bus tickets for daily wage earning migrants who desperately needed to get to their villages in the face of the first, sudden lockdown he had announced in March 2020. "You people (pointing at the Opposition benches) pushed the labourers into difficulties," he said. But, this was an egregious statement since everyone knew most migrant labourers were thrown into a survival crisis after the PM announced the lockdown giving the people only four hours to prepare for it. And it was the Prime Minister's personal decision to bring back thousands of stranded Indians from many coronavirus infected countries starting with the first flight from Wuhan of China, the birth centre of the virus.

Prevarication, deliberate forgetfulness and election rhetoric should not be what the Prime Minister offers while replying on the Motion of Thanks to the President for his address in the Parliament.

## WISDOM CORNER

> The Lord is in me, the Lord is in you, as life is in every seed, put false pride away and seek the Lord within.
> **KABIR**

> It is easy to hate and it is difficult to love. This is how the whole scheme of things works. All good things are difficult to achieve; and bad things are very easy to get.
> **CONFUCIUS**

> Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.
> **RUMI**

## WORDSWORTH

### Sabermetrician

It means a person who studies baseball statistics. It's not a particularly well-used word anywhere, though better known than it was, but it's almost unknown outside North America, even among the minority who follow baseball in other countries. The game is unusual among competitive sports in that there has been no fundamental change in the rules for almost a century and that, as with cricket but unlike most other team sports, statistics on the performance of individual players have real meaning. So it is possible to compare the players of today with those of previous generations in a meaningful way. The term is first attested in the early 1980s, and derives from the acronym SABR, short for the Society for American Baseball Research, whose members collect and analyse baseball statistics. Several compounds are known, such as sabermetrics for the discipline. This is a recent appearance: You know, Davey's always been on the cutting edge. This is a guy who was employing sabermetrics before there was even a sabermetrician. Like I said, he's a thinking man's manager, he's a player's manager, he's a guy who loves the game, knows the game inside out, and he has a track record that's second to none (The Washington Post, 26 Jun. 2011).

## LOL

### Discussing Grades

A high-school student came home from school seeming rather depressed.
"What's the matter, son," asked his mother.
"Aw, gee," said the boy, "It's my marks. They're all wet."
"What do you mean all wet?"
"I mean," he replied, "below C-level."

FOCUS PROPAGANDA

# WHEN MONEY SMELLS

*Ian Buruma*

**PRIVATE DONORS, WHETHER FORMER CRIMINALS OR NOT, HAVE PERSONAL INTERESTS**

In recent years, the Vrije Universiteit (Free University) Amsterdam has conducted research on human rights in China. As part of this work, carried out by the university's Cross Cultural Human Rights Center (CCHRC), researchers travelled to Xinjiang province, notorious for the Chinese authorities' mass incarceration of more than one million Uyghurs and members of other largely Muslim minorities. The CCHRC published the results of its investigations in a newsletter, financed through the Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing.

It was a little strange, but hardly surprising, to learn from one of the Dutch researchers, Peter Peverelli, that he saw nothing untoward in Xinjiang. The region was "just lovely," he said, "lovely people, breathtaking nature, great food. And no forced labour, no genocide, or whatever other lies the Western media might come up with."

The Vrije Universiteit had to admit that something was not quite right. It now says it will not accept further Chinese funding for the center and will return the money it received last year. The CCHRC website was taken offline, leaving behind only a terse statement: "Human rights are preeminently the area where inclusiveness and diversity are important."

That is one way of putting it. The Nazis were not very keen on inclusivity or diversity, either. But it is an unusual way to describe the Chinese government's systematic persecution of an ethnic and religious minority.

This is not to say that people like Peverelli, who deny that such abuses are taking place, are necessarily corrupt. They may well think that whatever the Chinese government claims is true. Why, therefore, should they refuse to take Chinese money to confirm what they already believe about human rights in Xinjiang? The same thing might apply to some Western supporters of Russian President Vladimir Putin who receive Russian money and subsequently express their disgust with NATO.

Research can be expensive. Universities are often strapped for cash. And many countries, including China, are more than happy to help researchers portray them in a good light. The question is whether universities, or media outlets, should ever accept money from governments or other institutions that have a political interest in the returns on their generosity.

**Research can be expensive for cash-strapped universities, and many countries, including China, are more than happy to help. The question is whether universities, or indeed media outlets, should ever accept money from donors that have a political interest in the returns on their generosity**

For example, the British literary magazine Encounter got into trouble in 1967 when revelations of the CIA's indirect sponsorship of the publication led to the resignation of its editor, Stephen Spender. In the 1980s, when Japan's increasing economic power was spooking many in the West, US universities that accepted Japanese corporate money were much criticised, even when they claimed there were no strings attached. At the same time, some critics of Japanese corporate power were being sponsored by European or American institutions.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with official or unofficial subsidies. But when there is a problem, it is usually for one of two reasons: reputational embellishment or political influence-peddling.

In the mid-1990s, Oxford University was riled by the "Flick affair." Gert-Rudolf Flick, the perfectly respectable grandson of a prominent German industrialist, offered to sponsor a Flick Chair in European Thought. After a lot of hand-wringing, the university turned down the money, because the Flick company had profited from concentration-camp slave labour during World War II, and Flick's grandfather, Friedrich, had been convicted of war crimes.

One may well ask whether instituting a Rupert Murdoch Chair of Language and Communication at Oxford was any better. Murdoch is not a war criminal, but he is still a highly controversial media and political player. Then there is the case of Japan's Ryoichi Sasakawa, whose Sasakawa Peace Foundation doles out large sums to many institutions, including Yale University. Sasakawa was a gangster and a fascist (and a suspected war criminal), but he is no longer a political player because he died in 1995.

Still, taking cash from someone seeking to buff their tainted reputation, though sleazy, is less dangerous to the intellectual integrity of universities or media than political propaganda. And this is where things get tricky.

Some governments are more respectable than others. French, German, or even (still) American democracy is preferable to the authoritarianism of Putin or Chinese President Xi Jinping. Clearly, the United States uses its "soft power" to further its own interests, too. But one difference is that, unlike in a dictatorship, propaganda is still a dirty word in a liberal democracy. It is a little easier to preserve a degree of independence in the context of American soft power (as was true of Encounter, which was an excellent magazine).

But maintaining even some independence is not always simple. US universities have received financing not only from Japanese companies, but also from the Japanese government, especially for Japan studies. MIT's Richard J. Samuels, a distinguished political scientist, said about this: "Once you have an endowment, it's arm's length and the role of the donor ceases with the delivery of the gift."

There is no reason to doubt Samuels' word. The Japanese government is probably too sophisticated to exert direct pressure on the content of the scholarships and programmes it sponsors, though some professors have told me in private that there could be worry of needlessly upsetting donors by supporting doctoral research on subjects that might seem provocative.

China, however, goes about things in a very different way. Criticism of Xi, especially but not only regarding human rights in Xinjiang or Tibet, is quickly punished. China slapped economic sanctions on Australia after the Australian government called for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. Similarly, Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, was barred from entering Hong Kong because his organisation had criticised China's human-rights record. In short, what Peverelli, or anyone else, really thinks is irrelevant. Subsidies from China don't come without a quid pro quo.

This may be true of many kinds of financial support. What matters is whether there are strings attached. Universities need cash. Media organisations have commercial imperatives. Governments have political priorities. Private donors, whether former criminals or not, have personal interests.

But academic independence cannot be guaranteed if financial donations come with expectations of intellectual conformity and political compliance. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has realised this now. Better late than never.

***The writer is the author, most recently, of The Churchill Complex: The Curse of Being Special, From Winston and FDR to Trump and Brexit (Penguin, 2020).***

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IN JEST THIS

# Spoil your ties with alcohol, not with others

*Melvin Durai*

**IF YOU'RE A DRINKER, IT'S ALWAYS WISE TO DRINK IN MODERATION. BUT UNLIKE IN AN INTERNET FORUM, YOU HAVE TO SERVE AS YOUR OWN MODERATOR**

I'm grateful to my mother for a lot of things, but one of the most important is that she urged me not to drink. Actually, 'urged' is not the right word. It was more like 'forbade.'

My mother forbade me from drinking alcohol. She saw it as a sin. And though almost every adult in her close family now drinks, at least occasionally, she still sees it as a sin. She is surrounded by sinners, including me. But let me explain.

Let me explain my relationship with alcohol. We never liked each other. We still don't really like each other. But now and then, we spend time together. Sometimes, we even allow other people to see us together.

Because my mom forbade me from drinking, I did not touch alcohol in my twenties. While my friends were drinking beer at parties, I was drinking Coke and Fanta. But when I turned 30, I decided to re-evaluate my relationship with alcohol. Could we actually get along if we followed some reasonable limits? Could we have just a cordial relationship—not a passionate, "till death do us part" relationship like some of my friends had?

I decided to try beer, and let me tell you, from the very first sip, I hated it. It was bitter. "Stop drinking that!" my taste buds screamed in unison.

Beer is an acquired taste. But how exactly do you acquire it? By drinking more of it, apparently. "No way," my taste buds said. "Give us Coke and Fanta."

Most forms of alcohol are too strong for me, but I do enjoy sweet wines and cocktails. I have a drink once a month on average, never more than a glass at a time. I appreciate our monthly get-togethers, but have no interest in taking the relationship any further. I won't be bringing a bottle home to meet mother.

So why am I still grateful to my mother? Because she ensured that I wouldn't get hooked on drinking while I was young. When I finally had a drink, I was wise enough not to drink too much.

If you're a drinker, it's always wise to drink in moderation. But here's the problem: unlike in an internet forum, you have to serve as your own moderator. You have to be the one to press the 'delete' button on the second drink.

Drinking in moderation may actually offer some health benefits, as research has shown. It may, for example, reduce your risk of developing heart disease. But if you're looking for health benefits, you are far better off adopting a healthy diet or exercise regimen. That's because even moderate amounts of alcohol can put you at higher risk for cancer, not to mention the risk of saying or doing something stupid.

Every time you drink, there is also the risk of getting carried away and drinking heavily. Alcohol is addictive, after all, and habitual drinking will put you at risk for all kinds of health problems, not just cancer, but liver disease, stroke, pancreatitis, high blood pressure, and a cracked skull. How would you get a cracked skull? By having an accident while you are drunk—or getting hit by another drunk person at the bar.

Actually, a cracked skull may be the least of your worries if you get behind the wheel of a car. You will endanger not only your life, but the lives of many other people.

Alcohol has been the cause of many accidents, as well as many fights—and not just at bars. It has broken up numerous families, destroyed countless relationships.

So before having another glass of beer, ask yourself this important question: which relationship do you value more?

# Letters

TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa POST are most welcome to contribute letters (200 words), articles and columns (between 750-1250 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send in their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: **edit@orissapost.com**

Orissa POST HERE . NOW
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## Cong's Punjab challenge

**Sir,** This refers to "AAP to gain the most from Cong infighting" **Orissa POST**, Feb 8. Given the hype surrounding the Congress naming its chief ministerial face for the upcoming Assembly elections in Punjab, one can be forgiven for assuming that the party has already won, and current chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi, a Dalit, will continue in the chair. The question however is, whether this burst of elation takes the Congress towards an absolute majority or not. Punjab's huge Dalit population is politically fragmented and the community is divided into at least 39 sub-castes with each fighting for benefits within the SC pie. They have also sought the patronage of different political parties over time and do not subscribe to a common ideology. Their loyalties towards the SAD and now the AAP will matter. It also needs to be pointed out that, the Bahujan Samaj Party that germinated in Punjab could never get the consolidated support of this segment for the same reasons. For the Congress, whatever it gains from the Dalits will be negated by the upper caste Hindus and Jat Sikhs who will most certainly desert the party in large numbers. Ever since Channi was elevated in September last, upper-caste Punjab has remained displeased. Many consoled themselves with the thought that perhaps the Congress will use him to woo Dalit votes and change horses if the party wins the election. This is not to be. Sidhu, a Jat Sikh, was made the PCC president to prevent alienation of Jat Sikhs who comprise some 20 per cent of the population and have dominated the politics and economy of the state for decades.

***N Sadhasiva Reddy,*** BANGALORE

## Farmers' concerns

**Sir,** Many countries including the USA and Asian nations have been toying with the COVID-relief packages. Even though there have been such relief packages getting underway, it is not that clear whether those promises have been really fulfilled or not. We have been coming across so many coronavirus casualties all up through this pandemic. True, finishing the virus once and for all is the prime objective. Besides, strengthening the all-round economy is the key now. Talking about the relief packages, it is pretty crucial and significant to safeguard farming and the people involved in it. If we are serious about getting food security in perfect place, immediate steps should go into helping the farming community.

***P. Senthil Saravana Durai,*** MUMBAI

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The Telegraph

WEDNESDAY 9 FEBRUARY 2022 VOL. XL NO. 212

## NEW LESSON

Mysteries, like wonders, never cease. A few months after the National Education Policy, 2020 was announced with drumrolls celebrating its steps towards an inclusive, excellent, world-attracting education, the University Grants Commission has produced a draft policy that cuts down on teachers in higher education. A teacher-student ratio of one teacher to 18 students had become the approved one during the United Progressive Alliance regime. The UGC draft policy has proposed that social sciences, commerce and management courses have one teacher for 30 students — the ratio for classes in school fixed by NEP — and sciences have one for 25. In postgraduate classes, science, engineering and management should have one teacher for 10 students, and media and mass communication, almost as privileged, one for 15. There is little mystery about the basis of this discrimination between streams since it reveals the comparative values the government attaches to science and humanities subjects, and to the different types of professional and applied education. The devaluing of the humanities was obvious during the UPA rule and is also a worldwide phenomenon. The mysteries reside elsewhere. Since the UGC proposal is clearly aiming to cut down on the number of teachers and thus save costs, how does it match the NEP's high-flying dreams of educational excellence? No excellence is possible without sufficient teachers, while reducing teaching jobs means that the government is not serious about increasing employment.

The drive to reduce expenditure in education may not be surprising. While an 11.8 per cent increase in the allocation for education in the 2022-23 budget is being tomtomed, the allocation still remains at 3.1 per cent of the total budget in place of the 6 per cent considered necessary. The mystery is to be sought for in the UGC's reference to the NEP's goal of better institutional infrastructure. The draft policy proposes an action plan for enhancing academic facilities and turning every higher educational institution — irrespective of its special emphases or core competence — into a multidisciplinary institution. It is neither clear where the money for that will come from nor what will be achieved by diluting strong academic or professional traditions by introducing disciplines that an institution may not be prepared for. All this with fewer teachers. The abyss between the NEP and the UGC's proposals — including the teacher-student ratios — seems unbridgeable.

## GONE FISHING

There is nothing fishy about it. Ahead of the upcoming *panchayat* elections in Odisha, given the Covid-19 restrictions on large rallies, candidates are using campaigning strategies that are so simple and direct that they are remarkable in today's world. One candidate is carrying around a live version of her election symbol — a fish — as she goes door to door to canvass support. Another candidate is lugging around an LED television set — her symbol — while yet another contestant, an *ayurvedic* doctor, offers consultations to voters when he visits them. At a time when bigger political leaders, starting with the prime minister, increasingly rely on technology for modern campaigning, Odisha's candidates represent a breath of fresh air and a reminder of just how far India has drifted away from the fundamental, honourable ideals of democratic elections. In a country where the universal adult franchise is the only right truly available to all adult citizens, election campaigning is the one time when Indians have traditionally had a chance to see their candidates up close. That practice has been upended in recent years by the growing reliance of major political parties on virtual rallies, interactions *via* holograms, and political messaging on social media platforms.

Of course, technology has brought about positive changes to elections too, and it could serve even more as a force for good. If all candidates could communicate with voters remotely, and all citizens could access their messaging with equal ease, digital campaigning could — in theory — dramatically cut the carbon footprint associated with the cross-country travel that senior political leaders undertake during key elections. But in reality, money power — just as it does with traditional election campaigning — makes virtual campaigning an uneven playing field. Hiring an army of people to artificially boost political messages on Twitter or Facebook needs plenty of cash, which only some parties have. That is why the approach to campaigning adopted by many candidates in Odisha is worth celebrating. The very idea behind election symbols is to help build a unique brand for each candidate or party, especially in a nation where millions still cannot read. It is hard to forget someone who shows up at the door with a living fish in her hand. If that helps to tip the scales in favour of these innovative politicians, that can only be healthy for Indian democracy.

### SCRIPSI

*'It is always fatal to have music or poetry interrupted.'*

GEORGE ELIOT

Gujarat 2002 was the premiere of later enactments

# Splintered vision

**STATE OF PLAY**

SANKARSHAN THAKUR

This is the twentieth anniversary of the making of Narendra Modi and the Gujarat Model. It was this month twenty years ago that triggered the marinade of horror, hatred and gore that has served up this sizzled nation called New India where it is possible for zealotry to hound a young girl for her choice of apparel, for venom to fetch you a vice-chancellorship and for odium to create a public discourse on whether Shah Rukh Khan's act of prayer was actually a ruse for spitting on Lata Mangeshkar's mortal remains. It is necessary to recall and commit to memory the Gujarat of 2002 and the thereafter because we are probably only mid-stream in its momentous aftermath. We must know the nature of what came to unfold twenty years ago, if only so we are better able to negotiate this tide that has taken our affairs.

To anyone paying attention, it would have been evident that 2002 was not a contest to retain the Gujarat assembly, it was the beginning of his assault on New Delhi. In a skewed but probably telling sense, he had already raised the bar of competition higher than any other Indian chief minister would; he was not in a contest with locals, he had pitted himself against Pervez Musharraf — "Mian Musharraf" was his chosen address — and was waging a campaign to protect the nation from such threats as the then Pakistani dictator. Here, clearly and for all to see, was an architect of fractures who could dream but a splintered design, who could deal but in fear and its detritus. Here was a man striding divisions, driving them deeper, infusing them with the diabolical iridescence of hate and bitterness. Here was a man quite unabashed about what he was up to. Here was a man so focused on his distorted vision, he couldn't care for correctness, political or otherwise. The recurrent horrors enacted in Gujarat that year were nothing but a natural reaction to the carnage of Godhra; if tempers were such they spilled into murder and mayhem, it was only a measure of the depth of public shock and anger. The relief camps had to be shut and the refugees sent back to their charred and sundered homes because the government was not interested in any more charity, not certainly for baby-making factories; the victims could go and turn their five into twenty-five and twenty-five into six hundred and twenty five but his government was not subsidizing them. The Chief Election Commissioner — a man called J.M. Lyngdoh at that time — had to be flayed not because he takes decisions that are inconvenient and unpalatable but because his first name is James and, therefore, he must be deep in some dark conspiracy with the Vatican and Sonia Gandhi. Here was a man who didn't like mincing words. In fact, he often revealed a crowbar where his tongue should lie and he didn't like apologizing for putting it to use. The more he can do to annoy and affront, the better off he is, the more villainous he looks to some, the more heroic he begins to feel. The more some people reviled him, the more others raved about him. Censure was fodder to his cannons, he would court more and more of it so he could keep his guns blazing.

He is the classic anti-image, his stature is determined by his adversary. The more the opposition to him, the more he can feed and fatten on it. There is nothing that pleases him more than the charge of being anti-Muslim. The more the minority gets ranged against him, the more the majority consolidates behind him.

Accuse Narendra Modi of being a *Hindutva* battle-crier and he would respond like you had paid him a compliment. That would be like telling Ariel Sharon he is anti-Palestinian or Slobodan Miloševic that he is a Serb ultranationalist. Those are the badges they want to wear. That's the badge Modi wants on his chest, it's been his ticket past the turnstiles into power, and remains his essential lease document. He has a killer's instinct for power and a hunter's will to pursue it. What's more, he has a razor-sharp sense of the hour and how to make it his own. When passenger coach S-6 was set afire at Godhra junction late February, he seized the opportunity. He saw in a single flash of that incendiary moment a road map to new vainglory although the maxim it ran on was a very old and established one, used by many astute practitioners of power before him — that dividing is a handy principle to rule by.

Post-Godhra, Modi was a man transformed. Suddenly, he was no longer besieged in the crumbling fortress left behind by the Keshubhai Patels; he was out raiding, charging; he was bellicose and daring. He was unafraid to embrace whatever he saw profit in. What was tragedy, Modi converted into opportunity; he picked up the flames from Godhra and blazed a new trail with cold determination.

The Gujarat of 2002 was the premiere of later enactments. It is when peddling prejudice began not to be a thing of shame, it is when brandishing bigotry from the public stage, and profiting from it, began to be a thing of pride. It is when the thing of Indian hating Indian to the degree that one Indian was ready to lynch the other and brag about it became a thing of fashion. That's where we began this journey to unabashed worship of debased ideologues and assassins. The show isn't over yet, its protagonist is only warming up. Keep watching, if only because shutting your eyes will not ease the abomination of what we have become.

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# End hunger with peace

MALANCHA CHAKRABARTY

The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed millions of people into poverty and hunger. The United Nations estimates that between 720 and 811 million people faced hunger in 2020 — about 161 million more than in 2019. However, it would be wrong to blame the pandemic solely for the rise in global hunger figures. After about two decades of consistent decline, hunger began to increase from 2015 onwards. The last few years also witnessed a comeback of famines. In 2017, a famine was declared in South Sudan while Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen were on its brink. Currently, famine-like conditions prevail in Yemen, South Sudan, Madagascar, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia.

While the famine in Madagascar is the consequence of a severe drought due to climate change, all the other countries facing famine-like conditions are conflict zones. Yemen, described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, has been under famine-like conditions since 2016. The conflict between the internationally-recognized government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebel movement that began in 2015 has ravaged the country. Nearly 16.2 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance. About 50,000 people from Hajjah, Amran and Al Jawf are living in a famine-like ambience. Child undernutrition in Yemen is one of the highest in the world, with about 2.3 million children needing urgent treatment.

Similarly, South Sudan has been in a state of conflict since 2012-13 that has destroyed lives and livelihoods. About 60 per cent of the South Sudanese population is hungry. Ethiopia, until recently one of the fastest-growing African countries, is experiencing another famine due to the ongoing conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and Ethiopian troops. About 400,000 people in the Tigray region are facing famine. Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and the consequent suspension of international aid have also heightened the risk of a famine in that country. The Afghan economy is in a shambles and Afghanistan is facing a severe drought. About 23 million Afghans are threatened with hunger and nearly one million Afghan children need immediate treatment for malnutrition.

Amartya Sen has often stressed the role of democracies and government action in the prevention of famine. However, unlike functional democracies, none of the governments in these countries is actively engaged in famine prevention. In fact, some governments have actively contributed to the famine through neglect or deliberate prevention of relief to those in need. For instance, the South Sudanese government has largely downplayed the crisis while the Ethiopian government is widely accused of creating the famine by preventing the flow of relief into Tigray. Likewise, the Taliban leadership lacks both the wherewithal and the intent to prevent mass starvation in the country.

The international community needs to step up its efforts to address mass starvation in these nations. While scaling up humanitarian efforts is the need of the hour, it is also important to recognize their limitations. For instance, considerable resources have already been spent on South Sudan and Yemen since 2016 but their people continue to suffer from extreme hunger. The key question is this: is it even possible to end hunger in these regions through humanitarian efforts without addressing the underlying cause of hunger — conflict? In addition to food aid, there is a need to put an end to the conflicts so that the nations and their people can resume normal economic activities and become less reliant on international support.

Ending hunger (Sustainable Development Goal 2) is not possible without peace and security (Sustainable Development Goal 16). Global hunger should not, therefore, be looked upon in isolation. The inextricable link between hunger and peace and security must be acknowledged and peace-building must become an essential ingredient in the fight against hunger. To achieve the sustainable development goal 2, additional resources should be channelled towards peace-building. Political solutions to conflict must be prioritized. Enhanced humanitarian assistance will not be enough.

**Malancha Chakrabarty works as a Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation**

### *Glorious win*

■ Sir — The Under-19 Indian boys' cricket team must be congratulated for winning the World Cup. It is the only team that has lifted the trophy five times. This year, as many as six players either tested positive for the coronavirus or exhibited symptoms. But the players stood strong and beat England in the finals. Yash Dhull, Nishant Sindhu, Shaik Rasheed, Raj Bawa and Ravi Kumar performed remarkably well. The young players must continue to work hard so that someday they can secure a place in the men's cricket team.

**Bal Govind,**
*Noida*

■ Sir — Yash Dhull, the captain of the U-19 cricket team, expertly led India to its fifth victory in the World Cup. There is certainly no dearth of talented young players in India. Hopefully, the Board of Control for Cricket in India will continue to encourage these young players.

**Samir Das,**
*Cooch Behar*

### *Smart choice*

■ Sir — The announcement of Charanjit Singh Channi as the chief ministerial candidate of the Congress for the upcoming assembly polls in Punjab must be a bitter pill to swallow for Navjot Singh Sidhu ("Cong projects 'poor' Channi", Feb 7). It is obvious to all that Sidhu has been eyeing the post for long. While Sidhu has publicly announced that he respects the decision of the high command, there is certainly a possibility for sudden tussles within the Congress.

**K.V. Seetharamaiah,**
*Bangalore*

■ Sir — The Grand Old Party has ended all speculation surrounding its choice of chief minister for the 2022 Punjab polls by announcing the candidature of Charanjit Singh Channi. Navjot Singh Sidhu's frequent clashes with the Congress high command and the departure of the former chief minister of Punjab, Amarinder Singh, from the party have tarnished its reputation amongst the people of the state. The myriad internal crises within the Congress continue to be a problem and will likely affect the outcome of the polls. It is high time the party resolved its internal troubles.

**M.R. Jayanthy,**
*Mumbai*

■ Sir — With the elevation of Charanjit Singh Channi — a Dalit leader — the Congress has indicated that it intends to rectify some of the power imbalances that have long plagued the party. The Congress must continue to acknowledge the contributions of Dalit leaders and activists.

**Vishal Mohite,**
*Nashik*

### *Grave imbalance*

■ **Sir — A skewed gender representation in any field can cause a plethora of problems. A nationwide survey has found that women make up only 13 per cent of scientists or science faculty in higher educational and research institutes. Yet, findings also indicate that 40 per cent of the country's annual science PhDs are earned by women. What this figure fails to reveal is that most female doctoral candidates are forced to work twice as hard to prove themselves, not to mention overlooked when it comes to grants. As a result, many women end up leaving the sciences. Unless existing faculty and administration — overwhelmingly male — actively encourage women, the situation will not change.**

**Swarnali Bhattacharya,**
*Jodhpur*

### *Poisoned air*

■ Sir — A lot more needs to be done to reduce the levels of air pollution in India ("Still gasping", Feb 7). Even after three years since the launch of the National Clean Air Programme, most non-attainment cities continue to exhibit dangerous levels of PM2.5 and PM10 in the air. While it is laudable that Varanasi has cut down its pollution levels by more than half, that is not much of a consolation — in 2020, 46 out of the 100 most polluted cities in the world were in India. The Indian government cannot afford to have a lackadaisical attitude about this crisis.

**Kirti Wadhawan,**
*Kanpur*

Inhaling poison

### *Downward spiral*

■ Sir — The Rights & Risks Analysis Group has released its *India Press Freedom Report 2021*, highlighting the targeted attacks on journalists in the country. It found that at least six journalists were killed, and 108 journalists along with 13 media houses and newspapers were targeted in India. Unsurprisingly, Jammu and Kashmir tops the list, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The independence of the press is one of the essential pillars of a functioning democracy. The continued attacks on scribes are cause for concern.

**Tarun Patidar,**
*Ujjain*

### *Stay fit*

■ Sir — The article, "Just Stretch" (Feb 2), by Debanjan Banerjee succinctly stressed the need for exercising the brain regularly. Research shows that if we fail to stimulate the brain adequately, it can lead to a range of diseases such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension, high cholesterol, depression and dementia. Thus, it is absolutely imperative that we constantly stimulate our brain through activities such as reading, painting, solving puzzles or crosswords, and, most of all, limit the time we spend in front of the TV.

**Sanjit Ghatak,**
*Narendrapur*

All-round fitness

■ Sir — Many of us focus on eating well and diligently exercise on a regular basis. But we rarely accord the same importance to the well-being of our minds. These days we spend hours scrolling through social media websites and consume an enormous quantity of inane content. In fact, compulsive social media usage can lead to anxiety and heighten depression. We must prioritize the health of our brains and spend our time wisely.

**Anindya Guha,**
*Calcutta*

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# Simplifying disclosures

## Abridged prospectus will help retail investors

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) recently issued a new circular relating to the disclosure of information on the application form for initial public offerings (IPOs). This goes into effect immediately. While the salient information to be provided isn't subject to much alteration or addition, the regulator appears to be making a creditable effort to ensure this information is easily read and comprehensible. This is clearly aimed at making life easier for retail investors, who often rely purely on information given in the application form — institutions will surely analyse the extended documentation that is mandatorily available on the website. The market regulator has said a copy of the abridged prospectus must be made available on the website of the issuer, the lead managers, and the registrar to an issue. In addition, a link for downloading the abridged prospectus must be provided in the price band advertisement. This may be in the form of a QR code that can be scanned for easy download of the full prospectus, and the abridged version.

Further, the information should be "adequate, accurate and not contain any misleading or mis-statement". The issuer should also ensure that any qualitative statements in the abridged prospectus are substantiated with key performance indicators (KPIs) and other quantitative factors. No qualitative statement must be made that cannot be substantiated with KPIs. In the circular, Sebi also said the front page of the application was often crowded and difficult to read due to the large amount of statutory information. The circular includes an annexe, which illustrates by presenting a dummy prospectus what details should be listed and the format in which they should be presented. Under the revised format, a company will have to disclose the name of the promoter and the details of the offer to the public — the type of issue, fresh issue and the offer for sale (OFS) component, and total issue size — and also share reservation details on the front page of the abridged prospectus.

Additionally, the following pages of the abridged prospectus must contain a general disclosure of risk; details about the promoters' relevant experience and education; the directors' experience and education; a brief overview of business strategies including revenue segmentation by product or service; geographical coverage of the firm; intellectual properties, if any; market share; employee strength; factory locations, etc. Also, the segmentation of objects of the issue by amount allocated, the shareholding pattern and the consolidated financials must be mentioned. The top five risk factors as stated in the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) must also be stated, and any litigation or criminal actions against the promoters must be mentioned. All these details and more are listed in the DRHP and RHP, but those tend to be lengthy documents, which retail investors may lack the ability to comprehend. By ensuring that the above information is easily available in the application form and presented in a fixed template, the regulator will definitely make it easier to comprehend.

The IPO market has seen a drop in sentiment after the deep correction in Paytm and several other newly listed companies. This comes after an extraordinary bull run through 2021, when many companies raised money at highly optimistic valuations. Investors are likely to be more cautious now, in the face of tightening liquidity. Transparent disclosure is likely to make their task of assessing IPO prospects better.

# Reducing edible oil imports

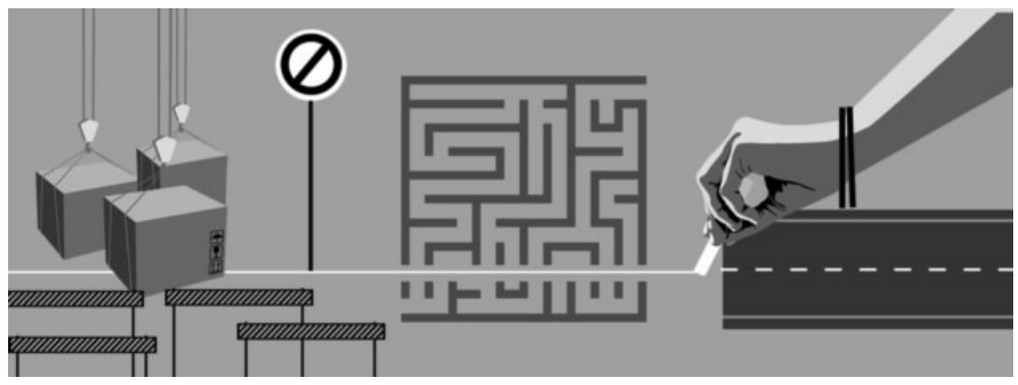
## India needs a stable policy framework

Just days after Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke in her Budget speech about boosting the output of oilseeds to reduce dependence on imports for edible oils, the government has opted to extend stockholding curbs on oilseeds and edible oils, which are bound to prove counterproductive. This decision also ignores the caution voiced in the Economic Survey against knee-jerk reactions to price fluctuations of essential items, which send wrong signals to domestic producers. The move, moreover, is mistimed for several reasons. For one, the prices of most cooking oils are either stable or on the slide ever since the stock limits were originally announced in October last. However, only six states — Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan, and Bihar — had followed the Centre's directive then and notified limits on the stocks that could be held by traders. Now, the government has gone a step further and has specified the restrictions to be imposed in the remaining states as well. This measure has followed the earlier equally ill-advised step to abolish import duties and drastically slash the agri-cess on edible oils from 20 per cent to merely 5-7.5 per cent.

The trade restrictions are uncalled for at this stage also because of an expected bumper rabi harvest of oilseeds. The area under mustard, the main rabi oilseed, is estimated to have expanded by 23 per cent and the crop stand is said to be excellent, thanks to salubrious weather. Preliminary estimates put the likely output of mustard at over 11 million tonnes, far higher than last year's 8.5 million tonnes. Any restraint on stockholding at this stage would tend to keep the buyers away from the market, thereby, depressing the prices during the post-harvest marketing season to the detriment of the growers. Low price realisation would deter the farmers from raising oilseeds production in the next kharif as well, thus perpetuating the dependence on purchases from abroad. The recent decision to allow the import of genetically modified soyameal, used as livestock feed, has also served as a major disincentive for higher local production. India has already become the world's largest importer of vegetable oils, buying 14-15 million tonnes of these oils annually to meet its requirement of 25 million tonnes.

Heavy dependence on imports for a mass-consumed kitchen staple like the cooking oil is untenable, as also dicey, because the bulk of the imports are of palm oil, sourced from just two countries — Indonesia and Malaysia. Any disruption in supplies can pose problems for India. Such a situation is unwarranted for another reason. The country has the potential to grow enough oilseeds and edible oils to meet its needs. The Oilseed Technology Mission, set up in the mid-1980s, had shown the way to do so. It disallowed any market intervention as long as the prices remained within a reasonable band that struck a balance between the interests of producers and consumers. However, this policy was abandoned in the 1990s, frittering away the gains from the good work done by the mission. What is needed now is a similar policy framework to spur domestic production for the benefit of all stakeholders in the oilseeds and edible oil sector, including producers, processors and consumers.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



# Different strokes in transparency

## More clarity on Customs duty changes could have made the Budget more transparent

RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

The Union finance ministry has rightly come in for praise for its transparency in acknowledging the extent to which it has met government expenditure by using extra-Budgetary resources such as bonds, which are fully serviced by the government, or by borrowing from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Meeting government expenditure with the help of such extra-Budgetary resources hides the actual size of the fiscal deficit. Hence, both its disclosure and gradual reduction in the use of such resources are welcome developments.

The process of disclosure began with the first Budget that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented for 2019-20. The details of the government's recourse to such extra-Budgetary resources, since 2016-17, were given in the Expenditure Budget document and were limited to disclosing only the amount of expenditure met through fully serviced government bonds.

In her Budget for 2020-21, Ms Sitharaman went a step further and presented the details of her government's extra-Budgetary borrowings at the end of her Budget speech. While she restricted such disclosure only for 2019-2020 and the proposed borrowing in 2020-21, she also began including her borrowing both through bonds and funds from the NSSF.

Thus, the Budget Estimate of such extra-Budgetary resources of ₹57,004 crore in 2019-20 rose to ₹1.73 trillion in the Revised Estimate for that year. Worse, at about ₹1.86 trillion, she showed that she would raise more such resources in 2020-21. Raising more resources that would effectively hide the real extent of the fiscal deficit was problematic, but what came as a pleasant development and perhaps a redeeming feature was her desire not to hide that problematic move.

In her Budget for 2021-22, Ms Sitharaman revealed a bit more on the government's use of extra-Budgetary resources. The details at the end of her Budget speech noted for the first time that the practice of raising such resources even from the NSSF began in 2016-17, by her predecessor Arun Jaitley. Such borrowing in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19 was estimated at over ₹79,000 crore, ₹88,000 crore and ₹1.63 trillion, respectively.

She also made it clear to everyone that she had a firm plan to reduce her recourse to such extra-Budgetary resources. For instance, the Actuals for such borrowing in 2019-20, her first year in office, had been brought down to ₹1.48 trillion, compared to the Revised Estimate of ₹1.73 trillion. And the Budget Estimate of ₹1.86 trillion of extra-Budgetary resources in 2020-21 was brought down to ₹1.26 trillion in the Revised Estimate for that year. What's more, she proposed that the recourse to extra-Budgetary resources in 2021-22 would be restricted to only ₹30,000 crore.

When early this month Ms Sitharaman presented the Budget for 2022-23, she over-delivered on that promise. She reduced the government's recourse to extra-Budgetary resources to just ₹751 crore, against the Budget Estimate of ₹30,000 crore. And for 2022-23, she indicated that there would be no such extra-Budgetary borrowing.

Given such a commendable performance on transparency about the government's extra-Budgetary resources, it is puzzling that the finance minister was not equally transparent about her Customs duty proposals for next year. Remember that Customs duty changes are difficult to decipher from the notifications that are issued by the finance ministry. They are to be read in conjunction with other relevant notices issued in the past to understand the actual implication of the new rules and arrive at the effective rate of duty for an item.

It was Jaitley who had begun the practice of outlining the key Customs duty changes in simple language, in a table at the end of his speech, indicating the old and the new rates for different items and the government's objective in bringing about the duty adjustments.

This was a big change. You could thus make out the number of items whose Customs duty went up because the government wanted to ensure a level playing field for the domestic industry (another name for protection) or how many items saw a duty increase to help the government garner additional resources. There were also instances of duty reductions that, according to the government, would have helped the export competitiveness of the Indian industry. You could make sense of all this by perusing the few pages at the end of the Budget speeches from 2015-16 onwards.

In her first three Budgets, Ms Sitharaman followed that useful practice of revealing the specific changes in the Customs duty on various items and the purpose for which they were brought about. Surprisingly, that practice was given up in the Budget for 2022-23, even though Customs duty changes formed a significant part of her new taxation initiatives.

One of the major initiatives on the Customs duty front pertained to reforms of the complex exemption regime that governments in the past three decades have introduced, and which have made the Customs regime even more complicated. What used to happen was that the government while reducing the Customs duty would not cut the rate, but introduce an exemption notification, whose enforcement would reduce the effective tariff. Making sense of this to help importers was a delightful and remunerative exercise for tax consultants.

Obviously, a simpler Customs duty regime with fewer exemptions was necessary. Ms Sitharaman did precisely that with her 2022 Budget — by removing the exemptions on as many as 414 items in one stroke. There will be no change in the effective rate of the import duty for these items, but the confusion over the exemptions regime for these items would be over.

There are many more changes in the Customs regime. As many as 97 items will see their duty rates rationalised. The exemption regime for several other items has been simplified, including some that would result in a reduction in the effective rate of Customs duty.

But neither the Budget speech nor the explanatory memorandum makes the intention clear for the ordinary person, who may be keen to understand the trajectory of the Customs duty changes. If only the finance minister had retained the practice of outlining the existing and proposed tariffs on these items, things would have been different.

Worries over the Customs duty changes resulting in an increase in tariffs would have persisted, nevertheless. After all, there are as many as nine items, including some machinery and project imports, that have been subjected to a higher Customs duty. And it is still not clear if some items, whose exemptions have been removed, would now be attracting a higher duty. All these doubts would have been dispelled if there was a clear note at the end of the Budget speech as was done in the past seven years.

Total Customs duty collections have been rising in the last couple of years. Their share in total imports has also been increasing in this period. More clarity on the actual direction of changes in the Customs duty would have been helpful.

# When founders need an 'Asoka moment'

THE WISE LEADER

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

There are disturbing company reports of pathologically destructive leadership behaviour —poor governance, discernible fudging, intemperate language, overweening ambition, perpetually boastful talk and so on. To my simple mind, being psychopathic is like behaving in a toxic, megalomaniac or narcissistic manner. Not every founder's behaviour is psychopathic, but as the cases keep coming, one wonders whether founder-chief executive officers (CEOs) are prone to this malaise —for example, BharatPe, Paytm, and Zee. Other examples have been Rotomac Pens, Pan Parag, RDAG, Kingfisher, Gitanjali Gems, Café Coffee Day, and Housing.com. Sometimes, the funders drive the founder into psychopathy.

During my career, I served as non-executive director of a start-up with a founder as managing director. It took the board seven long years to be convinced that the founder-CEO was a psychopath with hallucinations about who he was and what he was worth. It took the board another three years to ease him out since they desired no public controversy. I learnt a lesson about the tenure of founder-CEOs: If in doubt, pull the trigger sooner rather than later, quite the opposite of the view of many founder-CEOs.

The drumbeats around the Indian start-up sector are loud and deafening. Every senior government official lauds the emerging ecosystem and the response through Start-up India. According to a recent NASSCOM-Zinnov report, between 2011 and 2021, India added 25,000 start-ups; 2,250 in the last year when $24 billion of equity investments was made into start-ups; and 6 lakh direct and 34 lakh indirect jobs were created by such enterprises. This array of statistics is overwhelming.

Silicon Valley has its share of psychopaths. In 2020, Maelle Gavet, a veteran of the tech industry, wrote a riveting book, *Trampled by Unicorns: big tech's empathy problem and how to fix it*. The book offers an account of the world's tech start-up —Amazon, Google, Facebook, Twitter, WeWork, Tesla, Airbnb, Uber, not to forget Theranos.

Big tech has progressed humanity's most noble pursuits but has to grapple with destructive empathy deficit. Ms Gavet says, "We need tech, but a more empathetic tech." She quotes research by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that companies managed by psychopaths tend to decrease productivity and create low employee morale. Ms Gavet argues that psychopathic leaders' behaviour trickles down and creates psychopathic companies by nurturing an "infantilised culture", where employees become accustomed to working in "hyper-privileged bubbles in which their every whim is catered to and every need anticipated." Her view about Steve Jobs, whom many founders try to emulate, is that his legacy has "cultivated an indelible association between being a jerk and a genius." The 2011 Walter Isaacson biography and the 2015 Netflix movie purport to bring out the real Jobs. I asked a few Indian founders about the negative reports about Steve Jobs. Their response was, "He did not build Apple by being humble and caring about people."

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist, the universally accepted diagnostic tool used to assess this behaviour, includes traits such as "a grandiose sense of self-worth, lack of remorse or guilt, poor behavioral controls, pathological lying and a lack of empathy."

Thus there are two diametrically opposing narratives— genius-like entrepreneurs who are out to change the world on the one hand, yet who are susceptible to toxic behaviour on the other. There are far more psychopathic founders than real geniuses. Further, every founder, like medicines and corporate CEOs, has a "use-by date." The skillsets of a founder-CEO and a profitable-growth CEO are not necessarily the same.

The psychopathy of founder CEOs is not yet at a crisis point for India. The Indian entrepreneurship flower can be nurtured. A former Verizon CEO details "watch-for bad habits"—not building trust and integrity, focusing on things that don't matter, shirking being a role model, not reinforcing what is really important, trying to be popular, getting caught up with self-importance, burying one's head-in-the-sand, and not fixing root cause of problems.

Entrepreneurship associations and training institutions can help by emphasising positive behaviour as a necessary adjunct to the innovation role, like SINE at IIT Bombay and TiE do through their mentorship network and counselling. I tried to make a small contribution through a 2021 book, *Wisdom for Start-ups from Grown-ups*. An empathetic Indian start-up atmosphere is desirable.

It is instructive to read the book, *Myth of the Entrepreneur*, by Ravi Kailas with Cathy Guo. He was a serial entrepreneur who built and scaled ventures spanning telecom, software, financial options and more. During the hustle and bustle of his journey, he had his "Asoka moment". After excelling as a traditional king for eight years, King Asoka watched with great pain his destruction of the fertile lands of Kalinga. This set Asoka, as is well-known to Indians, on a journey to express his inner revolution.

Likewise, entrepreneur Ravi Kailas realised that the pearl is formed around a grain of sand. That grain of sand catalyses the pearl into being. Once the beautiful pearl has been formed, the grain loses its identity. The grain of sand is then significant only by its absence. Indian founders, who created long-lasting enterprises, did exactly the same —Jamsetji Tata, Jamnalal Bajaj, Pirojsha Godrej, and Ghanshyam Das Birla.

*rgopal@themindworks.me. The writer was Director, Tata Sons and Vice Chairman, Hindustan Unilever*

# The ESG imperative

BOOK REVIEW

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

Reams have already been written about the importance of responsible business, and why companies need not sacrifice profit for social outcomes, but the uniqueness of *Outlast* lies in the fact that it is the first Indian-authored book on how environment (E), social (S) and governance (G) can benefit businesses in the country. So, the problems and solutions are all set in the Indian context, and there are several case studies of Indian companies. This is useful for readers to relate to what the authors have advised.

The Tata group, of course, gets more than a pride of place in the book, which is understandable since both the authors spent much of their professional life there and were involved in the group's remarkable ESG journey. That sense of belongingness and gratitude is evident throughout the book, which many readers may find a little repetitive.

*Outlast* successfully demolishes the shared wisdom of many Indian companies that their main responsibility is to generate profit for investors and a focus on ESG will mean sacrificing profits. The book shows that it's not an either-or choice anymore, and companies can create both profit and social value. It explains how successful companies have embedded purpose into practice so that it's more than just a mission statement.

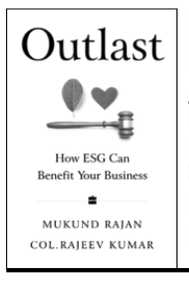
The need for businesses to shift their practices from wasteful extraction to sustainable, regenerative, equitable systems has never been greater. After the Covid-19 pandemic, many businesses now have a unique opportunity to prepare for a new age where businesses work for the good of society and make profit.

Such an approach makes good business sense, too, as organisations that have focused on improving their ESG performance have done better in terms of financial returns and have secured competitive advantages in product, labour, and capital markets. Poor ESG practices on the other hand have adversely affected shareholder value.

The authors have clearly delineated the ESG components: Environmental sustainability is demonstrated through optimal natural resource and energy consumption, responsible waste and pollution management leaving a minimal environmental footprint. The social dimension is determined by the links and ties the company creates with the local community, the concern for its employees and the working conditions, diversity and inclusion and factoring in the "long-term" well-being of other stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, and the community. The governance dimension brings together the role played by independent directors and board-effectiveness in ensuring transparency, stakeholder well-being through systems, processes, and audit controls.

As *Outlast* shows, the picture isn't pretty as far as India Inc is concerned, though there are a few islands of excellence. One of the significant misses is spending on research and development (R&D). The national gross expenditure on R&D in science and technology as a percentage share of the Indian GDP has stayed stagnant at 0.6-0.7 per cent for the last two decades, compared to China's 2.1 per cent of a far larger GDP and 2.8 per cent by the US. On the second set of key drivers of ESG improvement in India are social issues, as represented by the "S" of ESG. Take gender diversity, for example. According to the World Bank's India Development Report of 2017, India ranks 120th among 131 nations on female participation in the workforce.

Even in "G" (governance), the scope for improvement is huge. As the authors note, a cursory glance at the compensation of Indian corporate leaders in the Nifty-50 companies shows that they were paid, on an average, 260.5 times their organisation's median employee salary. This needs serious introspection at a time when a K-shaped recovery is dominating the headlines. One of the valid suggestions in the book is to strengthen corporate boards with a dedicated ESG committee. But then in the sharp-elbowed world of business, a genuine effort at building green credentials also needs greater clarity and a compass. The book, therefore, encourages a code of conduct, clear compliance expectations and enforcement mechanisms. A "whistle blower" policy to flag-off deviations will enhance the execution.




**Outlast: How ESG can benefit your business**
**Author:** Mukund Rajan, Rajeev Kumar
**Publisher:** Harper Business
**Pages:** 368
**Price:** ₹799

The authors rightly argue that it would take a very brave and optimistic business leader in a developing country like India to count on technology transfer or financial support from the developed world for help in addressing climate change. Instead, prudence demands that business leaders with operations in developed markets make the investments, of their own volition, now secure and sustain their future.

The amount of research that has gone into the book is remarkable, evident from the fact that almost a fourth of the pages in the 368-page book contains a list of reference material — white papers, books, documents, surveys, newspaper articles. The list is useful for readers who want to go deeper into their understanding of ESG issues. The broad message that *Outcast* has successfully delivered is that ESG is not simply a burgeoning trend, and Indian corporate leaders must get on board or risk extinction.

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# Relating to India Inc's RPT Concerns

## SEBI can do well to consider a review

Last week, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) tightened disclosure requirements for related-party transactions (RPTs) by entities that have listed non-convertible debt securities. This follows up on an earlier Sebi directive that enhances shareholder oversight of RPTs by listed companies. The rules for companies, which are to come into effect on April 1, have enlarged the scope of transactions that are material for shareholder scrutiny as well as the definition of related parties. Industry argues that such enlargement — going beyond provisions in extant legislation — adds to their compliance burden. It has asked Sebi for a review.

Industry is seeking a reversal to percentage of turnover as the criterion for reportable transactions instead of the ₹1,000 crore threshold set. It claims this will slow down decision-making by large listed companies. Industry also finds the definition of related parties as entities holding 20% in a listed company, which will be widened to 10% next year, as unnecessarily broad. It claims this will encompass a swathe of institutional holdings and wants them excluded. Essentially, two concessions are being sought: doing away with shareholder approval for RPTs in the ordinary course of business, and a proportionate definition of material transactions. These are genuine concerns, and Sebi will do well to take them on board. The argument of decisions being held captive by minority shareholders is less salient, given the size of public float in the Indian stock market.

Sebi's new rules are, however, in response to observed disclosure gaps in RPTs. The argument for ease of doing business runs up against that for greater transparency, the market regulator's primary mandate. Industry is making its case by highlighting concerns of big companies. Sebi's rules are for all companies. Most companies would not find Sebi's transaction threshold constricting and do not enjoy the privilege of institutional holdings. This is the segment of the market that the regulatory gaze is turning on.

# Global Brands Must Be Market-Sensitive

It's not every day that global brands muff things up. But on February 5, Pakistani operations of Hyundai, Kia, KFC and Pizza Hut jumped on the usual brand-wagon of commemorating special days on the calendar. Except they hashtagged Kashmir Solidarity Day, a national holiday on which Pakistan shows its 'support' for Kashmiris, including separatists, in India. You don't have to be Sun Tzu to know that for business that operates in multiple markets, especially in countries hostile to each other, this is throwing a grenade into your own compound.

In this day and age, when consumers in one corner of the world rightly reject items produced in another part of the world if they are products of child labour or animal cruelty, for a global carmaker or fast food company to be seen endorsing a 'cause' that challenges the sovereignty of another country is brainless. While the companies have been scrambling to apologise and explain to appalled Indian consumers that the social media posts were the 'unauthorised' doings of their local Pakistani partners, such buck-passing won't cut much ice in the porous world of international brand consumption. The Indian operations of the erring companies have apologised, and as rightly mentioned by commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal in Parliament on Tuesday, they have to be 'more forceful in their equivocal apology'.

It is highly unlikely that Hyundai or KFC has any stake in, or harbours any opinion on, India-Pakistan relations beyond their ability to sell cars and meals in both countries. But brands thrive by consumer perception; they are damaged by consumer perception. For the sake of their own businesses, they need to be more sensitive to popular sensibilities of their operating markets.

**JUST IN JEST**

The 10th richest person in the universe shows you can be clean and prosperous

# To Go Green is Enriching is Glorious

Deng Xiaoping may have caught on to something that the Medicis got wind of centuries before when the communist leader coined the phrase, 'To get rich is glorious.' But it may now be time for a follow-up: to go green is enriching. With Gautam Adani riding on the pigtails of renewable energy — Adani Green Energy is his most valuable company — he is now, going by Bloomberg's February 8 update of the world's top billionaires list, the 10th richest person in the universe and the richest in Asia. With a net worth of $88.5 billion, he's gone ahead of other energetic man Mukesh Ambani, the second time Adani's pipped him reliably after November 2021. (Poor Jack Ma is No. 34 now.) Considering the richest person, Elon Musk, also fuels his riches by expending both rocket fuel and revving up electric vehicles, the trick now seems to be to play both sides in the energy sweepstakes — seguing away from carbon-emitting coal to follow the sun. No longer the old binary of getting your hands dirty with coal, oil and gas alone if you wanted to make zillions.

But enough about funky fuel. Out of the top 10, eight are Americans, one (Bernard Arnault) French and one Indian. By being one of the 10 richest persons, Adani will help make the old land of snake charmers and mendicants be looked at in a slightly new way by the world.

**SWAMISPEAK** Sitharaman is right to gamble on growth. But she should know it's a gamble

# Keep Your Fingers Crossed

**Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar**

Will the ghost of Pranab Mukherjee come back to haunt Nirmala Sitharaman? She has opted for a high fiscal deficit for the third time in a row to keep stimulating an economy still recovering from Covid. This has similarities with Mukherjee's economic stimulus when he became finance minister after the Great Recession.

He inherited a fiscal deficit of 6.1% of GDP in 2008-09, increased it to 6.6% the next year, and after a reduction to 4.9% in 2019-11, he sent it up again to 5.9% in 2011-12. Mukherjee found it politically difficult to squeeze spending and raise taxes to reverse the stimulus. Analysts castigated him for not reducing fiscal deficits fast enough, for persisting too long with a stimulus.

### Export StagNation

One result was high inflation that caused much misery and made exports uncompetitive, leading to export stagnation. The high fiscal deficit helped widen the current account deficit (CAD) sharply to over 4% of GDP, leaving India vulnerable to any unexpected problem. This came with the 'taper tantrum' of 2013.

The US Federal Reserve panicked markets with a surprise announcement that it would taper its bond purchases. Sensing risk, investors fled out of all emerging markets into the safety of US bonds. The rupee crashed from ₹55 to ₹68 to the dollar, and the Sensex with it. Raghuram Rajan, the new RBI governor, stabilised the rupee. Mukherjee was kicked upstairs to become president.

Sitharaman, too, is persisting with high fiscal deficits: 9.2% of GDP in 2019-20, 6.9% in 2020-21, and a projected 6.4% next year. The combined Centre-state deficits exceed 10% of GDP, a crisis level by normal IMF standards. The debt-GDP ratio has soared to almost 90%. Covid justified extraordinary measures. But I am astonished that virtually nobody worried any more that high fiscal deficits can be inflationary. The old Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) target of 3% now seems a tale from another century.

Why? Because the world over, after the Great Recession of 2008-09, countries have run high fiscal deficits, and central banks have printed trillions of dollars to buy securities to curb interest rates. Yet, inflation has been very low. Economists initially attributed this to low demand for finance after the Great Recession — it took time for corporations to deleverage and banks to clean up their balance sheets.

But when inflation stayed low for years, many economists attributed this to demographic change that had created a permanent savings glut. Ageing in major economies led to falling consumption — the aged spend less than youngsters — so savings had soared.

The savings glut, exacerbated by loose monetary policy, meant demand could be stimulated a long time without causing inflation, especially when the stimulus boosted asset, rather than consumer, prices. Real interest rates fell to zero, stock markets soared and investors put surplus cash into speculative vehicles like cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs).

All good things must end. Inflation is now rising everywhere (almost 7% in the US). To check prices, the Fed may raise interest rates five times in 2022. Global money is flowing back from emerging markets like India to safer western havens. This is not yet a flood, but cross your fingers.

**Deal with it**

The global scene threatens India's inflation. High import prices (especially for oil) mean wholesale prices are up almost 14%, though consumer inflation is a bearable 5.4%. The GDP deflator — the widest measure of inflation — is a whopping 8.4%. The budget assumes, very optimistically, that the GDP deflator will collapse to just 3% next year, reversing last year's inflationary surge. Maybe so. But the assumption could go terribly wrong. RBI data show household expectations of inflation exceed 12%.

### Not Many DefiCitings

On TV, I called the budget strategy a gamble on growth while risking inflation via a high fiscal deficit. GoI's principal economic adviser Sanjeev Sanyal responded that high deficits did not cause inflation, only high monetary growth did, and broad money supply was under control (growing at 9-10%). However, other economists (notably German) believe fiscal deficits are inherently inflationary. I asked Manmohan Singh on TV after the 2012 budget how to check inflation. He replied, 'We should cut the fiscal deficit.' He did not qualify that with reference to the money supply.

Has the world changed since then and become inflation-proof? Or is that a temporary illusion? After the Great Recession in India, banks had impaired balance sheets and heavily leveraged corporations sought to deleverage. Banks did not want to lend, and corporations did not want to borrow. That slowed monetary growth and checked inflation.

But now the budget speech says corporations have deleveraged, banks have repaired their balance sheets and both sides are set for an investment boom, kickstarted by high capex in the budget. The scenario is plausible. But if indeed bank lending surges and money supply with it, inflation could surge too. The RBI is reluctant to get tough and blunt Sitharaman's stimulus.

A high fiscal deficit can spill over into the balance of payments (BoP), widening the CAD. The latter is under control today thanks to buoyant exports. But imports are soaring even faster. Keep your fingers crossed.

I think Sitharaman is right to gamble on growth. But she should be aware it is a gamble.

> If indeed bank lending surges and money supply with it, inflation could surge too. The RBI is reluctant to get tough and blunt Nirmala Sitharaman's stimulus

# Need To Be Above BharatPe Grade

**Kiran Somvanshi**

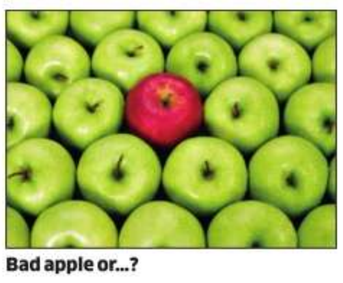
In a curiously worded statement last week, BharatPe's board of directors expressed being 'deeply pained that the integrity of the BharatPe board or individual board members is being questioned time and again through misrepresented facts and baseless allegations'. They requested all, including the media, to show restraint.

Given the extent of alleged governance lapses that have surfaced over recent weeks amid a murky boardroom battle, it is interesting to see the board of the much-celebrated fintech break its silence in this way. The board seems to have exercised restraint for far too long. As the dirty linen gets washed in public, concerns are naturally now about how the linen got dirty in the first place — and what actions those in charge took or did not take. Co-founder Ashneer Grover is now reportedly in talks with investors to sell his 9.5% stake in BharatPe. This means the stable door may be closing — but after the horse has bolted.

The BharatPe episode illustrated the kind of corporate governance lapses that can occur in well-funded, richly valued startups that have experienced and established venture capitalists and private equity representatives on their boards. Superior valuations, high-profile investors, reputed board members and celebrated founders, all exude the impression of operational hygiene and reliability. However, these markers don't necessarily entail that the business is well-governed.

Beneath the trimmings lie discomforting aspects — family members in key business roles, alleged siphoning of money, a toxic work culture — that point to weak internal control and poor vigilance. It is unlikely that BharatPe's board and investors would have learnt something new in the past few weeks that they didn't know or suspect before. Soaring valuations seem to have prompted existing investors to overlook some fundamental flaws in the company's management, till now.

The BharatPe affair raises some fundamental questions regarding the role of boards and internal audit in startups. Does a company's board of directors hold any vicarious liability for the actions of its chief executive? Can the board members assert immunity from the fraudulent acts of the executives? Are boards liable to face any implications if found to be ineffective in their oversight of the company's management?



**Bad apple or...?**

Also, should startups involved in the lending business be allowed to thrive in an unregulated manner? Time and again it has been proven that money management as a business is inherently susceptible to frauds and corrupt practices that warrant greater compliance and scrutiny. Can new-age fintechs be presumed to be immune to such flaws? Functioning in a regulatory grey area by using sharp practices cannot be camouflaged as 'innovation' for long.

Could the RBI have been more vigilant? Ironically, it is only last month that the central bank set up a dedicated department to supervise and regulate fintech. The department shall now have to contend with probing this case.

While it is difficult to determine what could be an avoidable lapse of governance in this entire episode, it underscores the need for better control mechanisms. Such incidents highlight the difference of governance standards required from listed and unlisted firms. It is time regulators across sectors ponder over how to regulate high-valued startups and their lesser-known business practices.

Once a startup grows to be a unicorn, it could well be asked to comply with governance norms similar to those observed by a listed company. Growth and innovation chasing valuations cannot stay divergent from the fundamental aspects of governance even for an unlisted business. The ramifications are, as BharatPe shows, very real for both customers and business partners.

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# Will Cryptos Be Goods or Money?

**Vidushi Gupta**

In her budget speech, Nirmala Sitharaman announced the imposition of a 30% tax on transfer of cryptocurrencies. Much is being made of the rate of tax, the definition of 'virtual digital asset' (VDA) and the term 'transfer'. Despite these issues, this possibly signals the highest degree of certainty and stability ever offered to those in the crypto ecosystem by India's policymakers. That said, income-tax (I-T) is not the only tax potentially leviable on transfer of cryptos. There is also GST, about which there is a complete lack of clarity.

Given that cryptocurrencies can arguably meet the criterion of being 'moveable property', they could well qualify as 'goods' under the Central Goods and Services Tax (CGST) Act, 2017. To fall under the category of 'money', cryptos need to fall under one of these items: Indian legal tender, foreign currency, and electronic remittance.

RBI has repeatedly clarified that cryptos do not constitute legal tender. Based on the definition of 'foreign currency' and 'currency' under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (Fema), 1999, cryptos do not really fall within either category. So, cryptos may not qualify as 'money' and not be excluded from the definition of 'goods'.

Given their status as a means for payment, however, cryptos could fall under one of the items listed as 'money'. For instance, the term 'electronic remittance' that is included under 'money' is not defined, and its meaning may be extended to include cryptos. Without ruling on this point, in the 2020 'Internet and Mobile Association of India v. Reserve Bank of India' case, the Supreme Court stated that it is not possible to accept the contention that virtual currencies are just goods and can never be regarded as real money. The European Court of Justice, in the 2015 'Skatteverket v. David Hedqvist' case, too deemed cryptos to be a 'means of payment' and treated them at par with legal tender for indirect tax purposes.

The implications of this uncertainty around the classification of cryptos are substantial. Their inclusion under the ambit of 'money' will essentially exclude the applicability of GST on transactions such as their exchange for fiat currency. If cryptos are considered as 'goods', which seems more plausible under the existing framework of the CGST Act, several GST implications will ensue.

**So let's toss for it**

First, far more 'events' will amount to being taxable supplies if cryptos are considered as 'money'. It will require one to pay tax on the procurement of cryptos using fiat currency, on their disposal in exchange for goods or services as barter transaction, and the subsequent conversion of cryptos for fiat currency by the supplier of goods and services. The same transaction, when conducted in fiat currency, however, will attract GST only once — when a supply is made for the procurement of goods or services.

Second, given the volatility, and lack of standardisation in the value of cryptos, valuing transactions will pose a significant challenge. This is specifically exacerbated in the GST scenario, where tax is levied on the value-add and credit of tax paid on inputs is allowed. There may be cases where GST paid at the time of procurement of cryptos may be less than what is chargeable on their sale. Given that cryptos are unique in this regard, the existing GST framework does not typically account for such occurrences.

Finally, the GST implications of a transaction depend on the physical location of the parties involved. Given the decentralised and pseudo-anonymous nature of crypto transactions, ascertaining this location — and in cases such as block rewards, initial coin offerings (ICOs) and pre-mine sales, ascertaining the two parties involved — may also be an extremely difficult task.

While the evolution of the definition of money poses several pertinent threats, it also offers many valuable opportunities. Most of the challenges associated with cryptos can be effectively addressed by designing an appropriate regulatory framework. The taxation framework should, thus, be designed such that taxes do not factor into investment or business decisions. They should not be designed to disproportionately encourage or deter activity in this space. Their sole aim should be to earn revenue, without stifling innovation and development of the ecosystem.

Whether cryptos qualify as goods or money under the GST framework should be clarified. If it is concluded that they constitute goods, then an amendment should be made to the GST law, specifically including cryptos to the definition of money. This treatment would align with global best practices, including similar amendments made in Australia.

*The writer is former leader, tax law, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy*

**THE SPEAKING TREE**

## The Beauty of Saying Sorry

**MEENA OM**

We don't apologise enough when we go wrong. Instead, we look for excuses and someone to blame. Just say sorry and move on. Carry no ill will. Otherwise, we will stall our spiritual progress and not complete our karma cycle.

Subconsciously, we nurture the habit of carrying some fodder for the mind to chew on. Our ego stops us from apologising, so the incident remains lodged in our subconscious and holds us back. An apology can clear the clouds of duality and suspicion. So, leave the baggage of pros and cons and walk light. Only when you are light, you can go far.

Saying sorry for your mistakes is good for inculcating humility. Humility gives you the power to learn from everyone. But apology should be from the heart, and to let peace prevail. Peace is the most important thing; more important than nurturing the ego.

There is another perspective too. If we apologise to the one who is not considerate enough, it could enhance his arrogance. In that case, take the path of dhyana. Bring the person on the screen of your mind and apologise wholeheartedly. The vibrations of the message will travel to him silently and touch his Inner Being. The effect will be the same, as if you have apologised in person and no one will feel higher or lower. This is the miracle of walking on the spiritual path.

**Chat Room**

## Poising Inflation & Interest Rates

Apropos the Edit, 'A Slippery Scene On the Oil Front' (Feb 8), the Brent crude oil prices hurtling towards $100 a barrel brings into sharp focus an inflated fuel import bill. The Opec is facing outages, US shale oil supplies are not rising and Russia is not able to achieve targeted oil production. If the burden of the higher fuel import bill is passed on to consumers, it will significantly impact inflation that is already inching towards the upper limit of the tolerance level. Hopefully, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will judiciously balance the need to control inflation with keeping India in sync with major economies on interest rates.

**VIJAY MULLAJI**
*By email*

## Oil on the Boil to Roil the Economy

This refers to 'A Slippery Scene On the Oil Front'. A sustained spike in the crude oil price may potentially derail the economy from the visible growth trajectory. To woo the voters in the run up to assembly elections in five states, the additional cost of the rising oil prices has not been passed on to the consumers. Post election, a surge in domestic oil prices will fuel inflation, pushing consumer inflation over 6%, thereby breaching the upper band of the inflation target. Spiralling oil prices coupled with increasing inflationary pressure will take centre stage at the ongoing MPC meeting.

**ASHOK KUMAR SAHOO**
*Mumbai*

## Homage, Holiday A Flawed Remix

Apropos the news report, 'PM Leads Nation in Offering Last Respects to Lata Didi' (Feb 7), Lata Mangeshkar would have disapproved of the Maharashtra government observing public holiday in her memory. The best way to pay homage to the legendary singer would have been to work extra hours and donate the extra income to the needy. A single day off means loss of hundreds of crores to the economy that a developing nation like India can ill-afford, especially in these Covid times. Politicians declare holidays for their own popularity and vote-bank politics. The Supreme Court and the Parliament should ban all holidays other than those specified in the Constitution.

**S N KABRA**
*Mumbai*

*Letters to the editor may be addressed to*
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**A thought for today**

*It is impossible to go through life without trust: that is to be imprisoned in the worst cell of all, oneself*

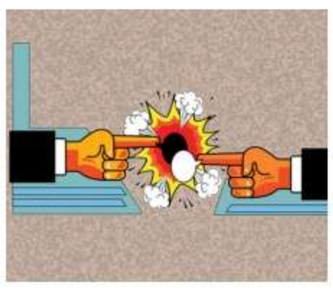
GRAHAM GREENE

# Economy Suffers

*As GoI's position in SC on Hindustan Zinc shows, agency actions often extract great costs*

India's low-trust environment and ill-equipped investigation mechanism, both of which straitjacket economic policymaking, was the focus of attention on Monday in the Supreme Court. GoI plans to move a review petition of an apex court judgment of November 2021 directing CBI to file an FIR in the 2002 privatisation of Hindustan Zinc. What made it unusual was that GoI's line of argument claimed that foundational facts presented by CBI were factually incorrect and this was the result of "intricate commercial processes" being examined by investigating officers.

This development encapsulates a core problem holding back policy that major political parties in office tend to support. In an independent development, but one that is relevant to this issue, on Monday GoI informed Parliament that it is yet to come out with a mechanism to sell its stake in two public sector banks. Over a year ago, the 2021 Budget said two banks would be sold. The quality of work in agencies such as CBI, CVC and CAG have sometimes led to delays and substantial economic costs. The price for it is borne largely by citizens in terms of lost opportunities.



It's not just privatisation that is affected by this environment. Almost six years after the Supreme Court cancelled 122 telecom licences in the wake of controversies, a CBI court acquitted all the accused and said matters were "conjectured". The reverberations of those events in the telecom sector are still being felt. Hopefully, GoI's position on Hindustan Zinc privatisation will be followed by a decision to sell its residual stake of 29.6% soon. It's almost a decade since a decision to sell it was taken. It's an example of an all too common delay that imposes costs on the exchequer.

GoI continues to have a stake in two conflicting roles, commercial operations in different sectors and policy making for the same. To ensure a sharp focus on right policies, it's important to retreat from commercial operations. However, that process is made unduly controversial and the ineptitude of institutions meant to oversee things lead to endless delays. We need to move away from this system if we are to make a durable return to a trend of at least 8% annual economic growth. As GoI's position on HZL privatisation teaches us, these commercial processes can't be subject to ham-fisted scrutiny by ill-equipped investigators. Even foundational facts are at times misrepresented.

# 21-Day Injustice

*Haryana's grant of long furlough to Ram Rahim utterly improper. And what does it say about politics?*

Haryana CM ML Khattar has denied politics influenced his government's grant of a 21-day furlough to Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, just as Punjab elections are set to begin. Keeping that aside for a moment, let's look at the law. Ram Rahim was convicted for two murders and two rapes and is serving multiple life terms. His conviction for raping two women disciples in 2017 was followed by convictions in 2019 and 2021 for murder of two whistleblowers. Khattar's point that the convict was eligible for furlough having served three years in prison should be seen in the context of the Haryana Good Conduct Prisoners (Temporary Release) Act, 1988.

This law says a "hardcore prisoner" – those convicted of dacoity, robbery, murder with rape, murder or attempt to murder for ransom or extortion, rape of minor, etc – are not to be released on furlough. Such prisoners are allowed only 48-hour freedom for marriage or death in the immediate family. Surely, Ram Rahim, with two murder and two rape convictions, is a good candidate for a "hardcore" prisoner? Equally clearly, just as emergency one-day paroles in 2020 and 2021 granted to him to visit his ailing mother were proper, his 21-day furlough is egregiously improper. It sets a terrible administrative precedence in a country where terrible precedents are often copied enthusiastically.

Then there's the question of the already volatile Punjab elections. Political temperatures are running high in a multi-cornered, high stakes contest framed by farmers' agitation, controversies of alleged sacrilege incidents. Thanks to the furloughed convict's still-existent popularity, most political parties are silent on Khattar's decision, fearing vote loss. But the potential for disturbance as Ram Rahim is set free amidst polls cannot be discounted. And what does it say about our politics that a two-time rapist and murderer is thought to be a vote influencer?

# Museum pieces

*Technological progress has made many things obsolete – but, sadly, not everything*

**Jug Suraiya**

The other day while rummaging through a disused storage space I came across several dusty, black plastic boxes. It took me a moment to realise that they were tapes for a VCR – a Video Cassette Recorder.

I hadn't seen a VCR tape, much less watched something recorded on one, for many years, having long disposed of our VCR to an obliging raddiwala.

And the reason that we'd done this was because advancement in technology had made the VCR as extinct as the dodo by the late 1990s, and replaced it with the DVD – or Digital Versatile Disc – player.

I first read about VCRs in a *Time* magazine article in 1970, and had at the time marvelled at the concept of bringing an entire movie theatre into your home via a machine smaller than a briefcase into which you inserted a box the size of a book and watched whatever film or other recording you wanted to see.

I checked the dateline of the issue to make sure it wasn't April 1, and the article wasn't an All-Fools' Day spoof. But no, it wasn't April 1, and the article wasn't a spoof. Thanks to the VCR you could bring the magic of movies into your home. Could anything best that?

**second***opinion*

And the answer was yes, in the avatar of DVDs, which in turn have been made obsolete by screening devices like smart TVs and phones on which you can watch films, news and anything else being streamed 24x7. The unstoppable avalanche of technological progress has made yesterday's miraculous inventions into today's museum pieces, and completely changed the world around us, and the way we communicate with it, and with each other.

But while the technical means of communication have far outstripped the boundaries of erstwhile imagination, the content of what is communicated, in films, news, or social media, has only too often remained much the same, if not actually regressed.

Too much of what is commonly trending, what we see, hear and read, on our digital devices, deals with the continuing brutal oppression of caste, creed and gender, with rabid intolerance, violence and despair.

The most ancient museum pieces, which tragically are in use today, are the atavistic mechanisms of hatred, rage and fear, outworn relics of the primaeval human mind.

*blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/jugglebandhi*

# Facebook To Metaworse

*Metaverse may not be Zuckerberg's salvation if privacy violation is built into its business model*

**Apar Gupta**

Over the past week Meta Platforms, which owns and operates Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, has taken a big market hit. Its shares dropped 25%, wiping off at least $240 billion off its market capitalisation. As of Monday, this trend continued with another dip of 4.7%, a cumulative stock price fall of 30% since its earnings report for the fourth quarter of 2021.

Is Meta's share fall a part of the overall bearish market sentiment on global technology companies? No, because the Alphabet-Google stock is down only 1.8% and the Amazon stock, after a drop, is now witnessing a rally. Therefore, markets are sending a bigger message to Meta.

Market analysts have set out two primary reasons for Meta's challenges. The first is that Facebook has lost roughly half a million users, marking a decline in its global user base for the first time. While this may seem like a blip in the overall number of 1.93 billion active daily users, if this continues as a trend, it will lead to a negative network effect.

The doctrine of network effects says that the value of a communications network is proportional to the square of the number of its connected users. Just as this plays out when most people join social media, a shrinking user base will usually have a compound impact that will spur greater attrition – simply, each person leaving Facebook, prompts another.

The justification provided by Meta in its earnings reports and investor calls have focussed on, "*increased competition for people's time*". This means that more social media users today prefer native video sharing platforms such as TikTok to Facebook, or even Instagram Reels.

The second reason is contained within the press release accompanying Meta's financial results and states, *"We will overlap a period in which Apple's iOS changes were not in effect and we anticipate modestly increasing ad targeting and measurement headwinds from platform and regulatory changes"*.

This essentially means that Meta, an advertising company, is facing challenges targeting its users due to privacy protections and regulations on data protection. The most prominent has been due to technical changes in iPhones after iOS 14.5, which lets users disable ad-tracking.

Uday Deb

The response to these "headwinds" has been a mix of an intermediate solution and long-term product strategy. Immediately, Meta is focussing on video, and group messaging features to counter challenges from TikTok and similar platforms. It's also devising new ways of ad delivery that are contextual and operate within the boundaries of ad-tracking blockers as those devised by Apple.

The longer term response is building a Metaverse. This will be possibly a constellation of immersive virtual reality environments that will serve as the next generation of social media interactions. While market analysts are forecasting uncertain capital expenditures and user adoption as concerns, there is a greater reason to consider privacy and data protection challenges.

**Social media-generated problems like abuse, disinformation and social polarisation will be likely more severe in a virtual reality environment like the Metaverse, which will have the ability to render more vivid experiences and alter our sense of reality. Plus, this strategy comes at a time user trust in Meta is low thanks to regular public scandals**

Any immersive, virtual reality environment is likely to have greater adhesion to users leading to greater data collection. For instance, take a user's eye as an example. It is one of our many organs that will be digitised and then rendered within the Metaverse.

As per a framework released by XRSI, a non-profit organisation working on rights around virtual reality environments, tracking in the Metaverse may include, "eye opening and closure; eye movements; eye health; pupil properties; iris characteristics; eyelid and skin properties". This list is far from exhaustive but neatly captures the scale, granularity and extent of data collection possible through the Metaverse.

To allay such concerns a founder's letter by Mark Zuckerberg emphasises that, "Privacy and safety need to be built into the Metaverse from day one. So do open standards and interoperability." However, this intent may not be implemented in engineering design or business practises if the core economic model of serving ads through data collection does not change. Similar human rights concerns and larger business impacts will manifest in time if the core business that powered Facebook is adopted by Meta.

Continuing a harmful, tired approach would also mean taking on most regulators and national governments that are devising or enforcing privacy regulations.

Also, social media-generated problems like abuse, disinformation and social polarisation will be likely more severe in a virtual reality environment like the Metaverse, which will have the ability to render more vivid experiences and alter our sense of reality.

This strategy comes at a time when user trust in Meta is low thanks to regular public scandals, including revelations by whistleblower Frances Haugen in several complaints to the US Securities Exchange Commission. In her subsequent testimony to the US Senate she has stated that, "I'm here today because I believe Facebook's products harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy."

To avoid repeating the same mistakes, and therefore avoid user disapproval, Meta needs to look at the first principles around which social media was built and Metaverse will be built. Unless the business model changes, the Metaverse may be Metaworse for both Meta's users as well as shareholders.

*The writer is Executive Director, Internet Freedom Foundation*

# RBI's Dilemma: Let Prices Rise Or Interest Rates?

## But in tomorrow's monetary policy, central bank should prioritise fighting inflation

**Rajeswari Sengupta**

RBI's monetary policy decision is due tomorrow. It comes in the backdrop of government plans to borrow Rs 15 lakh crore in 2022-23, to finance a higher-than-anticipated fiscal deficit of 6.4% of GDP. This complicates RBI's policy choices.

This monetary policy is different from contexts defining recent ones when government borrowing increased due to the pandemic and RBI stepped in to make it cheaper for the government to borrow. It lowered the short-term policy repo rate to a mere 4% in March 2020. Then, through a series of unconventional actions, it bought immense quantities of government bonds and injected vast amounts of liquidity into banks, to encourage them to buy bonds as well.

**When inflation was low**

The increase in inflation was fairly modest, considering the extent of RBI's actions. Thanks to the pandemic-induced uncertainty, banks were reluctant to lend, households were disinclined to spend, and firms were hesitant to embark on investment projects. So spending was contained. CPI inflation reached the upper limit of the RBI's target band, but did not spin out of control.

Therefore, the government could run large deficits and RBI, a stimulative policy, without worrying about inflation. Plus, similar policies in rich countries encouraged capital to flow to emerging markets, providing India with additional liquidity and reinforcing RBI's strategic objectives.

However, in recent months, the global macroeconomic environment has changed quite significantly. Rich countries are experiencing a serious bout of inflation. Inflation has jumped to 5% in Europe and 7% in the US, the highest in four decades.

Time to start worrying about prices

This change has two implications for India.

**Times have changed**

First, for the first time in decades, India is now faced with a serious case of "imported inflation". Prices are rising rapidly on all the goods India imports, from oil to investment goods to vital industrial inputs. Even food prices have increased by 20% year-on-year as measured by the FAO Food Price Index.

Second, as a result of this global inflation, developed countries' central banks are getting ready to increase interest rates and withdraw additional liquidity. Their policy has begun to diverge from RBI's accommodative stance, prompting capital to flow out of India in copious amounts over the past two months. This has weakened the rupee and pushed up domestic bond rates.

With foreigners fleeing the Indian market, domestic institutions panicked about GoI's borrowing plan, because it meant that they might have to shoulder the entire burden. Plus, they would also need to buy whatever amount of government securities the foreign investors are planning to sell in the coming months. Unsurprisingly, the 10-year rate has shot up to 6.9% in a matter of days.

**Two tough choices for Mint Street**

This brings us to RBI. Given the changed global environment and the government's big borrowing plan, the RBI is faced with two difficult policy options, each with associated risks.

It could resume buying government securities in order to keep interest rates in check. The problem is that buying bonds will inject even more liquidity into the system, at a time when price pressures are intensifying. This could potentially jeopardise RBI's objective, since CPI inflation is already running close to its legally mandated limit.

Alternatively, RBI could wind back liquidity and raise the policy repo rate. This would be consistent with its inflation targeting objective, and bring its stance in line with that of rich countries, thereby reducing the risk of further capital outflows. But it would also push up bond rates, making it costlier for the government and the private sector to borrow.

Both options have their costs. But between the two, RBI should worry first and foremost about the costs to society of high inflation. Inflation is a tax that falls heaviest on the poorest, the most vulnerable segment of the society. And once inflation starts rising, it becomes very difficult and costly to bring it down, as we learnt from our painful experience during 2013-14, when short-term interest rates reached 12%.

As for bond rates, ultimately they need to be determined by demand and supply, without interference from the central bank, as this is the only way to ensure that they reflect the real cost of capital.

It will be interesting to see which way the RBI goes.

*The writer is Associate Professor of Economics, Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research*

**dilbert**

**Sacred***space*

*Strong As A Mountain*

*Whoever lives contemplating pleasant things, with senses unrestrained, in food immoderate, inactive, him verily Mara overthrows, as the wind blows down a weak tree. Whoever lives with senses restrained, in food moderate, full of faith, full of sustained energy, him Mara overthrows not, as the wind cannot shake a rocky mountain.*

**Dhammapada 7-8**

# How Manthara And Akampana Changed Ram's Life

**Sudhamahi Regunathan**

The story of the Ramayan can be said to have evolved because of the craftiness of two people: Manthara and Akampana.

Manthara, as we all know, was the hunchback maid of Kaikeyi. She was on the terrace of the palace when she saw the city bursting with festivities. She wobbled along to find someone to inquire the reason. "Ram is being crowned tomorrow," said Kaushalya's maid. Immediately Manthara came down to Kaikeyi's room and reprimanded her harshly, "You foolish woman, get up. Do you know that tomorrow is Ram's coronation as the crown prince?"

Kaikeyi did not heed Manthara. She was delighted that Ram was being crowned. "Ram or Bharat, it makes no difference to me. They both are the same to me," said Kaikeyi.

Manthara saw that Kaikeyi was not going to change her mind so easily, so she played her trump card: "Kaushalya who has always been jealous of the king's affection for you is now going to wreak vengeance on you. Her son will be king, you will be just another person in the palace."

Kaikeyi held her husband's affection and was proud of that. She could see a jealous Kaushalya belittling her. Manthara had made her ego bristle with anger. She began listening to Manthara and the rest is known.

Another character, much less known, is Akampana. He had been in Janasthana with Khara, Trisaras and Dushan. Ram killed all of them along with 14,000 rakshasas. Akamapana escaped and came running to Ravan to give the message. Ravan was furious and hurt. He wanted to avenge the death of his brother Khara and was ready to go to war with Ram immediately.

Akampana declares that Ram can never be won in war by Ravan.

"What you can do is to kidnap his wife. He is very attached to her. Once you kidnap her, his death will be certain."

Ravan went to Maricha and asked him to help kidnap Sita. Maricha admonished him. "Why would you ask for trouble? Don't play with such a powerful man. Go back and live in peace and let your city and citizens prosper." Ravan took the advice and came back. He too, like Kaikeyi, could see reason.

However, within some time Surpanaka, hurt and wailing, came to Ravan and in addition to deriding him by saying, "What kind of king are you that mere mortals injure your sister and you do not even know about it," she also said, "I went there only to get that beautiful woman for you. So beautiful that …" She caught the lustful imagination of Ravan and hurt his ego by questioning his power as a ruler. Then Ravan changed his mind about Akampana's suggestion and went back to Maricha. This time he did not heed Maricha's advice. And the rest is known.

Manthara and Akampana were the two people who turned the minds of Kaikeyi and Ravan. Both Kaikeyi and Ravan resisted it initially, but their ego and weakness let them down and they became easy targets to influence. Kaikeyi lived to repent, Ravan lost his life.

Today social media can sometimes play the roles of Manthara and Akampana, let us be alert.

THE SPEAKING TREE

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

# SEVERAL SOUTH ASIAN ECONOMIES FACE DEBT TRAP

## ILLEGAL MIGRATION, SECURITY THREATS CONCERN INDIA

NANTOO BANERJEE

A host of South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Myanmar, all India's neighbours, are faced with sovereign debt crisis and growing internal disturbances. Nepal and Bangladesh are becoming increasingly dependant on bilateral loans and FDI flow from China which they may not be able to service and sustain in the long run. Sri Lanka is facing the most alarming level of external debt crisis and human trafficking. The situation in Afghanistan is equally disruptive.

There are at least 200,000 illegal migrants from Myanmar, including tribal Chins from its north and Rohingya moslems from south, camping in various parts of India. The number of refugees and illegal immigrants from internal war-torn Afghanistan and economically unstable Pakistan is anybody's guess. As of June 2021, Pakistan's public debt was 83.50 percent of the country's GDP, over 35 percent of which in the form of external debt. Unofficial reports say that Pakistan's incumbent government has almost doubled the country's external debt in just three years, adding US$35.1 billion to take the total figure to an astonishing $85.6 billion.

The growing financial instability in Pakistan, a major political and military support base for Afghanistan's five-month old Taliban regime, should be a worrisome problem for India. The latter has to be constantly vigilant against infiltration and terror attacks on the country by various fundamentalist groups from the economically shattered region. Massive Chinese financial and military aids have put Pakistan's economy under severe pressure of growing import bills, mostly on account of supplies from China.

The current year may see yet another year of record borrowing to reduce the stress on its current account deficit. In September, Pakistan's finance ministry said that the large increase in its total public debt was due to currency devaluation. The Pakistani Rupee depreciated 30.5 percent against US$ since Imran Khan became the prime minister. A new World Economic Forum report has termed Pakistan's debt crisis as a "top risk" facing the country. The profligacy of Pakistan's ruling elite - politicians, civil and military bureaucracy, industrialists, businessmen and bankers - has led to its being under continuous borrowing pressure.

To what extent the change of regime in Afghanistan is additionally responsible for Pakistan's economic crisis is not easy to assess. But, the crisis may deepen with time as China is indirectly supporting the anti-US Islamic fundamentalist Taliban group, predominantly Pashtun, that returned to power in Afghanistan in September, last year, after waging a 20-year insurgency. The Taliban poses immediate threats to Afghans' constitutional civil and political rights created by the earlier US-backed government. Foreign governments have warned that, if the Taliban do not protect Afghans' rights, they could stop providing aid, which could lead to a dire humanitarian crisis. International observers fear that the Taliban could allow terrorists to operate within and outside Afghanistan, threatening regional and global security. On its part India is trying to help Afghanistan with lifesaving medicines and food.

The island nation of Sri Lanka needs around US$7 billion this year to service its debts to various creditors. The total debt service liability between now and 2026 is expected to rise to $26 billion. This is too high compared to the country's GDP, which was billed to reach $81 billion by the end of last year as per the Trading Economics global macro models and analysts expectations. Since 2007, Sri Lanka accumulated $11.8 billion worth of debts through sovereign bonds, making up the largest portion (36.4 percent) of its external debt. Sri Lanka's Central Bank is required to arrange $2.4 billion to assist the country's state-owned and other private companies to honour debt obligations in 2022.

This is in addition to the central government's debt repayment obligation of $4.5 billion, reported international credit rating agency Fitch. Sri Lanka also needs around $20 billion to meet its import needs for petroleum, food and intermediate goods. The country's foreign exchange reserves, which are said to be at a critical level, have lately been boosted by a $1.5 billion Yuan currency swap from China. India has offered a new Line of Credit of $500 million to Sri Lanka for purchase of petroleum products.

In fact, massive imports and unsustainable infrastructure credit from China have put these south Asian countries under heavy financial stress. China is the biggest bilateral lender to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar. For six years in a row, China has topped the chart of FDI pledges to Nepal. According to an official statement, Nepal received FDI pledges of $268 million in 2020-21, with China accounting for 71 percent of the total.

PEGASUS IS SUCH A DEEP SECRET THAT EVEN RTI FAILS TO CRACK IT

# APPLICANT'S ALL EFFORTS TO GET INFORMATION FALL IN DEAF EARS

Indian Youth Congress National President, Srinivas BV, along with supporters stages a protest against the alleged purchase of Pegasus Spyware, near Parliament, in New Delhi on Wednesday. ANI

VINITA DESHMUKH

An application filed under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, seeking information about the purchase of the spyware `Pegasus' from Israel-based NSO group and the availing of services from NSO is presently languishing as a second appeal at the Central Information Commission (CIC) for the past several months. It was filed with the CIC after the central public information officers (CPIOs) and the first appellate authorities (FAAs) of both the ministry of home affairs (MHA) and the national investigative agency (NIA) refused information.

Being a journalist himself and concerned whether he could also be the victim of tapping, Saurav Das, the RTI applicant, states, "I have a genuine apprehension that being an investigative journalist and transparency activist, I'm also susceptible to such illegal snooping like many others. I am also susceptible to such gross human rights violation and breach of my fundamental right to privacy and thereby the right to life and liberty, guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution of India. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to establish transparency and seek the answers through RTIs from the competent authorities of MHA and NIA.''

The reply he got for his RTI application in March 2021 by the CPIO of MHA was: "The undersigned CPIO has no information to furnish in the matter."

The FAA too concurred with the CPIO stating that his reply was "appropriate and in order."

Mr Das argues that being only a deputy secretary in the MHA, the CPIO would not have such sensitive information at his desk. So he had requested the CPIO to avail the assistance of other officers, including the Union home secretary under Section 5(4) and 5(5) of the RTI Act since access to such high-level information would be available and only with the home secretary and other such senior-level officers.

This request was, however, turned down by the CPIO says Mr Das, which is in gross violation of several court judgments.

The RTI application filed by Mr Das had sought the following information from the MHA and NIA:

Whether the ministry of home affairs or any of its connected investigating/law enforcement agencies/departments have ever purchased or given a purchase order for PEGASUS- spyware developed by Israeli Cyber arms firm- NSO Group; if so, on which date; if not, whether there was any proposal for the same at any point of time;

Whether the MHA or any of its connected investigating/law enforcement agencies/departments have ever used the services of NSO Group, Israel. If so, the details thereof and the expenditure towards it;

Whether the MHA or any of its connected investigating/law enforcement agencies/departments have ever subscribed to any of NSO Group, Israel's products, like the Pegasus or services. If so, the details thereof including at what cost;

Furnish a copy of any search and enquiry conducted in pursuance to the Hon'ble Delhi High Court order.

In his second appeal to the CIC, Mr Das says that he had asked for an "urgent appeal'' for which he has quoted several Supreme Court judgments, including the one of ArnabGoswami V/s The State of Maharashtra & Ors. Criminal Appeal No. 742 of 2020. In this case, Supreme Court, in its judgement, had noted- "60. Human liberty is a precious constitutional value, which is undoubtedly subject to regulation by validly enacted legislation……. Liberty across human eras is as tenuous as tenuous can be. Liberty survives by the vigilance of her citizens, on the cacophony of the media and in the dusty corridors of courts alive to the rule of (and not by) law. Yet, much too often, liberty is a casualty when one of these components is found wanting." "61. Deprivation of liberty even for a single day is one day too many."

He has requested in his second appeal to the CIC to recognise a senior-level officer and the home secretary as the deemed CPIO and assigns him/her the task to furnish this information within seven days, in a clear, detailed, point-wise manner as sought in his RTI application.

Mr Das has also requested the CIC to direct the department of personnel and training ( DoPT), the nodal agency for the RTI Act, to issue a relevant circular to grant a personal hearing at the stage of the first appeal in compliance with the relevant orders of the Supreme Court and High Courts and admonish the FAA for disregarding the same.

He had requested the CIC to hold an urgent hearing in this matter, "seeing the immense public interest and deprivation of liberty of several Indians.''

However, rues Mr Das, "that the CIC is completely compromised is very evident by its actions. A body whose sole responsibility is to uphold public interest and order disclosure of the information is often hesitant to pass a significant disclosure order in a matter of public interest. This is because most of them are former bureaucrats, some of whom have worked under the present government, or are those who are close to the regime."

He has also filed an RTI to the ministry of electronics & information technology (MEITY) on a letter of 31 Oct 2019 from the IT ministry to the Facebook-owned messaging platform-WhatsApp to explain the breach of privacy and data of Indians, using the NSO Group spyware- Pegasus. He has received no reply.

For recall, Pegasus is a spyware capable of reading text messages, tracking calls, collecting passwords, tracing the phone's location, accessing the target devices, microphone(s) and video camera(s), and gathering information from apps.

The Washington Post reports that 189 journalists, more than 600 politicians and government officials and more than 60 business executives were targeted by clients of NSO Group, a hacker-for-hire headquartered in Israel.

HEALTH **CAPSULE**

## KIDS FIND IT MORE DIFFICULT THAN ADULTS TO RECOGNISE FACES BEHIND MASKS

**TORONTO:** Children are having a difficult time recognising faces that are partially covered by masks due to Covid-19 pandemic and tis could potentially impact social interactions with peers and educators, as well as the ability to form important relationships, according to a new study. The research shows children's face-perception abilities are not only profoundly impaired when people are masked, but their level of impairment is greater than that experienced by adults. Children have about a 20 per cent impairment rate for recognising masked faces compared to about a 15 per cent rate for adults. "Faces are among the most important visual stimuli. We use facial information to determine different attributes about a person, including their gender, age, mood and intentions. We use this information to navigate through social interactions," said Erez Freud, Assistant Professor, at York University. The study by researchers at Universities of York and Ben-Gurion in Israel, looked at 72 children, ages six to 14, to see if their experience was similar to that of adults. Faces were presented with or without masks, both upright and inverted. The study also revealed children process faces differently when the face they are looking at is masked, compared to one that's not. Their ability to holistically process faces, which is necessary for face perception, was disrupted and became more analytical. Typically, humans process the face as a whole rather than by its individual features. In the study, published in the journal Cognitive Research: Principles & Implications, the team used the kids' version of the Cambridge Face Memory Test -- the most validated measure of face perception abilities in humans -- to test the ability of school-aged children to recognise faces with and without masks, both upright and inverted.

CONG-LEFT FRONT BRIGHTENS PROSPECTS OF NON-BJP GOVT IN MANIPUR

# THE GOP HAS TO BE FULLY CONCIOUS TO ENSURE NO DEFECTION

DR. GYAN PATHAK

Manipur is going for assembly elections in two phases on February 27 and March 7. The politics in the state has gained a higher pitch. There is a very high stake for the ruling BJP led NDA since the state still seems to be heading towards a hung assembly, a prediction that the last poll survey has made almost one month ago.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Manipur visit last month, during which he addressed a public gathering at the Hapta Kangjeibung ground in Imphal and his inaugurating 13 projects worth Rs4,815 crore seems to have little effect on the ground. An additional 29 projects worth Rs 2,450 crore were even virtually inaugurated by the Union Minister of Home Amit Shah also failing to entice voters in BJP's favour. The chief reason behind this is that the Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh has been drumming up for BJP only government in the state for almost last one year. It has irked their partners in the NDA and their supporters and their cohesion has somewhat weakened. ABP-CVoter poll survey last month had predicted a close contest between the BJP and the Congress, which now seems even a 'closer contest' now as on February 8.

Obviously a hung assembly fear looms large on Manipur. The range of seats was projected by the survey for BJP was 23-27 and for the Congress 22-26. The Congress has gained more ground in the last one month almost

blunting the BJP's edge perceived one month ago. How the BJP has been losing ground according to the opinion polls since September 2021, has rung the alarming bell for the party when it was predicted to be winning seats in the range of 32-36. It is now self-explanatory why the N Biren Singh was batting for BJP only government in the state. However, the political prospect for the BJP has drastically diminished now. The BJP had won only 21 seats in the 2017 election, and hence it is safe to conclude on the basis of the survey prediction that the party has not improved much.

As against this the prospect of the Congress has considerably been improved since September 2021 when the survey projected a range of seats for the party between only 18-22 which was in 22-26 range a month ago. Congress has won 28 seats in the 2017 election, and hence we can conclude that its political fortune has not diminished much.

All these indicate that the regional political parties may be heading for a loss making room for increasingly closer contest between the BJP and the Congress. In 2017, in the 60 member assembly, Congress had emerged as the largest political party by winning 28 seats, followed by BJP winning 21 seats. LJSP, TMC and Independents had won one seat each, while NPF and NPP had won four seats each. Despite being single largest party, the Congress went out of power in the state after 15 years of rule, and the BJP formed government with the support of NPF and NPP. LJSP, TMC and the Independent MLAs also supported the BJP government.

However, the situation has changed now. The push for 'only BJP' rule has now irked their alliance partners from Manipur and 'other states' and their supporters, and it is here, the prospects of the Congress led Manipur Progressive Secular Alliance (MPSA) has brightened. MPSA includes Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist), Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Janata Dal (Secular). Only three days ago on February 5 they have launched their 18-point Common Agenda, which has showed considerable attraction for the common voters, especially those who do not want to be superimposed BJP's agenda on Manipuri territory, history and culture, a sentiment that has become stronger in since the last survey of September 2021.

At that time the survey had predicted a vote share of 7.2 per cent for NPF and 21.4 for others. However, by January 22, NPF's vote share was predicted to increase to 11.2 per cent. Vote share of others was predicted to be 20.7 which was only a marginal declined. It means both the NPF and NPP are harming the BJP's vote share. MPSA has thus a greater role to play from now onwards. Final picture for the candidates for the Phase V will emerge on February 11, and for Phase VI on February 16 that were the last dates for withdrawal on nominations. Total 38 assembly constituencies would go to poll on February 27 in the Phase V, and 22 constituencies on March 3 in the Phase VI. In case of hung assembly, Congress led MPSA need to have an open mind towards all political parties of Manipur and of other states who had helped the BJP to rule the state for the last five years but are now not happy with the BJP's present policies and leadership.

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

*The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity.*
*Leo Tolstoy*

# Parties to blame for criminal crorepatis getting tickets

The Association for Democratic Reforms on Tuesday released its analytical report on the assets the contesting candidates own and criminal cases that they are facing in various courts and it doesn't make for pretty reading. The number of candidates with serious criminal cases has more than doubled and the number of candidates who own assets of Rs 10 crore or more has grown manifold.

While some amount of growth in the value of an asset is expected given that the market rates of immovable property keeps on rising as time goes by, the rate of increase of most of the winnable candidates has grown much faster than the common man in the state. As pointed out by the ADR 30% of the candidates contesting are worth more than Rs 5 crore with the richest -- Michael Lobo having assets valued at Rs 93 crore.

Such trends bring into question the role of political parties which are supposed to play the role of gatekeepers and as guardrails of our democracy. For democracy to survive political parties would need to take certain moral and ethical decisions, even if it means upsetting certain powerful interests. They wouldn't mind the death of ethics and morals in public life provided they get their way.

Instead we are seeing a situation where political parties are being made to dance to the tune of the individual winnable candidate irrespective of his criminal record and record wealth she/he has amassed. Political parties have allowed themselves to be used as tools in the hands of unscrupulous individuals whose sole aim is to use power to amass even more wealth at the cost of the quality of life for the rest of Goa while appropriating commonly held wealth for personal gain. This is a trend that is across major political parties contesting elections in Goa.

**Political parties play a crucial role as gatekeepers for democracy and if they do not play their part in all seriousness the day is not far when dictatorship enters the country via a candidate endorsed by a political party**

There's an even more worrying trend that has emerged from an analysis of the documents. It is apparent to anyone who bothers to read carefully the kind of discrepancies that emerge between the total value of the assets of the contesting candidates vis a vis the amount of income they are declaring in their income tax returns. Worse still, certain candidates have been found to have been blatantly falsifying affidavits claiming that they have less assets that they already own, misrepresenting the worth of their assets claiming that they are worth less than they actually are and other falsification.

They do it because more often than not, no authority has been holding the candidates to account for falsifying their affidavits giving them a free run to falsify the affidavit without any repercussions whatsoever.

If we are to save our democracy it has to begin by strengthening the institutions that make up our democracy including the statutory bodies who are expected to be keeping tabs on the unexplained wealth of individuals as well as taking matters to their logical conclusion if any discrepancy is noticed.

More than that, however, we need to strengthen the institution that is the political party in order that parties themselves which are a crucial part of the democratic process do not allow themselves to be misused by individuals who in turn go on to destroy institutions and democracy as we know it. Political parties play a crucial role as gatekeepers for democracy and if they do not play their part in all seriousness the day is not far when dictatorship enters the country via a candidate endorsed by a political party.

## OPEN SPACE >>

### *Will elected politicians accept will of people?*

It was interesting to read the answers to some of the questions posed to the candidates in the rapid fire section of your newspaper. The questions in the first place, were indeed, very pertinent, considering the present situation in the state and in several other states as well. One of the candidates said, he would like to see a law which would save the environment in Goa if he comes to power. Another one says, the anti-defection law needs to be amended. If elections have to become meaningful in our country, the anti-defection law must be amended. Will the politicians accept the will of the people after the ballot boxes have spoken on February 14?

**MELVILLE X D'SOUZA,** *Mumbai*

# Covid will soon be endemic, not harmless

## In order to reduce the likelihood of new variants emerging, it's vital we step up our rollout of vaccines globally to reduce virus transmission

**HASSAN VALLY**
>The writer is Associate Professor, Deakin University

**CATHERINE BENNETT**
>The writer is Chair in Epidemiology, Deakin University

We have experienced many bumps in the road since 2020 and one would have to be extremely brave to predict what the pandemic may throw at us next.

But in terms of the endgame, many experts believe COVID will eventually become an endemic disease.

However, what this actually means is a source of considerable confusion. One of the main reasons for this is a misunderstanding of endemicity itself, and what COVID being an endemic disease would actually look like in the real world. Let's break it down.

What does 'epidemic' actually mean? A disease is either epidemic or endemic. The most straightforward explanation of an epidemic disease is that it's one in which the number of cases in the community is unusually large or unexpected. When this occurs, it signals a need for public health action to bring disease transmission under control.

In the case of a pandemic – a worldwide epidemic – this occurs on a much larger scale. Depending on the infectiousness and severity of the disease, it can represent a global public health emergency, as we've seen with COVID.

When you have the emergence of a completely new virus like SARS-CoV-2 that has the potential to cause severe illness while also being highly transmissible, the lack of any immunity among the population results in the drivers for disease spread being incredibly strong.

A disease being epidemic indicates there's an imbalance between these drivers of disease spread and the factors limiting spread in the community. In short, it means the drivers for disease spread overpower the factors limiting spread.

As such, the disease spreads like a raging bushfire. It's explosive and hard to bring under control once it has seeded.

However, over time, the underlying forces driving an epidemic alter.

As immunity begins to increase across the population – ideally in a controlled way by vaccination, but also by natural infection – the pathogen starts to run out of fuel and its ability to transmit falls.

**As immunity begins to increase across the population – ideally in a controlled way by vaccination, but also by natural infection – the pathogen starts to run out of fuel and its ability to transmit falls**

Pathogens can include a variety of microorganisms, such as viruses, bacteria and parasites. In this case, let's assume we're talking about a virus.

On top of immunity, we can also reduce a virus' ability to spread by behaviour changes, such as limiting contact with others, mask wearing and improved hand hygiene.

In addition to lowering the virus' ability to transmit, immunity also reduces its ability to cause disease, meaning fewer people become really sick or die.

And finally, if we are lucky, over longer periods of time, the virus may also evolve to become intrinsically less severe.

The net result of this is we move from an imbalance in terms of the forces driving disease to a more steady state of equilibrium.

Instead of explosive and unpredictable disease spread, we reach a point where the presence of circulating disease represents a lower threat to the community than it did at the beginning of an epidemic.

Transmission becomes more predictable, but not necessarily constant – we may still see some waves, especially seasonally. But these are expected and manageable.

In short, we start to live alongside the virus.

This is what we mean by an endemic disease. Examples of endemic diseases include the common cold, influenza and HIV/AIDS.

The discussion around COVID becoming endemic becomes even more complicated by very different views about what this actually translates to in practice.

It's important to emphasise it doesn't mean we drop our guard, surrender to the virus or downgrade the threat the virus poses to individuals and the community.

We remain vigilant and respond to surges in cases when they occur, doing what's needed to keep transmission as low as possible.

Importantly, a disease being considered endemic doesn't mean we consider it mild. It just means it remains a part of our lives, and therefore we still protect the vulnerable from severe illness, as we do with other diseases.

It's crucial we understand living with the virus isn't the same thing as ignoring the virus. Instead, it represents an adjustment in the way in which we respond to the disease.

It's also important to highlight this transition may not necessarily be smooth and there will no doubt be challenges along the way.

One of the main obstacles we're going to face is the possible emergence of new variants and how these will impact the infectiousness and severity of the disease.

In order to reduce the likelihood of new variants emerging, it's vital we really step up our rollout of vaccines globally to reduce virus transmission.

To aid us in our transition to this next stage of the pandemic, we will, thankfully, be able to draw on many new weapons which are in the pipeline. This includes next-generation vaccines which will be more effective against the latest variants, or universal vaccines that cover all variants. We expect new vaccines will also be better at controlling transmission.

We'll also have ever-improving treatments, and better infection prevention and control engineered for specific environments.

The big question, of course is when will this transition to endemicity happen? Many experts believe huge strides will be made along this path in 2022.

## THE INBOX >>

### Beware, wolves in sheep's clothing on Valentine's Day!

This Valentine's Day is the luckiest one ever for some. It means that you don't have to be in any obligation with your constituency's Santa as that sponsored laced envelope is your 5-year dividend interest with you being the exchequer or the taxes you had paid for healthy services and the principal amount still remains close to Santa's heart as it does not matter if you vote for him or the candidate of your choice. Election politics is often an confusing area for most of us, but it is our duty to figure out where we stand on issues like alleviating poverty, employment, education, basic amenities, environmental protection, agriculture and urban development. Despite suffering poor governance for decades, we don't realise that voting means standing up for yourself, your future and for Goa on the whole. If you don't vote or don't vote for your own interests, than who will? We must vote for a clean candidate to represent us, our ideas, and our interests as the elected legislators are accountable to seek our mandate and not fill their own pockets with overwhelming wealth as they have done so far. The clock is ticking and so is our pulse, not to see our mother Goa deteriorating further at the cost of some disgraced wolves in sheep's clothing.

**GASTON DIAS,** *Sarzora*

### Time-bound services dire need of hour

It is good to see that at least one political party has included " time-bound services to the public " in its manifesto. For years people have been demanding that government prescribe a time schedule for its departments to deliver services to the public.

In the absence of such time schedule, the departments keep the files pending for months together forcing people to make countless visits to the offices to get their work done. There is no accountability for the staff in the discharge of duties.

Deliberate delay also helps them to demand bribes from the public to clear their files. It is high time that the government gave priority to this important requirement of the people.

**RODNEY DE SOUZA,** *Assagao*

### Every Goan roots for good governance

In the run up to next week's Assembly elections, Goa is witnessing another struggle by determined people across the State seeking to be freed from the current corruption and nepotism to see good governance.

There has to be total transparency and accountability in the functioning of the government. Goa has to be unchained from the menace of being a gambling, drug and prostitution den which has become a safe haven for crime and criminals. It is despicable that an acutely debt-ridden government which is borrowing hundreds of crores of rupees every month has ill thought out projects being bulldozed against the wishes of the people. For too long our elected representatives have failed to be a government of the people by the people and for the people. The insistence of the government to dabble in pompous projects that have little or no benefit for the common good and which have ended up as a scam, has forced a disappointed and frustrated people to liberate themselves by standing up to a government to demand that their needs be given top priority. The people have rightly realized that change and liberation will not come unless we are the change we seek. When we have personal, medical, economic and environmental freedom then we can have reason to proudly celebrate a truly liberated Goa.

**AIRES RODRIGUES,** *Ribandar*

### Statue of Lata Mangeshkar must be installed in Goa

Melody queen and nightingale of India Bharat Ratna Lata Mangeshkar, a legendary singer par excellence had strong roots in Goa and she retained strong connections with the people of the state. The great singer had thousands of songs to her credit in different languages including Konkani. She will always remain in the hearts of the millions of her fans spread across the globe. Though born at Indore, Lata Mangeshkar never forgot her Goan roots. It is learnt that she reportedly even sang in order to raise funds for Goa's Liberation. It is understood that Mangeshkar later even served as general council member of Kala Academy. Given the close ties Lata Mangeshkar had with Goa it would be a befitting tribute to install a statue in honour of the legendary singer at a prominent place in the state, probably at the Kala Academy. This will serve as an encouragement for would-be singers in the state as Lata Mangeshkar rose to be one of the best known Indian singers across the globe. The new government which will be sworn in Goa after March 10 should make it a point to install the statue of the legendary singer. It is pertinent to note that a day after Lata Mangeshkar's demise, political parties in Mumbai have reportedly demanded that a memorial be built at Shivaji Park..

**ADELMO FERNANDES,** *Vasco*

### Of mining and misgovernance

The Goa mining fiasco has been a poor advertisement for governance in India, the failure to renew leases after their expiry in 2007 combined with turning a blind eye to environmental violations had culminated in the mining ban between 2012 and 2014. Renewal of 88 mining leases instead of issuing fresh leases coupled with non recovery of amounts due from old lessees for illegal mining led to the Supreme Court cancelling the leases in 2018. During the mining boom of 2011, the government earned humongous revenues of Rs 950 crore which petered down to Rs 6 crore in 2019, a steep fall for a state mired in debt of @ Rs. 24,000 crores. More than 300, 000 mining dependents have been left out in the cold struggling to make ends meet. Devising and implementing sustainable mining practices and addressing environmental concerns is the first thing to be looked into, hopefully by a new government in Goa.

**REKHA SARIN,** *Benaulim*

**Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location**

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THE FREE PRESS JOURNAL SINCE 1928
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# Hijab row testing our commitment

The controversy over certain colleges refusing to allow the entry of Muslim female students wearing the hijab may have its roots in local politics, but has far-reaching ramifications for our polity as a whole. What began as an isolated incident in a government-run college in Udupi has escalated into a much wider issue. So far, five education institutes, of which three are government-run, have barred entry to hijab or headscarfed women students. Protests in solidarity by Muslim women students, many in hijab, met with counter-protests by saffron-scarfed youth have quickly escalated. With youth at the centre of the affray, and politicians and media fanning the flames, the situation now threatens to go out of control and develop into a tense communal confrontation. That this would suit the ruling BJP in Karnataka is evident from the Karnataka government's less than neutral response to the issue. Rather than nipping the controversy in the bud and ensuring that the situation was not allowed to go out of hand, the Karnataka government invoked 133(2) of the Karnataka Education Act of 1983, which states that clothes which disturb equality and integrity and could create law-and-order problems should not be worn in schools and colleges. Issuing guidelines to colleges, the state education department has decreed that "all government schools should follow the uniform dress code, declared by the state government. Students from private institutions should follow the dress decided by the school management". "Colleges that are under the dept of Pre-University, state government to follow the dress which was decided by the college's development board (CDC). If there is no such dress code, students can wear the dress which will not affect equality, integrity and law & order," the department order adds. If media reports are to be gone by, the state's home minister has reportedly asked police to investigate the protesting girls to see if they have been 'influenced' by anti-national elements!

The victims in all this are the affected students themselves. For young women from conservative Muslim families, stepping out of their homes to secure a modern education is, in itself, an act of emancipation. Wearing the hijab in order to attend school may have been a matter of personal choice, or, as some have argued, may have been forced on them by conservative elements in their families and societies. However, the reasons do not matter. By suddenly choosing to impose a selective dress code, the college administrations concerned have, in effect, withdrawn these students' right to education guaranteed by the Constitution. They have also chosen to reinforce, rather than try and bridge the communal divisions that exist in their society. By backing their actions, the Karnataka government has compounded the problem. It is now up to the Karnataka high court, which is hearing an appeal filed by one of the affected students that the hijab ban is violative of the right to religious freedom under Article 25 of the Constitution.

# Step cautiously into the digital currency world

Five years after an inter-ministerial committee recommended the introduction of fiat currency in digital form, the government has decided to take the plunge into the world of cryptocurrency, with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announcing in the Budget that the Reserve Bank of India would issue a digital rupee sometime during the upcoming financial year. Although the government has banned all cryptocurrencies as legal tender, its attitude towards crypto assets continues to be ambiguous, with Budget 2022-23 also introducing a 30 per cent tax on gains made from trading crypto assets. Of course, a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) – which is what the 'digital rupee' issued by the RBI will be – is not the same as anonymous cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin. a CBDC is not a cryptocurrency. It is the digital form of the legal tender issued by the RBI, which is exchangeable one-to-one with physical currency. However, while it offers a safe and convenient alternative to physical cash, and will not require a banking intermediary to be exchanged between users, thereby providing a fillip to digital transactions, there are some risks as well, with the anonymity of transactions potentially aiding illegal activities and money laundering. The digital currency issued will be counted as money in circulation and the RBI will have to weigh the macroeconomic and inflationary impact of issuing additional currency, albeit in dematerialised form. Any attempt to too quickly replace physical currency with digital could also have an adverse impact on the people, similar to what was witnessed during demonetisation a few years ago. While the need to join the global digital currency bandwagon may be pressing, the government and the RBI would be well-advised to proceed with caution in the matter, given the complexities that the Indian landscape offers.

# First on U'khand voters' wish list is stability

Here, There, Everywhere
Sayantan Ghosh

The last days of high-pitch campaigns are happening in Uttarakhand as it will go to the polls on February 14. Recently, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi held a virtual rally in the state and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is all set to begin his campaign from this week. In the midst of this all is the serious anti-incumbency against the BJP. Further, the issue of infighting has created havoc among both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress. Eventually, the citizens of Uttarakhand have only one expectation from this election. They want a stable government with a permanent chief minister.

**History of political instability**

The state of Uttarakhand was carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000. Its 21-year-old history has been filled with political instability -- four assembly elections have been held but 10 chief ministers have come and gone. On Independence Day, 1996, Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda announced the formation of the new state of Uttaranchal, which was later named Uttarakhand. Under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, Parliament and the President of India approved the Uttaranchal Bill and in November 2000, it became a separate state.

It would be wrong to say that political instability has occurred only in the time of the Bharatiya Janata Party. In 2014, Harish Rawat toook oath as the chief minister of Uttarakhand but within two years, after nine Congress MLAs rebelled against him, the state went under President's rule. Later, Rawat returned to power but in the 2017 assembly elections, this infighting caused havoc to the Congress party and it won just 11 seats. However, even after this, the instability continued under the new BJP government.

**How anti-incumbency might affect BJP**

In 2017, the BJP won around 57 seats but this time, it will be a tough task. Firstly, the Modi wave which was in evidence the last time is not as intense. Secondly, in the Kumaon belt, the farmers are agitated against the BJP government over the controversial farm laws (subsequently repealed). The Kumaon belt is considered very important in terms of the political outcome of the state. Significantly, current Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami's constituency Khatima is also part of this belt, where farmers are still seething.

Meanwhile, despite the so-called double-engine government, the recent environmental disasters have raised questions on the intent of the BJP government. However, unfortunately, none of the political parties in the state has made environmental restoration a poll issue in the upcoming election.

**Increasing Congress infighting and a possible masterstroke**

The infighting in the Uttarakhand Congress is now a regular story. However, the party has done some last-minute course correction and has given tickets to the former rebels. Again, the trend that the state of Uttarakhand has never consecutively voted for the same party is favouring the Congress. According to party sources, the population of Muslims and Sikhs from the lower Terai region could play the biggest role in this election.

Meanwhile, a section of people believes that the masterstroke of the Congress lies in having moved former CM Harish Rawat from the Ramnagar seat to Lalkuan. This has brought down the chance of rebellion by the working president of the party's state unit, Ranjeet Rawat, who has been eyeing the Ramnagar seat for several years. This decision is important because it has toned down the rebellion within the party significantly.

**Employment, healthcare & disaster management, the need of the hour**

During the Covid pandemic, the poor health of the health infrastructure in Uttarakhand was exposed. On the one hand, the citizens of Uttarakhand are looking for political stability and on the other, they are also looking for steps by which employment can be generated and a better health infrastructure can be developed. Currently, the citizens of the state want a clean and clear focus on disaster management. In the past several years, the state has witnessed several natural calamities and many people have lost their lives. While the BJP government claims that it has done magnificent work in terms of developing a better disaster management system, in reality, these claims are highly exaggerated. In the minds of the people of Uttarakhand, it is clear that if immediate work on the development of a disaster management system and environment restoration does not start, then the future of the state will be in jeopardy.

**Rise of Aam Aadmi Party**

In Uttarakhand, Col Ajay Kothiyal (Retd) is the Aam Aadmi Party's chief ministerial candidate. In Uttarakhand, the AAP's messaging is not only the Delhi Model but also nationalism and of making Uttarakhand the spiritual capital of India, which is a pro-Hindu stand. Army veterans and their families hold a major vote share in the state and Kothiyal is a popular figure known for his social works in the state. With increasing infighting in the BJP, consecutive change in CMs and the deteriorating significance of the Congress in Uttarakhand, the AAP is undoubtedly in a good position. Meanwhile, pitching the Delhi model, with 200 units of free electricity, water bill waiver, improvement of education and healthcare facilities, the AAP is all set to woo the voters in this state.

The rise of the AAP should be a matter of concern for the Congress in this election because the key voter base of the party has always been the traditional Congress voter. More than the BJP, the AAP targets the Congress during poll campaigns. However, it is unlikely for the AAP to form a government this time in Uttarakhand but if the Congress fails, then eventually their vote will entirely shift to the AAP.

Who will win Uttarakhand, time will tell. But irrespective of the outcome, the people of the state expect a government that will be in place for five years and an administrator in whom they can repose faith for the coming years. If in the turmoil of infighting, this basic expectation of the people is brushed off, it would be the biggest mistake that could be committed by the party that will come to power.

*The writer is an independent journalist based in Kolkata and former policy research fellow, Delhi Assembly Research Centre. He tweets @sayantan_gh. Views expressed are personal*

# Our rivers, revered, yet reviled at the same time

Opinion
P N Vijay

There are many contradictions we stoically put up with in India but nothing is as glaring as the manner in which we treat our rivers. We worship our rivers as goddesses and the livelihood of more than half of our population is dependent on them. And yet, we pollute them to the extent that they are the most polluted rivers in the world. In fact, a frustrated activist recently called the Yamuna in Delhi 'one big sewage drain'.

Indian scriptures proclaim our rivers as goddesses. Ganga is the goddess who was sent down from the heavens and was safely ensconced in the matted locks of of Lord Shiva to channel her exuberance and let her flow on earth at a life-enabling pace. Aarti is offered to the Ganga in several places and millions gather to pay their respects to her. Many holy towns of India like Haridwar, Prayagraj and Varanasi are on her banks. Yamuna is no less holy. She is considered the daughter of Surya, the sun god and the sister of Yama, the god of death. Lord Krishna spent his childhood on her banks and stories of his pranks and his dances with the gopis are sung in many Indian homes. Rivers like the Kaveri, Narmada and Godavari are equally revered.

Most Hindus believe that a bath in the Ganga will rid them of their sins and bring moksha (liberation). The ashes of the dead are mingled in the Ganga in the belief that doing so will enable the deceased to reach heaven. Crores of Indians take a dip in her waters on festive occasions. In fact, devout Hindus recite 'Gange cha yamune chaiva Godavari Saraswati. Narmade, Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannithim kuru (O seven holy rivers, please this water with thy presence)', as they pour water on their heads at the commencement of their bath. Even a 'rationalist' like Pandit Nehru, in his last will and testament, desired that his ashes be mixed with the Ganga in Prayag and strewn in all the rivers of India.

Apart from their holy status, Indian rivers also provide livelihood to crores of Indians. According to one estimate, about 90 of the approximately 135 crore Indians depend in some way or the other on these rivers. The Ganga and her tributaries provide drinking water, water for agriculture, industry and so on, to about 55 crore of them. The rivers of India are the most used and their banks most densely populated than those of all other rivers in the world.

**We worship our rivers as goddesses and the livelihood of more than half of our population is dependent on them. And yet, we pollute them to the extent that they are the most polluted in the world**

So much for being revered and used; let us look at the flip side. It is a well-known fact that these rivers are highly polluted. The Yamuna is the most polluted among them and the main culprit is the National Capital Region of Delhi, where most of the damage is done. Of her total length of about 1,400km, only a 22km stretch flows through Delhi but this less than two per cent stretch accounts for more than 80 per cent of the pollution. The reasons are not hard to find. To start with, when it enters Wazirpur, the government diverts a substantial part of the water to the Sonia Canal, which provides a large portion of the drinking water for the capital. So the Yamuna loses much of its flowing water. Then 22 drains dump toxic waste from factories and domestic sewage into the river. These are so poisonous and filthy that no flora or fauna can survive in the water.

Many plans have been drawn and many commitments have been given to the Supreme Court about setting up sewage treatment plants (STPs), diverting the waters through interceptors, increasing the amount of flowing water but all these plans remain on paper or half-implemented. Among all the villains, the Delhi Jal Board is high on the list of offenders. In the last 25 years, more than Rs 5,000 crore have been spent by Central and state governments to clean up the Yamuna, but it has gone 'down the drain'.

The cleaning of the Ganga is a bigger story and equally frustrating. Interestingly, according to archives, in 1950, the Ganga was clean and its water potable right through its 2,500km journey from the Gangotri glacier in the Himalayas. The river flows through 100 cities with populations over 100,000; 97 cities with populations between 50,000 to 100,000, and about 48 towns peopled by 10,000 to 50,000. A large proportion of the water with higher pollutants in the Ganges is from this population, through domestic water usage. Not that industries are any less to blame. Because of the establishment of a large number of industrial cities on the bank of the Ganges like Kanpur, Allahabad, Varanasi and Patna, countless tanneries, chemical plants, textile mills, distilleries, slaughterhouses and hospitals prosper and grow along with this and contribute to the pollution of the Ganges by dumping untreated waste into it.

The money spent on cleaning the Ganga dwarfs that spent on the Yamuna. But thankfully, the results are visibly better. Ganga is at its most polluted levels in Kanpur because of the tanneries and chemical factories but this has been contained in a large way. Talking of the Yamuna and Ganga pollution does not mean other major rivers of the south are clean. Far from it. They are as worshipped and polluted like their north Indian counterparts. And the worst part is, not being perennial rivers, the water flow reduces dramatically in the months before the monsoon. States fight all the time about water-sharing--but that is a different story.

What needs to be done does not entail rocket science. What is lacking is the will to do the needful. First of all, we are woefully behind in installing STPs to clean the industrial and domestic waste and send treated water into the rivers. Secondly, we are behind schedule in making interceptor canals and diverting the polluted water. Most of the industrial units are illegal and function only by giving bribes to officials. Cities on the banks do not have proper urban garbage and sewage treatment facilities. These measures can be implemented in less than five years if we were to go about it earnestly. Last but not the least, people have to shed their hypocrisy, cooperate and do the right thing by the rivers they venerate. If Bharat is our Mata, surely our rivers are the blood that flows through her.

*The writer is an investment banker and political commentator. His Twitter handle is @pnvijay*

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FREE PRESS JOURNAL

SHASTRI LIKELY CHOICE
Nehru suggests separate leader in Lok Sabha

Mysore pupils win fee fight, call off strike

Arabs agree on joint command

Curb on gur movement will stay

Delhi mob tongued

Ease ready for minor share

England play for a draw

Panama they're good to the last puff

Calcutta peaceful: relief in full gear

Tripartite meet next week on index issue

### SHASTRI LIKELY CHOICE
### Nehru suggests separate leader in Lok Sabha

**THE FPJ NEWS SERVICE / NEW DELHI, January 15**: Prime Minister Nehru is believed to have suggested the appointment of a floor leader in the Lok Sabha.

While Shri Nehru will continue to be the Prime Minister and leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, a separate leader in the House will be named.

If Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri is taken back in the Cabinet before Parliament meets on February 10, he will be the leader in the Lok Sabha. If this is delayed, Shri Nanda will be the leader.

There is a likelihood of the floor leader getting the status of Deputy Prime Minister.A final decision on the matter will be taken when the Congress President, Shri K. Kamaraj, arrives here from Madras early next week.

## WHIZ QUIZ

1. What is Vardhamana, the Jain tirthankara, better known as?
2. What is patisserie known as in English?

3. To which country did Ibn Battuta, the famous traveller, belong?
4. What do Magellanic, Emperor, Gentoo and Fairy have in common?
5. Who was the first American woman in space?
6. Who was the first woman to receive the Sahitya Akademi award?
7. Which freedom fighter shares his birthday with Dr. Radhakrishnan?
8. What are low-priced, non-luxury products, which have few close substitutes called?

9. What is the unit of measurement equal to three feet?

**Answers:**
1. Mahavira 2. Pastry 3. Morocco 4. They are all penguin species. 5. Sally Ride 6. Amrita Pritam 7. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (V.O.C.) 8. Giffen goods 9. Yard

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## GUIDING LIGHT

### Is there a recipe to be happy? — AiR Atman in Ravi

Though we all want to be happy, happiness remains elusive. The problem is that we haven't understood what happiness is. Happiness is a state of being. We just have to be happy instead of trying to become happy. Happiness is not a product that can be bought. Nor is it a person that we can live with, or a place we can go to.

Most of us think that happiness comes from achievement, from success, from money. If happiness truly came from wealth or success, then all successful people would be happy, wouldn't they? But they aren't. However, those who stop climbing the illusory peak of achievement, and live with fulfilment, attain a state of peace. Peace is the foundation of happiness.

Living a life of contentment gives happiness and peace that is more enduring than running after transient pleasures that come from achievement. We allow our need to be overtaken by greed. If we constantly want more, how can we be happy?

We need to realise that happiness is in the NOW. We must live in the moment. But instead of being blissful and peaceful in the present moment, we lose it, either by living in the past or the future. It is our monkey mind that takes us into the past or the future. We must tame our mind, make it silent and still by observing it jumping from thought to thought.

Happiness is like a shadow. The more we chase it, the further it goes away. This is the 'happiness paradox'. However, if we stop, we will find that happiness is with us wherever we are. Most of us don't realise that happiness is within us, but we are searching for it outside. We live and die like that musk deer who is searching for the fragrance of the musk that is inside its own navel all along. Ultimately, it falls off the cliff and dies.

We all experience suffering — we experience the physical pain of the body, misery of the mind, and agony of the ego. Those who go in quest of the ultimate peak of happiness and enlightenment, realise the truth. They realise who we are, the Divine Soul. They experience Divine bliss. They discover the true meaning of life and with that, live a life of eternal peace and everlasting bliss, Satcitananda, as they escape from the triple suffering of the body, mind, and ego.

*(The author is a spiritual leader and the founder of AiR Institute of Realization and AiR Center of Enlightenment)*

**(Spiritual organisations keen to be featured in this space contact : features@fpj.co.in)**

## One flew over the nest #NewJNUV-C

Grammatical pedantry is a sign of a colonised mind! Why be enslaved by M/s Wren & Martin?
hursh chandhok@ChandhokHursh

Judging JNU VC for her grammar is not classist, please. A person who is a professor since 1980s is not an underprivileged child.
Tejas Harad@h_tejas

It's not classist but pointless. English technical proficiency is not an useful indicator of any individual quality.
rudie@rudrani_dg

In a senior administrative position of an internationally renowned institute these small things matter a lot. It is a formal written communique not an extempore speech. At the very least, should have been sub-edited through a staff member.
Harneet S Chugh@hschugh

Grammar is the most harmless thing wrong here.
Sana Fazili@FaziliSana

And pray what is her new job all about? Minimum requirement is correct grammar
Bismaya INC@bismay_inc

## WEDNESDAY'S SWIPE

## TAROT MESSAGE FOR THE DAY
## JUDGEMENT

A day of forgiveness, changes and review. Take some time out and contemplate what has worked for you and what has not.

Some of you will pay homage to ancestors. Communication is going to be important. Reach out to more people.

A day of letting go, of old and worn out to welcome fresh beginnings.

**Tip for the day:** Look at the image and say "God please bless our ancestors."

*Lots of divine miracles your way, Sheetal Sapan Mhatre.*

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# The Importance of All India Civil Services

Perhaps the most crucial decision of the then national leadership of free India about the strategy of management of the new democratic Republic was to retain the 'steel frame' left behind by the British in the form of ICS and IP and establish IAS and IPS as the All India Civil Services to succeed them.

These were envisioned as the specially empowered national instruments to broadly handle development administration and the law & order apolitically - across the national grid - taking into account the federal scheme of things in the Republic.

In no other major country in the world does an equivalent of IAS and IPS exists in the sense that on a merit-based selection at the national level, the entrant is installed in the decision-making 'leadership' position of an Under Secretary of Government of India just within three years after the training - Collector and SP in the states represent that status granted at the start of the service career itself.

That there was no conflict between the Centre and the states about these prime services was implied in the practice of the Centre handling the recruitment and training of IAS and IPS officials and then placing them in the hands of the states according to an assessed 'cadre strength' with the minimal subsequent role of broadly keeping track of their performance and giving them a sense of central protection against any unfair treatment meted out by the state government wherever necessary.

The Centre has also been helping the reallocation of the cadre of the spouse wherever needed, if both husband and wife are members of All India Civil Services. The allocation of cadre state was made on two grounds - consideration of individual's preference allowed on the basis of place in the merit list and exercise of Centre's discretion.

The strong points of these services were the high-level of integrity at personal level, independent decision-making in public interest and fair play in the handling of the subordinate government servants down the line.

The comparative perks and facilities provided to even the young officers - considering the general economic situation of the country - are noticeable enough to promote self-confidence and a sense of pride in the All India Civil Services.

For long years after Independence, many of their members distinguished themselves in both Central and state governments. They served the cause of national integration and also added to the credit of the leadership in power in any part of India - regardless of its party label.

But then there was an inevitable slide reasons for which needed to be examined.

Members of the All India Civil Services retained an inbuilt willingness to serve the national government at appropriate stages of their career and looked forward to that experience to enhance their work profile.

They all carried the desire of holding senior most positions that existed only at the Centre. It was therefore the normal thing for the officers serving in their cadre states to aspire to get the opportunity of being picked up by Delhi under the Central quota, which every state knew it had to honour at any point of time.

This gave them an added reason to perform well. There could be an occasion when the call from the Centre had to be declined by an officer for some valid personal or family reason, but it was otherwise a mutually agreeable arrangement that operated without impediment.

Slowly but steadily. politicisation of bureaucracy and police by the ruling parties of the states created the tendency among officers of holding on to their position in the state for vested interests.

The state governments, for political reasons, also started giving weightage to state service officers directly recruited by them, inducing the IAS and IPS to become more and more 'compliant'. All of this resulted in the unhealthy trend of All India Civil Services officers looking weaker as they moved up the ladder - the Chief Secretary and DGP not minding even the transfers and postings of officers done by the political masters at their back.

The Centre was justified in feeling concerned about the heads of administration and the police in the states not measuring up to their apolitical Constitutional responsibilities. The Central oversight on the two premier All India Civil Services had to be maintained and legitimate procedural correctives made in the larger national interest to ensure competent administration of the democratic state.

An unreasoned refusal of the state to release an officer selected by the Centre for deputation with the Government of India - out of political recalcitrance - can adversely affect the great tradition of All India Civil Services contributing to democratic governance through their apolitical public-service oriented work.

If the rule about the Centre's decision prevailing over the state's desire in the matter of central deputation of an officer acted somewhere as a deterrent against wilful neglect of Constitutional obligations at the top levels of state and police administration, this is welcome.

A few long-range steps come to mind for improving matters relating to these Services. First, there should be greater transparency about the appointment of Chief Secretary and DGP of the state. There should be a healthy Central input in the process by way of UPSC in consultation with the state governments, drawing a panel of three most eligible officers of the cadre - on the basis of seniority and performance - to leave it to the state government to make the choice.

Sometime back, the Supreme Court commended this approach when striking down the practice of appointing an 'officiating' DGP. There is no reason why this could not be followed in the matter of selecting the Chief Secretary as well.

Secondly, for senior positions at the Centre requiring specialised work background, officers available in various states could be given the opportunity of conveying their interest for being considered - this has perhaps been done to an extent already.

Third, it would be useful for Cabinet Secretary and Home Secretary - Director of the Intelligence Bureau (DIB) to hold a biennial conference of Chief Secretaries and DGPs purely for discussing the All India Civil Services - related issues of performance, facilities and working conditions. For DGPs, this can be a segment of the annual conference convened by the DIB.

Fourth, in keeping with the lofty objective of providing a uniform standard of efficient administration throughout the country after Independence - that had inspired the creation of the All India Civil Services - it is in the fitness of things that during the brief spell of joint training for the new probationers organised by the LBS National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie every year, education on strategic matters and national security had been introduced recently.

This will help cooperation among the All India Civil Services officers in their later years on issues of national interests and foster in them the spirit of serving anywhere in the country. The idea should be replicated in the joint courses held for Civil Services in latter stages, as well.

Last but not the least, there has to be a new emphasis on a further build-up of IAS and IPS as the principal instruments of governance through the intake of best available human material, special facilities of housing, transport and allowances provided in the early years of the career and introduction of the practise of a central deputation after certain periods of work in the cadre states, as far as possible.

The Centre heavily depends on these Civil Services and the states should be happy if their officers are selected for such deputation at the Centre. It seems there is a case for increasing the annual intake of officers for these services and meeting the demands of the states in this regard.

The states should not hold on to officers needed by the Centre as a show of political assertion - they are always free to take up individual cases where they find it necessary to retain an officer for a longer time for some special requirement of the state. Nothing should be done to further politicise the handling of the All India Civil Services.

**(The writer is a former Director of the Intelligence Bureau. The views expressed are personal)**

## Letter to Editor

### Glad Tidings

"With the mantra of 'Sabka Saath Sabka Prayas' , India has achieved the target of 75% of its adult population being administered both the doses of vaccine " , said Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Sunday. The health minister's tweet came amid the latest resurgence in the Covid-19 cases, driven by fast spreading Omicron variant . The country had been registering more than 2 lakh fresh cases on daily basis over past few days. Meanwhile, the health ministry said more than 164.36 crore vaccine dose have been provided to the State and the Union Territories through the direct state procurement category .

After achieving the target of 75% vaccination, we have become much more stronger in the fight against noval Coronavirus but still the danger is with us. Do continue to follow all the Covid appropriate Norms and get the due doses of vaccine as soon as possible.

**Ishita Patidar**
**Ujjain**

### NFT's: Digital Assets Market

Talking about NFTs (read: Western hype) sounds ephemeral in India but the reality is opposite. As no one expected Cryptocurrencies to flourish in India yet Indian Crypto investment has surpassed the $10 dollar mark. In hindsight, there is a boom in the blockchain market.

But when one spends astronomical sum for buying most coveted NFTs one want to make sure that it is not a plagiarised one. That the only hurdle in the race, i.e. lack of tech-savviness. The whopping gains are luring but for safeguarding once interest one need to be perspicacious.

Definitely the nascent industry is lucrative and needs the support of people so that not just the buyers but also the creators and sellers are able to make the best use of the platform. As this digital assets market is very wide, from video games to art everything is available here. The only need of the hour is tech-savviness. Rest the NFTs are welcomed with open arms.

**Shruti Sharma**
**Ujjain**

# Arif Khan's feat, J&K Sports Policy 2022 mark beginning of new era in Kashmir

Decision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi led regime to abrogate J&K's special status and turn it into a Union Territory has proven to be a game changer in the restive Himalayan region. The government laying emphasis on transforming lives of youth by channelizing their energies in a positive way is paying dividends.

Since August 5, 2019, when J&K was reorganized, the young boys and girls have exhibited their talent and potential in various fields, including sports. They have proven beyond doubt that they can compete with anyone and do wonders. Kashmiri youth, who just two years ago were considered as stone-pelters and militants, have washed off those labels and are shining like stars.

Recently, a talented Kashmiri youth, skier Arif Khan, carried India's National Flag at the opening ceremony of Winter Olympics in Beijing. The 31-year-old Arif was the lone Indian competitor at the games, having qualified in Slalom and Giant Slalom events. He is the first Indian to secure qualification in two events of the same edition of the Games.

Born in North Kashmir's Baramulla district, Arif took up skiing quite early in life, winning his first national slalom championship at the age of 12. He later went on to win two gold medals in the Slalom and Giant Slalom events of the South Asian Winter Games in 2011. Arif has become a role model for many Kashmiri sports persons, who want to follow in his footsteps and carry the tricolor in the international events.

Previously, India's Winter Olympics campaigns were identified with one man -- veteran athlete Shiva Keshavan, who represented the country in six editions of the mega-event. Now, Arif has joined him.

New Sports Policy

Recently, the Jammu and Kashmir government approved a new sports policy to promote sporting culture and harness the energy of youth in the Union Territory. The Administrative Council headed by Lieutenant Governor, Manoj Sinha, approved the rollout of the J&K Sports Policy 2022. The new sports policy aims at promoting sports in the Himalayan

region by developing sports infrastructure and incentivizing sportspersons to excel in their respective games and sport. The policy strives to achieve excellence by involving all the stakeholders and establishing inter-departmental synergies for composite development of sports.

The new policy envisages 'Scout' -- identify talent and catch them young; 'Engage' - ensure grassroot inclusive engagement in sports & games. Facilitate-provide sports infrastructure, facilities, know-how, and training; and 'Recognize' - acknowledge the achievements and contributions through awards and further employment.

The policy has also incorporated various annual awards like award for excellence in sports for ten sports persons, J&K Khel Protsahana Award for Sports Association, and two veterans/ experienced sportspersons/ organizers or referees, Parshuram Award for 5 best coaches in different disciplines.

To motivate the UT's sporting talent, the new policy includes announcing special cash awards to the winners in Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, Asian Championship, World Cup Championships, Youth Olympic Games, South Asian Games, and World University Games/ Championships; in the range of Rs. one lakh to Rs. one crore.

The winners in all recognized national competitions and national school games in various sports disciplines will be granted specified scholarships from the Directorate of Youth Service & Sports. The new policy also focuses on encouraging the specially-abled sportspersons through sufficient infrastructure and training facilities to ensure their full participation in various events.

The sports policy envisages roping in outstanding players to impart specialized training and coaching to budding players and athletes across the UT. Through inter-departmental convergences, new vistas of employment will be opened for youth in the fields of Tourism, Education, and Adventure/Winter Sports.

Complete Package

The new sports policy is a complete package for budding sportspersons, who want to excel in their lives and prove their mettle like skier Arif Khan. The youth oriented schemes and policies of the government are opening new doors for generation-next. These are helping them to shed the label of stone-pelters, militants and violence mongers.

The new avenues that have opened up for youngsters are keeping them away from the propaganda and indoctrination campaigns being run from across the Line of Control (LoC). Youth don't pelt stones anymore, nor are they interested in joining militant ranks. They are being guided in a proper way and the helmsmen are leaving no stone unturned to ensure that they don't go astray. The steps taken by the government during the past two years have instilled confidence among the younger people that they can build their careers and chase their dreams.

The J&K's transition into a Union Territory has proven to be a game changer for the youngsters. The sportspersons, who till August 5, 2019 -- when the Centre scrapped J&K special status and divided it into two Union Territories -- used to struggle to make their presence felt, have got the much awaited recognition and the facilities that they yearned for the past 70-years. They no longer have to run from pillar to post with their certificates and awards to prove their credentials. The government has kept all the doors open for them. It is encouraging the budding sportspersons to focus on their goals and set targets for themselves.

The J&K Sports Council last year made a sports calendar for the entire year under the slogan 'Har din khel' with an aim to include all the games and hone the skills of the players in their respective fields. The huge participation of youngsters in the sports events held by the council was an indication that J&K is changing at a rapid pace and youth are leading from the front.

Army Encouraging Youth

The Indian Army too has been playing its role to encourage youth to display their talent. The Army has been organizing cricket, football, hockey and other tournaments across the length and breadth of Jammu and Kashmir.

In August 2021, international cricketer Yusuf Pathan, while attending the final match of Kashmir Premier League (KPL) in Kashmir had praised the efforts of the Army for organizing KPL in which more than 200 teams of the Valley had participated. He had exuded hope that the efforts put in by the Army would bear fruits and J&K would produce the international cricketers and Olympic gold medalists soon. The sports events organized by the Army have helped the budding players to get selected for bigger tournaments. The playgrounds and the venues created by the Army in the Union Territory have played a pivotal role in holding tournaments and events.

After the scrapping of so-called special status of Jammu and Kashmir, the government and security forces are working in close coordination with each other with an aim to empower the youth and harness their potential with a purpose to turn them into responsible citizens. And the generation-next of Kashmir is responding in a positive manner. It's a clear message to the adversary that people of Kashmir can't be misled anymore by preaching separatism and sedition.

# Why can't Ansari become APJ Kalam?

**By R.K. Sinha**

While residing inside his grand majestic bungalow of Lutyens' Delhi, Mohammad Hamid Ansari has again commenced saying that the Muslims of India are feeling insecure. In a seminar of the American Muslim Council, he reiterated what he is saying today. He said that Muslims of India have felt insecure since 2014. In a country where everyone has complete freedom of speech, one is free to say anything.

However, one cannot help but wonder if he would say such things if he had become the President after the Vice-President? This question in itself may seem a bit hypothetical to some. But, this is a question of grave significance. The nation is curious to know that after Ansari Sahib himself rose as the spokesperson of Muslims overnight, has he planned to travel from village to village to spread the light of education among Muslims?

The country also expects him to call upon the Muslims to present their side to the government regarding employment and better health facilities in a democratic manner. As he has never worked among the poor-Guruba Muslims or actively taken initiatives to help his brethren, there is a lingering uncertainty regarding how many Muslims will heed his advice. As an officer of the Indian Foreign Service, he lived abroad for decades. The same was also the case for other ambassadors of India in many countries. Even when they stayed in India, they enjoyed exclusive government facilities and lived a comfortable life.

After being relieved from the post of Vice President, Mohammed Hamid started living in an extravagant government-allotted bungalow in the heart of New Delhi's elite area. In addition, they also enjoy several

government facilities and top-notch security. Even though they do not miss any opportunity to berate the current central government, directly and indirectly, they do not have any shame in taking government privileges provided by them.

They are coming across as convenient revolutionaries. It would be meaningless to expect any kind of sacrifice from them. Ansari Sahib was the Vice President. When I was a member of the Rajya Sabha, he was also the honorable Chairman, so he should also be asked why he represents the interests of Muslims alone. Why hasn't he expressed any concern about the Dalits, Backwards, and Adivasis or any such person standing in the last line of the society? Why does he want to be like Asaduddin Owaisi, Azam Khan, or Farooq Abdullah? Why does he not stand up for everyone? He only seems to care about Muslims.

Has Ansari Sahib ever raised his voice against the rampant corruption in the Waqf boards? He could have done all this as the Vice President of India but remained silent. He was also silent on the dreadful practice of triple talaq among Muslims and never spoke in favor of Pasmanda Muslims. Everyone knows that Muslims are divided into Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal categories. Shaikhs, Syeds, Mughals, and Pathans are called Ashrafs. Ashraf are those Muslims of Afghan-Arab origin or those who converted from the forward castes of Hindus. Altaf is a class of Muslims that converted from professional castes. The third class consists of those Muslims with whom the rest of the Muslims do not consider their own. They are called Pasmanda Muslims.

In theory, there is a practice of casteism in Islam as it challenges the leprosy of caste. Despite this, in practice, the entire Muslim society is trapped in the quagmire of caste. Among Muslims, different castes have their separate graveyards. Non-Punjabi Muslims are prohibited from entering the cemetery of Punjabi Muslims in Delhi. Shias and Sunnis have their separate graveyards. Why does Ansari sahib not raise his voice against such discrimination? For how long will he avoid answering such questions? The nation as one demands answers.

Ansari Sahib represents those Muslims of India who lived their lives in comfort and luxury. They only talk about rights but start sweating bullets when reminded of their duties. As Mohammed Hamid hails from the same affluent Muslim noble family as the infamous Mukhtar Ansari in Ghazipur one can understand his magnitude of wealth and prosperity. He never bothered to increase the income levels of small farmers of Darbhanga, of a punctured person in Delhi, or of Muslims working in a mosque in Bihar Sharif. Ansari Sahib and Salman Khurshid can wear their sherwani and participate in any seminar at the India International Center.

Ansari and Salman Khurshid are two sides of the same coin. One must remember that Salman Khurshid also recently compared Hindutva with terrorist organizations ISIS and Boko Haram. While addressing a Congress rally in Azamgarh Uttar Pradesh on February 10, 2012, Salman Khurshid said, "When I showed the pictures of Batla House encounter to Sonia Gandhi, her eyes started watering and asked me to consult the then Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh. He had made a mockery of the martyrdom of a brave police officer like Mohan Chandra Sharma, who had sacrificed his life fighting the enemy.

Like Ansari, Salman Khurshid also never bothered to raise the issues of Pasmanda Muslims. The country gave everything to these people, but they remained displeased. Ansari sahib should self-reflect and question himself what he has given to this country. Maybe then he will feel a little ashamed of what he has done. He needs to realize that when the entire country respects Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam as its hero, why would no one give him even a speck of the same. India needs more heroes like Kalam Sahib. Leaders like Ansari and Salman Khurshid will come and go in hundreds and be forgotten. History will erase such selfish, mean, and cowardly people from existence.

**(The writer is a senior editor, columnist, and former MP. The views expressed are personal opinion of the author.)**

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Your expectation of something unique and dramatic, of some wonderful explosion, is merely hindering and delaying your Self Realization. You are not to expect an explosion, for the explosion has already happened

Nisargadatta Maharaj

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

— Ramnath Goenka

## PLATEAUING OF NATIONAL TAX BASE AND ITS FALLOUT

Even as the government announces another set of amendments in the Income Tax Act to expand the tax base by tapping into incomes prone to evasion, the government data seem to suggest that the country's tax/GDP ratio has remained unchanged over a long period of time. The Economic Survey Report 2022 reveals that despite all claims made by the government over years, the ratio has not changed much over the decade. It was 7.5% in 2012–13, and going by the budget estimates, the same is going to be 7.4% in 2022–23.

When the taxes of the states and Centre are taken together, the tax/GDP ratio continues to hover around 17% for the last 10 years. Compare this to China's 22% (in 2019), America's 25.5% (in 2020), Mexico's 18% and the average of Asia Pacific at 21%. This has been an area of concern for a long time, but nothing seems to have worked so far. The GST, once hailed as cure for all of India's tax troubles, has not been able to make much of a headway on this front even as it is about to complete five years later this year.

Policy analysts and economists love to refer to these numbers and frown over India's inability to increase its tax-GDP ratio. The situation certainly requires attention, but it is not too alarming. The government, therefore, should not unnecessarily keep increasing tax compliances in the name of raising the revenue base. Every year, a new set of transactions are brought under the ambit of TDS/TCS so that no income goes unnoticed by the I-T department. But in doing so, businesses are getting burdened with compliances.

We have to keep in mind India's demographic realities before pushing too hard on the tax accelerator. India is a lower middle income country (according to the World Bank) with a per capita income around $2,000. We have a large section of the population below 18 years (41% as per 2011 Census), and the woman participation in the labour force is below 20%. We, as a policy choice, have avoided taxing farmers. A higher tax-GDP ratio would require incremental changes in all those fronts, and it won't happen overnight, no matter how hard the government tries.

## ADDRESSING INDIA'S EDUCATION CRISIS

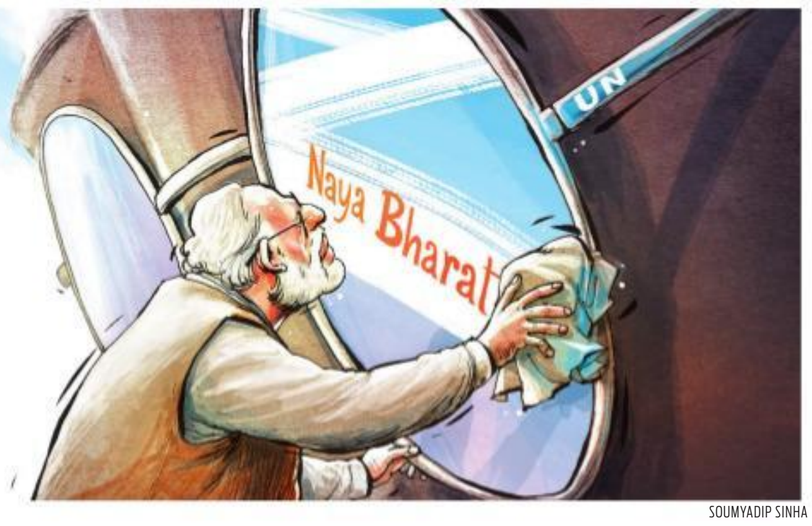
One of the most moving and defining images of the current times is that of a girl bursting into tears after she returned to the classroom as schools reopened earlier this month in India. Covid has robbed close to two priceless years from young students, and this has hurt them not just from an academic point of view. At least 13 states have, so far, reopened schools while others are toying with the idea. As the Covid third wave witnesses a sharp dip, the country is staring at one of its biggest challenges ever—the education crisis. According to the Department of School Education and Literacy, over 24 crore school children were impacted by the pandemic. Of them 12 crore are in Classes 1–5. All of them, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports in its August 2021 report notes, suffered instructional loss. If one needs to understand the true nature of the problem, the ASER 2021 report provides a glimpse. It says that about one in every three children in Classes 1 and 2 has never attended in-person school before. "Entry to the world of formal education can be a difficult process at the best of times, but the challenges these young children face as learners are likely to be far more complex than would have been the case in pre-pandemic times," it sums up. In addition to critical loss of learning, the absence of key social interactions that shape the well-being of children and their ultimate future is the most disturbing outcome of the crisis. The first thing that all states must do at once is reopen schools.

What is heartening though is that the Centre is seized of the matter and this is reflected in the spate of measures such as announcement of the expansion of One Class, One TV Channel, establishment of a Digital University and e-learning programmes in the Union Budget. Bridging the huge learning gap is the need of the hour. Here the states have a huge role to play because of the demographic divide, economic disparity and wide gender gap in education. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all strategy and the Centre must handhold them. Or else, it might well be impossible to compensate for the loss the country is looking at.

Tirumurti's speech was a rare instance of plain speaking in global fora. Earlier, it would have been considered blasphemous for an Indian diplomat to speak on issues faced by Hindus

# INDIA ENTERS THE MODI ERA IN GLOBAL POLITICS

A SURYA PRAKASH
Former chairman of Prasar Bharati and Scholar, Democracy Studies




SOUMYADIP SINHA

As the nation celebrates the 75th anniversary of its Independence, the world is now coming face to face with a new India—an Atmanirbhar India that is intolerant of hypocrisy and doublespeak and demands answers for questions that have been lying dormant for decades.

The international community got a taste of this last month when Ambassador T S Tirumurti, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, challenged many nations in regard to their approach to religion and democracy.

Speaking recently at the International Counter Terrorism Conference, he confronted other nations with three questions. One, while they talk of Islamophobia, Christianophobia and anti-Semitism (all pertaining to Abrahamic religions), how come has the UN never focused on the attacks on other religions and on the menace posed by those who spread Hinduphobia? Two, if "left wing" is okay, why is "right wing" not okay when ideological diversity is central to democracy and these are choices made by voters in democracies? Lastly, why is the international community diluting the definition of "terrorism" and bringing in extraneous issues that will weaken the global war on terror?

Actually, India has rarely done such plain speaking in international fora. In fact, in the pre-Modi era, it would have been considered blasphemous for an Indian diplomat to talk of Hindus or issues confronting Hinduism. Nor would they enter the ideological thicket and flag the duplicity of those who demonise the "right wing".

Happily, this has changed. Indian diplomats now speak the language that Indians have been wanting to hear for the last 75 years. A robust, honest presentation of what India stands for and how Indians feel.

Hitting out at several member states of the UN, which are driven "by their political, religious and other motivations", the ambassador said that over the years, the UN has highlighted Islamophobia, Christianophobia and anti-Semitism. But what about phobias against other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism? "New phobias, hatred or bias against other major religions of the world need to also be fully recognised."

Emphasising the need for balance on matters of religion, Tirumurti said "the emergence of ...anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh phobias is a matter of serious concern and needs attention of the UN and all member states to address this threat". Only then, he says, can we bring "greater balance" into our discussion on such topics. Obviously, India needed a Narendra Modi as prime minister to put this on the table.

The second issue the ambassador has raised pertains to ideology. Given the shrill attacks on the "right wing", he has said that it is important to understand "that in democracies, right-wing and left-wing are part of the polity" and they come to power through the ballot and reflect the majority's will. More importantly, he hammered home the basic point that democracy by definition "contains a broad spectrum of ideologies and beliefs".

It is indeed ironic that a primer on democracy has to be delivered, that too in the UN, but then who is better equipped to ram this in than the representative of the world's most vibrant democracy? Is it not amazing that those who swear by Stalin (the man who engineered a genocide and exterminated millions of his political opponents) strut around as defenders of democracy! Equally strange is the fact that some of the noted academic institutions in the West treat these hypocrites as "democrats" and "liberals" and allow them to peddle their wares in the international seminar circuit.

> India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations challenged many countries in regard to their approach to religion and democracy. Emphasising the need for balance on matters of faith, he noted that while the UN has highlighted Islamophobia, Christianophobia and anti-Semitism, it has ignored hatred against other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism

Tirumurti's observations about the "left" and "right" needs to be seen in the light of the mischief engineered by the "left" against India globally and its attempts to question the wisdom of India's over 900 million electors. As regards terrorism, the ambassador has warned the UN regarding the dilution of its definition.

Recently, the prime minister too has cautioned citizens about the attempts to tarnish India's image and said this should not be brushed aside. Modi's remarks come in the wake of agenda-driven reports and analyses put out by Western institutions over the last two years, which seek to run down India's liberal, democratic environment.

Sadly, many of these coloured reports are fuelled by Indian left and Nehruvian intellectuals, who stand fully exposed within the country. These unemployed, unemployable, diabolical minds are now looking for new pastures outside India to influence thought and run India down. The larger cartel of institutions wedded to Abrahamic religions are furthering this agenda. In the words of S Gurumurthy, Chairman of the Vivekananda International Foundation, this is part of the global agenda of the "doctrinally intolerant Abrahamic religions to tarnish the image of the doctrinally tolerant Indic religions". He says the Indian ambassador to the UN deserves congratulations for his geopolitical defence of India's civilisation.

One can see the firm resolve of Prime Minister Modi in ensuring that India confronts doublespeak in international bodies on issues pertaining to religion, ideology and terrorism. An Indian diplomat first flagged the issue of hatred and violence against Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs in the UN over a year ago. Thereafter, the Minister of State for External Affairs, S Muraleedharan, brought up the issue some months ago in the UN Security Council. This speech by Ambassador Tirumurti is indeed the clincher. India is now well and truly into the Modi era in international affairs. The humming and hawing of the Nehru era is over and there are no ifs and buts to the positions we take in international fora. The international community must now adjust to Naya Bharat. It has no other option.

*(suryamedia@gmail.com)*

# IN DEFENCE OF SMALL BUSINESSES, DEAR SHARKS

ANURADHA GOYAL
Author and founder of IndiTales

I have been binge watching *Shark Tank India*. It comes as a breath of fresh air for multiple reasons. The biggest of them is the fact that it is one of the rare shows on television without the essential *tadka* of Bollywood. Second, even with a bit of drama created for TV, it is infusing the viewers with ideas, giving them a glimpse into the world of business, and how investors think and act. I had not seen the show earlier, so I had no base to judge it against and in hindsight, I am happy that way. I knew that the Sharks are real people, as I had interacted with one of them for my first book—*The Mouse Charmers*. For the pitches, I actually googled the ones I liked to see if they are all real businesses, and yes, they are. Their websites or social media handles were not as great as their presentation on TV but they all existed. The good news is that they saw a sharp spike in sales after they appeared on television. So, even the ones that did not get investment got their spotlight.

Businesses pitching on the show gave me an insight into what entrepreneurs are thinking about. It made me aware of some problems while others were just trying to solve the same issues differently. Food businesses rule big time. There was essential diversity infused with a couple of rural entrepreneurs. Pune sent a lot of ideas, but Delhi and Bengaluru still dominated, while some Tier 2 towns made their presence felt. Overall, the ideas raised curiosity.

Investors gave me insights into how they think before investing. The questions they asked educated the viewers about things that an entrepreneur should think about. They clearly brought out the strengths and weaknesses of the idea, the business model and the entrepreneur carrying them. Personally, their biggest driver to invest was the potential for growth and speed with which it will happen. So any business that did not have the potential to grow very big did not generate too much interest, even if it was a good idea running profitably.

Now, reading between the lines, there are a few things that the show might have communicated inadvertently. Like, an idea is not worth pursuing if it cannot be a unicorn in the future, which also means you will not have the support of the investor community or start-up ecosystem. In my opinion, a business that gives you more than what you would otherwise earn in a job—while allowing you the joy of running a firm your way, creating employment and most importantly adding value to society—is worth pursuing. There may be a few firms worth billions but there are billions of big and small businesses that make up our economic universe. A mother and daughter team doing ₹27 lakh turnover from Varanasi by upcycling waste is definitely a worthy business. Some businesses may seem to have limited scope or a short shelf life, but then they all have their limits both in space and time. The real goal of a business is to add value to customers and earn well in return before multiplying wealth for investors.

> There are a few things that the show might have communicated inadvertently. Like, an idea is not worth pursuing if it cannot be a unicorn in the future, which also means you will not have the support of the investor community or start-up ecosystem. ... We get to read about a handful of very successful businesses, but remember they are just a more visible part of a larger ecosystem

We get to read about a handful of very successful businesses, but remember they are just a more visible part of a larger ecosystem. There are a lot of smaller businesses that form the supply chain or the local hub and spokes of these firms. Unicorns are rare and if you go by the dictionary meaning, they are even mythical. Do we not need a thriving diverse jungle with all its biodiversity, with animals big and small, with those who fly and those who swim, with a self-sustaining food chain?

Second, when Sharks looked at the gross margins, especially for the B2C or D2C products, they looked at a range of 70–80% for the idea to be attractive. Why? So that there is enough buffer to invest in marketing and customer acquisition. Now, think about it from a consumer perspective. Ultimately you are paying for all the advertisements, all those influencers and all that fancy packaging. Let's take the case of chips—one of the most consumed packaged foods. The cost of production, including the cost of fancy packaging, is less than 30% of MRP. Chips are processed enough to ensure a long shelf life, even if we ignore the elements added to make them addictive. Now, compare it to the bakery next door, where you can buy fresh if not better chips at 40% of the cost, benefitting both you and the manufacturer, without hurting the environment and while nurturing a local economy. If you were watching the show like me, it would give you a strong reason to consume local as well as not pay a premium for products that claim to be purpose-driven.

Having said that, we need more such shows that take us back to one of our oldest roots—entrepreneurship. Who else has a longest living history of global trade and entrepreneurship than India?

*(Tweets @anuradhagoyal)*

## MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

### Sad but not surprising

The news item on the caving in of portions of platforms at the to-be-inaugurated Sir M V Terminal platforms in Bengaluru made for sad reading, though it was not surprising. Similarly the report that said Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) engineers have been put on the mat for shoddy work was not shocking in the least as it has become a common phenomenon (Feb 8). Neither the government nor we as citizens seem to be too concerned about these things. The contractor lobby is too strong to be made accountable and the officials are also not taking any responsibility for such shoddy works. Except for some occasional reprimand from the courts, nothing changes on this front.

**R Sriramprasad, Bengaluru**

### Patently partisan

The new vice chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University appears to be partisan as seen from her earlier tweets that have now been deleted (Feb 8). She does have a brilliant academic history. But her deleted tweets mentioned in the article expose her patently pro-BJP mindset, which certainly is not fitting for one who is to head a revered educational institution. It is evident that those who selected her did not think so and are supportive of her views, which she herself tried to erase. It is sad that people in power consider being partisan is okay for a V-C, who should be a role model for students and teachers.

**Capt Raju Mathai (Retd), Kochi**

### Tweets tarnish image

An accomplished academic and a former student of the iconic JNU, the new V-C has become the first woman to decorate the post. She is a multifaceted personality who can speak six languages. Unfortunately the unverified and later deleted Twitter handle with toxic tweets tend to tarnish her image.

**Rajakumar Arulanandham, Palayamkottai**

### Nationalise med colleges

The speed with which the government ensured the NEET Bill was passed reflects the state of affairs in Tamil Nadu. The process of admitting students to MBBS courses in Tamil Nadu was based on marks obtained in Class 12 exams before NEET came into force. Even then, students who studied in private schools and could afford private tuition had a big advantage. So, the problem of a level playing field existed even earlier. Perhaps the government can nationalise all private medical colleges in Tamil Nadu. Perhaps then the politicians and their cronies will stop complaining about NEET as their primary problem seems to be that the exam has made it impossible for them to sell medical seats in their colleges for crores of rupees every year.

**K Ramachandran, Chennai**

### Worshipping the Sun

This is with reference to *Surya worship & sculptures in ancient Karnataka* (Feb 8). The writer has vividly explained the importance of Surya worship with evidence from *Puranas*. He has also pointed out the existence of ancient temples that were dedicated to the Sun God based on sculptural evidence. Life exists on earth due to the Sun and hence Surya worship is an important part of Indian spirituality.

**R Pichumani, Kumbakonam**

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THE HANS INDIA
DELHI WEDNESDAY 9 FEBRUARY 2022

# Will e-rupee fuel growth of digital economy?

Budgetary announcement of India floating a digital currency is a milestone moment. Reports suggest that Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is likely to come up with a digital rupee in early 2023. Once it happens, India will be the first major economy to have its own digital currency. Globally, Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) is a much-debated theme with many nations mulling to float such a virtual currency. In the cryptocurrency era, CBDC has a lot of significance. Firstly, it will be backed by the sovereign. Secondly, it will be a big boost to the digital payment ecosystem in the country. India is already witnessing transactions touching record high through UPI (Unified Payments Interface).

In January 2022, UPI transactions touched the highest ever monthly value of Rs 8.32 lakh crore. Digital rupee is likely to strengthen this payment ecosystem further. Because, an electronic form of fiat currency will act exactly as a digital wallet provided currently by the private players. Instead of holding a note, an individual will be holding a digital currency in his/her phone, which can be transferred to any merchant for doing transactions. As it is backed by sovereign, the payment spectrum can also be larger.

Moreover, tracking the digital rupee will also be easier. Because, like normal fiat currency, digital currency issued by RBI will also be numbered in units. Blockchain technology is also likely to play a crucial role in the tracking and tracing of the digital rupee. The digital rupee blockchain, being developed by the Reserve Bank, would be able to trace all transactions, unlike the current system of mobile wallet offered by private companies. This will, in many ways, assuage the concerns arising from virtual currencies like cryptos where the tracing process seems to be opaque, leading to money laundering possibilities. Through CBDC, these fears will be largely allayed as the central bank will be able to gauge the money flow apart from tracking suspicious transactions.

Indian fintech ecosystem is burgeoning. Fintechs operating in the country raised a record $9 billion in 2021, setting the tone for the funding and growth boom to continue in 2022, according to data by Traxcn. Of the 43 startups that turned unicorns, 12 were from the fintech space. A unicorn is a privately held entity with a valuation of $1 billion or above. This ecosystem is based on technology-led innovations. The advent of digital currency will provide further boost to innovative solutions as fintechs will be able to build technology stack based on digital rupee. So, the speed of financial inclusion is definitely set to rise in coming years. The penetration of digital payments is increasing each passing day. Digital currency is expected to provide further momentum to this trend.

India is trying to create a $1 trillion digital economy by 2025. Apart from UPI, digital currency has the potential to make this dream realised within the set timeframe. While digital currency has given the clarity to the virtual currency ecosystem, it is imperative that the government finalises the regulations with regard to cryptocurrencies. Taxation proposals announced in the budget is definitely a first step in this direction. As more clarity emerges, India can be the epicentre of financial innovation in coming years.

COVID-19

# VIRUS AND VACCINE LESSONS FROM 2021 FOR BETTER 2022

SWAPNIL SONI

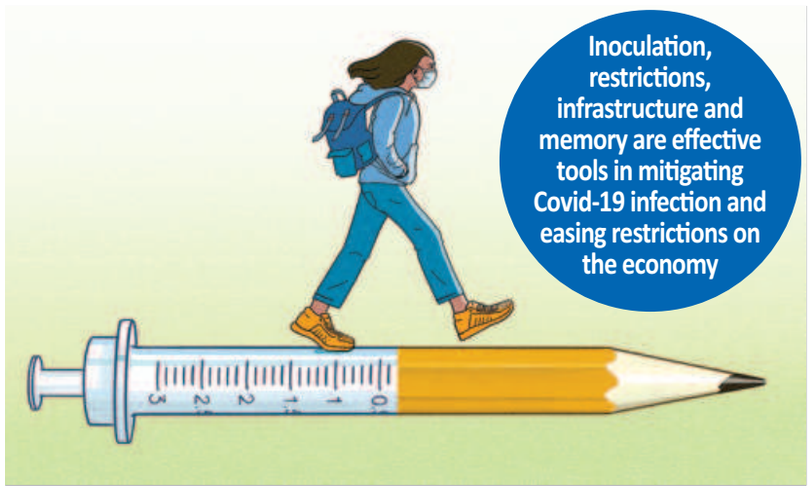
We bid adieu to 2021 with mixed feelings of sorrow and joy. 'Sorrow', because the year witnessed an unprecedented peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and 'joy', because it exhibited the end of the peak, owing to vaccinations and socio-economic restrictions.

In sum, 2021 educated us all on how to be vigilant and handle adversities. It did not end there. The year 2021 heralded the outbreak of a third wave, with the emergence of a newly mutated variant, Omicron. With the start of the New Year, it is important to retrospect and learn from the major socio-economic events in 2021.

2021 began on a hopeful note, with the promise of vaccination. We must acknowledge the laudable efforts of scientists, doctors, nurses, the police and frontline warriors.

However, with the easing of lockdown restrictions and prevailing skepticism and criticism about vaccination, the response to the inoculation drive in India largely remained a damp squib.

This led to the emergence of the 'deadly' second wave from March 2021 to June 2021. However, post-second wave, the situation improved. So what are the lessons from this experience for India?




### Data and analysis

Against this backdrop, we at the Indian Institute of Science performed a quantitative assessment of the indicators pertaining to vaccination, infection rate and socio-economic indicators. These included stringency index, purchasing manager index (PMI) and consumer confidence index (CCI).

Conventional statistical techniques including correlation, regression and time series were employed on these variables sourced from Oxford University's venture Our World in Data.

In the analysis, shown in the figure below, vaccination rate indicates the percentage of the fully vaccinated population in India. Infection rate is measured by the percentage of positive cases out of the total tests.

Stringency index measures the intensity of restrictions put in the country. PMI, administered by ingformation provider, IHS Markit, is the forward-looking indicator of producers' optimism about order books.

Finally, CCI, administered by global research association, The Conference Board, indicates the level of consumers' optimism regarding their expected financial situation. Broadly, PMI and CCI indicate economic health, the former from the producers' perspective and the latter from the consumers' perspective.

### Importance of vaccinations and restrictions

In a democratic country like India, local and national restrictions (such as lockdowns and constrained capacity operations in institutions) sounded odd but were implemented at various levels and time periods.

The stringency index, which indicates the intensity of such restrictions on economic activities, started to ease from the start of 2021. The easing continued till March 2021.

This easing, coupled with festivities and mass gatherings, caused the second wave starting March 2021. This resulted in an unprecedented high infection rate (a positivity rate of more than 15 per cent) and deterioration in economic health as indicated by nosediving PMI and CCI (both being less than 50, indicating economic contraction).

Restrictions started tightening from March 2021. But it was too late to curb the spread. The vaccination of less than a per cent of the population could not help.

The rate of inoculation was boosted due to the persistent efforts of frontline workers and reached four per cent by June 2021. In addition to vaccination, restrictions also helped in containing the viral spread, which cooled down in June 2021.

Post-June 2021, economic indicators started improving, as indicated by an uptick in PMI and CCI. From July 2021, PMI and CCI started exceeding the level of 50, indicating economic recovery, though at a moderate rate.

All this clearly vindicates that vaccination played a vital role in the 'infected' socio-economic scenario of India. It can be observed that increasing levels of vaccination helped in containing infection and subsequently easing restrictions, which, in turn, boosted economic health.

To this end, we extended our analysis to quantify the impact of inoculation on infection rates and levels of restriction.

We analysed the correlation between the daily vaccination as well as infection rate (COVID-19 positive rate in testing) for the period post the second wave (ie from July 2021) when the data is stable and free from outliers.

We found a statistically significant inverse correlation (95 per cent) between vaccination and infection rates. Also, each per cent increase in vaccination mitigates the infection rate by 0.05 per cent, indicating the saving of lives.

Similarly, we analysed the correlation between the daily vaccination rate and stringency index. We found a statistically significant inverse correlation (87 per cent) between these. Each per cent increase in vaccination eases the restriction by 1.17 index points, indicating the easing of economic activities.

Overall, it can be statistically asserted that vaccination is effective in mitigating infection and easing the restrictions on the economy. These together help in boosting the confidence of consumers and producers — the two vital agents in our demand-driven economy.

### Way forward

Inoculation is thus an important instrument to handle the COVID-19-induced pandemic. It is vital to increase the rate of vaccination together with booster dozes to fight against SARS-CoV-2.

If we continue with the current-month vaccination growth rate of about one per cent, we will be able to inoculate the country by March 2021.

Apart from boosting inoculation, it is also important to focus on three things learnt from last year: 1) Memory strengthening 2) Infrastructure strengthening and 3) Timely restriction. We must remember the loss of lives and livelihood in the last infectious wave and strictly continue adhering to COVID-19-appropriate behavior. We have observed the importance of health infrastructure during the second wave.

It is essential to develop, support and enhance our health institutions and health workers to be ready for future uncertainties. Finally, the requirements of local restrictions, wherever essential, must be assessed and announced in a timely manner before it is too late.

Late announcements of restrictions lead to infection severity and stricter restrictions. In sum, prevention is always better than cure. Let us learn from 2021 and implement the lessons for a better 2022.

*(Swapnil Soni is Senior Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth)*

# *Just 16% of the world's coastlines are in good shape*

BROOKE WILLIAMS

Only about 16% of the world's coastal regions are in relatively good condition, according to our world-first research released on February 7, and many are so degraded they can't be restored to their original state. Places where the land meets the sea are crucial for our planet to function. They support biodiversity and the livelihoods of billions of people. But to date, understanding of the overall state of Earth's coastal regions has been poor.

Our research, involving an international team of experts, revealed an alarming story. Humanity is putting heavy pressure on almost half the world's coastal regions, including a large proportion of protected areas. All nations must ramp up efforts to preserve and restore their coastal regions – and the time to start is right now.

Our coasts are vital – and vulnerable coastal regions encompass some of the most diverse and unique ecosystems on Earth. They include coral reefs, kelp forests, seagrass, tidal flats, mangroves, estuaries, salt marshes, wetlands and coastal wooded habitat. Many animal species, including those that migrate, rely on coastlines for breeding, foraging and protection.

Coastal sites are also where rivers discharge, mangrove forests exchange nutrients with the ocean, and tidal flows are maintained. Humans also need coastlines. Among other functions, they support our fisheries, protect us from storms and, importantly, store carbon to help mitigate climate change.

As much as 74% of the world's population live within 50 kilometres of the coast, and humans put pressure on coastal environments in myriad ways. In marine environments, these pressures include: - fishing

**Many are so bad they can never fully recover**

organic chemical and light pollution - direct human impacts such as via recreation - ocean shipping - climate change (and associated ocean acidification, sea-level rise and increased sea surface temperatures).

On land, human pressures on our coastlines include: - built environments, such as coastal developments - disturbance - electricity and transport infrastructure - cropping and pasture lands, which clears ecosystems and causes chemical and nutrient runoff into waterways. - To date, assessments of the world's coastal regions have largely focused solely on either the land or ocean, rather than considering both realms together. Our research sought to address this.

### A troubling picture

We integrated existing human impact maps for both land and ocean areas. This man pressure across Earth's coastal regions to identify those that are highly degraded and those intact. Both maps use data up to the year 2013 – the most recent year for which cohesive data is available.

No coastal region was free from human influence. However, 15.5% of Earth's coastal regions remained intact – in other words, humans had exerted only low pressure. Many of the intact coastal regions were in Canada, followed by Russia and Greenland. Large expanses of intact coast were also found elsewhere including Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Chile, Brazil and the United States.

Troublingly, 47.9% of coastal regions have been exposed to very high levels of human pressure. And for 84% of countries, more than half their coastal regions were degraded. What's more, human pressures were high in about 43% of protected coastal regions – those regions purportedly managed to conserve nature. Coastal regions containing sea grasses, savannah and coral reefs had the highest levels of human pressure compared to other coastal ecosystems.

Some coastal regions may be so degraded they cannot be restored. Coastal ecosystems are highly complex and once lost, it is likely impossible to restore them to their original state. So where to now? It's safe to say intact coastal regions are now rare. We urge governments to urgently conserve the coastal regions that remain in good condition, while restoring those that are degraded but can still be fixed.

To assist with this global task, we have made our dataset publicly available and free to use here. Of course, the right conservation and restoration actions will vary from place to place. The actions might include, but are not limited to: - improving environmental governance and laws related to encroaching development - increasing well-resourced protected areas - mitigating land-use change to prevent increased pollution run-off - better community and local engagement - strengthening Indigenous involvement in managing coastal regions - effective management of fishing resources - addressing climate change - tackling geopolitical and socioeconomic drivers of damage to coastal environments.

In addition, there's an urgent need for national and global policies and programs to effectively managing areas where the land and ocean converge.

Humanity's impact on Earth's coastal regions is already severe and widespread. Without urgent change, the implications for both coastal biodiversity and society will become even more profound.

*(The Conversation)*

# LETTERS

## Take Ramanuja's teachings far and wide

ESTABLISHING the statue of Sri Ramanujacharya is a welcome one. He is a spiritual revolutionary. He tried to bring spirituality to the doorsteps of common people.No doubt,he was the first social reformer not only in India but also in the world,as he taught equality centuries ago. Apart from establishing his statue, govts and spiritual leaders must try to take his teachings to the people in the form of books,telecasting his life on television and making his ideology a part in school syllabus.

Due to his ardent efforts, irrespective of caste all sections of people started entering temples.Even today we are witnessing honour killings, communal riots in society. So his teachings are need of the hour. That is why the statue is rightly deserves the name 'The statue of equality.'His motto 'All Universe is One Family' was an inspiration for mankind.

Propagating how he strained every nerve through out his life for bringing equality among the people,we can the problems that are plaguing the society. His life is truly inspiring and essential to make people know his life in these times as he liberated millions of people with his indefatigable efforts from social,cultural,gender,educational and economic discrimination.

*K Manoj Kumar*, Huzurabad, Karimnagar

## One nation, one syllabus

PLEASE implement urgently one nation, one fees, one syllabus standardisation (in India). Separate digital or online schools and colleges save expenses (money) on various rents, transport, infrastructure, more of staff etc. Thus digitally, reduction of fees is possible (to help the students of poor and the middle class families).

Entire nation having one syllabus ensures students from families of regular transfers, will not be affected. Will it help the morale of students if marks of Hindi and regional languages are not-counted / not included in the report card (at least to students of the other region)? Should focus be more on scientific subjects? Educational experts must discuss this.

*Sahasra Nivriti Vislesha*, Secunderabad

## Congress should set its house in order

Such a fierce speech by a PM against main opposition party in a parliamentary democracy is a rare phenomena and the opposition party staged walkout which was also not appropriate and should have faced such situation bravely. Cong party itself accepted many times that imposition of emergency was a wrong step taken by the party. About the Sikh riots in 1984 many Cong leaders had already accepted the wrong doing by their leaders.

It is well known fact that in the party family politics is prevalent and it is clear from the ticket distribution in the present assembly elections. For exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir, Congress as well as state-centric politicians had accepted number of times that they could not handle the situation properly and at present they are still living in tents or temporarily built houses .

PM also reiterated the schemes of infrastructure and other social schemes which are successfully running in the country. Congress is out of power in Tamil Nadu since 1962 and in Bengal since 1972 and in many states party is out of power since long from many states. Cong party should rethink on the points raised in Rajya Sabha and in strong democratic country like India opposition has major role to play and for that party should frame new strategy to revive the party and for the last two consecutive terms party could not win enough seats to get status of opposition leader. Party should set its house in order and organisational elections should be held to infuse new energy among the ground level workers.

*Yash Pal Ralhan,* Jalandhar

## Frosty ties continue with China

India decided to boycott the Winter Olympics hosted by China diplomatically when it was reported that a PLA soldier involved in the clashes with Indian troops in the Galwan Valley would participate in the opening ceremony. When India did not send any diplomats to participate in the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, China responded that New Delhi should not make a "politicised interpretation" of the participation of a Chinese soldier involved in the clashes with Indian troops at the Galwan Valley as a torch bearer.

India had announced that its top diplomat in China would participate neither in the opening nor the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics. India took the decision in the wake of Chinese state media report that a PLA regiment commander who was injured in the clashes in the Galwan Valley was part of the Winter Olympics torch relay. India strongly criticised the decision taken by China and pointed out that it was an attempt by China to politicise an event like Olympics. However, in China's view, the torchbearers of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics are broadly representative and meet the selection standards. A Chinese official said that India should not misinterpret the situation.

It must be remembered that India had lost 20 soldiers in the clashes in the Galwan Valley in the standoff between the two militaries at Eastern Ladakh. China had lost 40 soldiers in the clashes but it has not admitted it yet. In spite of disengagement at a few points, the standoff continues in many areas along the LAC in Ladakh. Despite several rounds of military and diplomatic talks, the conflicts between the two armies continue.

*Venu G S,* Kollam

**thehansreader@gmail.com**

# FROM THE WEB

## Bommai declares 3-day holiday for edu institutions as violence erupts over hijab row

BENGALURU\MANGALURU:At least two campuses turned war zones in Udupi town, while similar tense situation prevailed in Shivamogga and Bagalkot districts as students took out protest marches for and against hijab in educational institutions on Tuesday. In view of prevailing disturbances across the State, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai declared a three-day holiday for all colleges and schools.

## HC says mischievous elements keeping hijab issue burning, posts hearing for today

BENGALURU: The Karnataka High Court on Tuesday appealed to the students and people to maintain peace and tranquility as the hijab row escalated in parts of the State. After hearing the petitions filed by some students studying in the Government Pre-University College for Girls in Udupi, the matter was posted for Wednesday.

The petitioners argued that "they have a fundamental right to practice essential religious practices, including wearing of hijab as per Islamic faith, on the college premises," the single bench of Justice Krishna S Dixit said. "This court requests the students and the public to maintain peace and tranquility. This court has full faith in the wisdom and virtue of public at large and hopes that the same would be put to practice," the judge said.

Read more at
https://epaper.thehansindia.com (Bengaluru edition)

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