Anger in diplomacy

Pak. establishment was behind MNC Kashmir tweets, but India should have shown restraint

The advent of social media has no doubt changed how diplomacy is conducted between countries. Even so, it was surprising that the MEA and the Commerce Ministry put as much energy as they did into ensuring that several multinational companies retracted social media posts their Pakistani distributors had put out last week. The posts, that appeared to be part of a coordinated exercise sponsored by the Pakistani establishment, were put out on February 5 – marked in Pakistan as "Kashmir Solidarity Day" – and contained what New Delhi termed as highly offensive messages calling for "Kashmiri liberation". The Government's outrage was valid, given that these companies, including Hyundai, Toyota, KFC, Pizza Hut, and pharma major Schwabe, also have flourishing businesses in India, and it was strange that private MNCs would post such politically charged messaging at all. However, where a sharp word or even a short statement of disapproval would have sufficed, the Modi government decided to go the whole distance: even summoning the Korean Ambassador while ensuring that Indian embassies took up the issue with other governments. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also raised the matter with his Korean counterpart, who apologised to the Indian people. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal added in Parliament that the original apology by Hyundai India was not adequately "forceful or unequivocal", even as social media consumers in India threatened to boycott products made by the companies concerned.

While the Government might feel it has achieved its purpose by ensuring the companies and governments involved were contrite about the posts, it must also consider the big picture of how its actions, that appear to be at some variance with those of a secure and powerful global player, are viewed in the rest of the world. India's claims over Jammu and Kashmir are strong, and widely acknowledged, and not so fragile that a few social media posts, that appeared only in Pakistan, can dent in any way. Second, holding foreign governments in democratic countries to account for the actions of the local distributors of their private companies could have unforeseen repercussions. It is also worth considering whether the Foreign Ministry's resources are better spent in furthering India's interests than on expending diplomatic capital on short-lived controversies such as the MEA's objection to pop star Rihanna's posts on the farmer protests last year. The apologies and statements thus extracted may prove to be a pyrrhic victory, if one considers that the intentions of those behind the obnoxious posts in Pakistan, aimed at drawing attention to their propaganda on Kashmir, were also met. A quiet word with the MNCs might have worked better than a public display of diplomatic opposition.

The French format

If Normandy Format talks could be convened, it would be a breakthrough for Russia, Ukraine

French President Emmanuel Macron's shuttle diplomacy between Russia and Ukraine is one of the most significant interventions in the crisis ever since tensions started soaring in Eastern Europe. Mr. Macron, who has held talks with Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Moscow and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kiev, has said that both sides remain committed to the Minsk accords (2014-15), aimed at ending the violence between Ukraine and Russia-backed separatists in the east; Mr. Putin assured him that Russia would not escalate the crisis. Put together, these statements offer a path towards calming the Russia-Ukraine tensions. Moscow has issued sweeping demands, including rolling back NATO from Eastern Europe, which the West has rejected. But Russia's key concerns are the growing NATO-Ukraine cooperation and the increasing western presence in the Black Sea. The U.S. had earlier offered dialogue on mutually reducing military drills in the eastern flank of Europe. And what Mr. Macron is trying to do now, through the Normandy Format talks (including France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine), is for a Moscow-Kiev dialogue based on the Minsk protocol, which, in theory, was accepted by both sides.

The crisis has also laid bare the differences within the western bloc on how to deal with Russia. While the Biden administration has threatened to shut down Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the event of a Russian invasion, the German leadership has been less specific in its response. Germany has barred Estonia, the tiny NATO member that shares a border with Russia, from supplying arms to Ukraine. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who met Mr. Putin in the Kremlin earlier this month, has said Russia's demands were reasonable. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who visited Ukraine last week, has offered to host a peace summit. And now, Mr. Macron, who says the West "must respect Russia", has already moved ahead. These varied responses, despite Joe Biden's assertion of unity, show that Europe has less appetite for conflict with Russia. As a continent that experienced two disastrous World Wars and a Cold War, Europe understandably adopts pragmatic realism. But what needs to be seen is whether France and Germany have the diplomatic muscle to calm Russian nerves without making compromises on the continent's security. A starting point could be reviving the Minsk process. The accords call for a general amnesty for the rebels, constitutional amendments giving the breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine more autonomy and the handing over of Ukraine's borders to its army. None of the clauses in the agreement has been implemented. If the Normandy Format talks could be convened and Russia and Ukraine take steps to revive the agreement, it would be a diplomatic breakthrough.

Reviving the 'Kerala Model' of development

Its lustre is fading as there are threats from emerging social and environmental risks, but the question is how

SHASHI THAROOR & VINOD THOMAS

Kerala has long been recognised to have done many things right. For years the darling of development experts, non-governmental organisations and social activists, the 'Kerala Model' seemed to show that impressive levels of human development indicators – in health, education and quality of life, comparable even to some rich countries – could be achieved without a correspondingly high level of income.

A focus on 'failures'

But in the recent past, there has been a new debate on the 'Kerala Model' of development. Are we not guilty of exporting our unemployment and becoming over-dependent on remittances? Can you build high growth and strong human development indicators on such a flimsy basis? Is it sustainable? The focus in the new debates on Kerala seems increasingly on its failures: low employment, low levels of food intake and low incomes, accompanied by high levels of alcoholism and the nation's worst suicide rate.

After decades of robust social spending and participatory governance, the lustre of the Kerala model is now under threat from emerging social and environmental risks. Indeed, there is an irony here: some of the very strengths of Kerala's approach have become sources of vulnerability. For instance, its high life expectancy is translating into a high death rate from COVID-19.

In the face of rising risks, the Kerala model needs to be revitalised. The crucial question is how.

Reflecting the State's social outcomes, Kerala has India's highest literacy rate despite ranking only the ninth-highest in per capita income among 28 States. But as new global risks emerge in areas from health to climate change, Kerala's policies need to be bolstered and new challenges deftly managed. Severely hit by COVID-19, Kerala's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) contracted over 2019-20 and 2021-22, and unemployment, at 9%, is much higher than the 6% national average. The space to revive Kerala's sagging economy is limited because of a high fiscal deficit, around 4% of GSDP.

These difficulties could be meaningfully mitigated by smarter socio-economic investments, attention to good governance, and a far better stewardship of the environment. Kerala can develop as a knowledge economy, improve the quality of higher education and vocational training to meet the requirements of a modern workforce, and build on successes in tourism and hospitality services. All this will create meaningful employment and raise incomes.

Interventions that reach all

Our focus should be on the quantity as well as quality of health and education, and on ensuring that interventions reach all segments of the population. Basic education should continue to be a priority, but it is higher education that presents a pivotal opportunity on the global stage for Kerala – a State with high human capital and high population mobility. Played right, Kerala could become a regional, if not a national, centre for tertiary

THULASI KAKKAT

education in areas such as marine biology, health care, and digital technology, where it has considerable expertise.

Kerala was India's first digital State with the highest share of households with personal computers and Internet connections, mobile phone penetration, and digital literacy. Digital tools are being widely used in Kerala's COVID-19 response – for example, application of India's eSanjeevani, a telemedicine portal, offering psychosocial support for those struggling with the virus or its after-effects. We can build on and expand such approaches, learning, for instance, from Singapore's new generation of health apps and technologies.

Cracks in the health system

Serious gaps are growing in Kerala's health system. A pandemic response that laid a stress on mask-wearing and social distancing and tracing got off to a vigorous early start. But infections and deaths skyrocketed in 2021, partly as the population is highly mobile and also because Kerala let its guard down in key areas of surveillance. Testing, on the other hand, has been widespread, which helped reveal infections more transparently. Sustaining the edge on health care should be high on the policy agenda.

Another strength that needs to be sustained involves institutions, building on the State's grassroots organisation, participatory governance, and a free press. The Public Affairs Index 2020 ranked Kerala as the best-governed large State in 2019 on the basis of 50 indicators reflecting equity, growth and sustainability. Decentralised governance, a strong grass-roots-level network of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), volunteer groups, and Kudumbashree members helped in pandemic management. While there are lessons for others, Kerala needs to be more agile in public expenditure on health and developing local self-delivery systems.

The earth does matter

An asset that has turned into a worrying flash point is the State's rich but fragile ecology that requires heightened protection. Decades of ecological degradation amplified the impact of the 2018 floods in Kerala that took some 483 lives, displaced 14.5 lakh people, and cost over ₹40,000 crore. It is vital that the Madhav Gadgil Committee report is adopted with the minimal necessary modifications to protect vulnerable populations. The ecological disaster across the Western Ghats needs to be confronted and investments made to repair forests, river systems, water bodies, and flood plains. The State needs a bold programme of forest restoration in keeping with the commitments on forest protection from over 130 nations at COP26.

Kerala urgently needs to revive its network of rivers, their tributaries and streams. Sand mining needs to be stopped until the sandy riverbeds are restored. Water management calls for the periodic release of water from the dams, as indicated by the World Commission on Dams. This, together with desilting of dams, could control the quantity of run-off into the dams and the need for sudden releases that exacerbate floods. Kerala's supply of fresh water is being jeopardised by inadequate facilities for water containment. Water quality – and people's health – are hurt by domestic waste and industrial effluents, calling for better water treatment.

Moment for change

A reinvigorated Kerala model will do well to recognise the symbiotic links among social outcomes, environmental management, and participatory governance, and take actions that cut across these areas. It is time for revival. We must open our mental horizons to the world, outgrow our shopworn ideologies and create investment and business-friendly conditions for sustainable development.

One prerequisite for achieving sustainable development would be to change the perceptions of the State in our extremely politicised environment, especially the notorious *hartals* over marginal political issues, which have driven investment away. Political parties can differ on the precise policies and investments needed, but they must come together on a platform that transcends their differences. Sree Narayana Guru famously said, "*matham ethayalum, manushyan nannayalmathi* – whatever his religion, it is enough that a man be good." Similarly, Kerala must say, "*rashtriyam ethayalum, rashtram nannayalmathi* – whatever the politics, it is enough that the country be better."

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Revisiting the politics of social justice in Uttar Pradesh

The regime in the State has no road map to genuinely empower the vast majority of marginalised communities

HARISH S. WANKHEDE

The astonishing rise of Hindutva politics, especially in the Hindi belt, has almost relegated the politics of social justice to the back burner. Till recently, it was the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) that emphatically raised the agenda of social justice and also mobilised the lower castes as influential participants in the electoral democracy of Uttar Pradesh. However, in the last Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, it must be noted that the BSP has witnessed a considerable drop in its vote percentage (from 30.43% in 2007 to 22.24% in 2017). And instead, it has been the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that has emerged as a new 'inclusive' party, with a whopping 39% of the vote share. In the current phase of politics and elections, it is the BSP that appears to be inactive and irrelevant.

Key strategy

The right-wing party has been quite successful in engaging and bringing the socially marginalised sections into its fold by executing creative cultural strategies. However, the Yogi Adityanath government has not provided substantive welfare policies to satisfy the quest for social justice or to enable rapid economic development as far as the backward communities are concerned. The recent examples of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) leaders moving away from the BJP is a hint that the socially deprived communities could be disillusioned with the BJP and might lend their support to the Samajwadi Party (SP) that appears to be promising in political terms. Such a shift could reinvent the politics of social justice in the State.

Politics of social justice, limits

B.R. Ambedkar held the view that social justice is not merely a welfare policy framework. Rather, it is a dynamic tool to generate revolutionary political consciousness among socially marginalised groups. In the post-Ambedkar period, it was Kanshi Ram, the founder of the BSP, who reintroduced the agenda of social justice as a transformative political ideology.

Kanshi Ram utilised the ideas of social justice to highlight oppressive caste hierarchies and also inspired marginalised groups to build a robust political opposition. He argued that the national political parties retained their domination over legislative bodies by relegating the lower caste groups as a passive vote bank. He imagined that the socially marginalised communities could be united under a Dalit leadership (as Bahujan) and defeat the traditional ruling castes (often represented as Manuwadis). He proposed that the replacement of the conventional ruling elites by a Dalit-Bahujan collective would bring about a revolutionary change in governance and policy matters.

Imagining the Dalit-Bahujan mass as the ruling class was a radical vision. And forming social and political alliances are the foundational requirements to achieve such goals. However, the stiff social and cultural divisions between

GETTY IMAGES

Dalits and Other Backward Classes disallowed the possibility to organise a unified political front. The current vanguards of social justice politics have been criticised for a deep attachment to specific communitarian identities (like the BSP and the SP are often belittled as being the parties of the Jatavs and Yadavs, respectively) and alleged that the worst-off social groups (such as the Maha-Dalits and most backward castes) are not being given their legitimate space in electoral politics. Ironically, the lower caste parties often hesitate to join hands when it comes to pushing for an agenda of social justice (there is the well-known rivalry between the BSP and the SP) but find comfort in fighting independently or by forming alliances with the parties led by social elites. The right wing exploits the trust deficit between the Dalit-Bahujan groups and mobilises them on distinct cultural fronts.

Right-wing cultural politics

Since 2014, the BJP has launched a powerful rhetoric of development, anti-corruption politics and tapped the euphoria of nationalism that often bewitches aspirational groups and motivates them to support right-wing politics. Most importantly, the maverick top leadership in the BJP effectively controls the ship of propaganda and makes this party a dynamic force among the vulnerable social groups.

The right wing's understanding of social justice is curated under a neo-liberal ideological prescription. It looks down on popular institutional practices to ensure social justice (mainly the reservation policy) as the state's philanthropist distributive mechanism for lending some material doles to the deprived sections. Instead, the right wing underplays lower caste identities as being socially deprived classes and reprimands their assertion for social justice as being a disruptive force against Hinduism. The BJP crafts creative cultural strategies that perpetuate the domination of caste and class elites and motivates Dalit-Bahujan sections to find solace in the assertive communal Hindu identity. The domination of the social elites over political and public institutions is thus legitimised under the rubric of Hindu social harmony.

Importantly, the right wing engages with lower caste groups as a cultural and religious subject and exploits their association with Hindu rituals and traditions. The divisionary caste segments are celebrated as ruminants of Hindu civilisation; a new iconography and social history for each fragment are invented (like the evocation of Suheldev as the legend of the 'Pasi' caste). Such inventions are not only utilised to institutionalise the social ruptures between lower caste groups but also becomes a potent tool to propagate communal hatred against Muslims.

Parties such as the BSP and the SP have aspired to elevate the Dalit-Bahujan masses as the new political elites. Instead, the BJP's Machiavellian cultural politics in Uttar Pradesh have been exploiting caste divisions and relegating the lower caste groups as militant participants in a Hindu 'renaissance' under the aegis of social elites. The Yogi Adityanath regime has no road map to empower the vast majority of impoverished communities from poverty, social discrimination and political powerlessness. In the past, the rhetoric of inclusive growth or of Hindu unity may have impressed socially marginalised groups but such ideas have no power to liberate the poor and the vulnerable sections from their precarious social and class conditions.

A dignified presence

Hindutva's hegemonic cultural politics can be defeated by reinventing the ideology of social justice. The proponents of social justice have to demonstrate substantive accountability towards the vulnerable worst-off groups; and they also have to ensure their dignified presence in the mainstream political process. It is required that Dalit-Bahujan politics craft creative strategies to inspire the most vulnerable sections by building a prudent engagement with the cultural diversities and social identities. A dynamic interplay of social justice and socialism would be a lethal ideological weapon to defeat the communal politics of Uttar Pradesh.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The NEET debate

The argument that some extend in favour of the National Eligibility-cum-entrance Test (NEET) is that it promotes merit. But one cannot turn a blind eye to the sad reality that it has been promoting the coaching industry that has no scruples when it comes to levying prohibitively high charges which in turn impact the poor and economically marginalised (Editorial page, "'NEET is discriminatory, against social justice'," February 9). The very commercial and profit-oriented intent of such coaching centres is manifest in the expensive and self-promoting advertisements that they publish in the print media. Education has been reduced to a profiteering enterprise. Moreover, any attempt to impose a fit-for-all entrance examination of this kind, without taking into consideration the social, economic and territorial barriers that people are confronted with, violates the very sense of equality.

S. BALU,
Madurai

■ One wonders whether there is a hint in the article of 'pressure' from various owners (political) of private medical colleges who are said to be losing revenue from seats that have to be surrendered to the NEET pool. If there is concern about children from a rural background and government schools being unable to afford coaching, there are ways and means to disseminate training in an equitable manner. There can also be specialised coaching at the higher secondary level. Is it that difficult?

P. UPADHYAYA,
Bengaluru

Counter point

The reality today is that it is the ruling party which is pitting the country itself against democracy. There are examples to substantiate this – events like the toppling of governments in (then) non-BJP States such as Madhya Pradesh and Goa by audaciously effecting defections. In a democracy, when a person captures power, he should ensure governance that also embraces all parties and their leaders.

MANOHARAN MUTHUSWAMY,
Chennai

■ The Prime Minister's response to the Opposition's criticism has been an all-out attack without any remedy for the problems highlighted. The strength of a democracy lies in a healthy debate and respect in Parliament between the people's representatives. People would like to see constructive outcomes from debates, and not personal scores being settled. The Government must acknowledge this reality.

SUBASH BALAKRISHNAN,
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

Lata Mangeshkar

The report about Pan Woliu from Beijing being fascinated by the music of Lata Mangeshkar is a perfect example of harmony between diverse nations. The same can be said about Pakistan too where millions there are diehard fans of Lata*ji*. It is politicians who divide us.

C.K. PREM KUMAR,
Kalvakulam, Palakkad, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a front-page story titled "Posts on Kashmir unacceptable: Centre" (February 9, 2022), Osaka Batteries was erroneously referred to as a Japanese company.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

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It's time to take a relook at privatisation

Simply pursuing this path while utilising such proceeds for loan write-offs or populist giveaways will not do

FEROZE VARUN GANDHI

India's fiscal deficit (for the Centre) in FY22 is expected to be 6.8% of the GDP, or in layman's terms about ₹15.06 lakh crore. When considering the debts of States as well, this jumps to about 12.7% of the GDP (as of FY21). In comparison, the budgetary outlay for MGNREGA in FY22 was ₹73,000 crore, while the Ministry of Defence was allocated ₹4.78 lakh crore for FY22. Every year, the shortfall grows wider.

REUTERS

The reality of privitisation

There is consensus that privatisation is the panacea. Policymakers often cite the private sector's ability to grow faster. This may not always be true – studies indicate that the gap in growth (and service) between public sector undertakings (PSUs) with autonomy and private firms is not significant. One study highlighted that the famed British privatisation initiative of British Airways, British Gas, and the Railways led to no systemic difference in performance (T.T. Ram Mohan, February 2021); even now, private British trains can be significantly delayed by "leaves on the line". Evidence on performance after privatisation is even more mixed in developing countries. Of course, there are examples like VSNL and Hindustan Zinc, but growth post-privatisation is often due to multiple factors (for example, better funding under a private promoter versus a starved government budget, a better business cycle). Sometimes, the difference in a PSU's performance (and ability to generate tax revenue) is simply government apathy.

Privatisation as a revenue source has also offered paltry returns. As a state, we have sought to hock our generational wealth in PSUs for the past two decades, with limited success. The Disinvestment Commission, under the Ministry of Industries, was set up in 1996 to provide inputs on which firms to privatise in over a five-10-year period. However, this Commission was dissolved in 1999. A separate Department of Disinvestment was set up under the Ministry of Finance and later upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry in 2001. It was downgraded back to a department in 2004.

Beyond the institutional set-up, privatisation as a policy has also singularly failed to raise significant funds - actual receipts from disinvestment have always fallen significantly short of targets. For example, in FY11, ₹22,846 crore was raised against a target of ₹40,000 crore; by FY20, ₹50,304 crore was raised against a target of ₹1 lakh crore (PRS India, 2021). In total, between FY11 and FY21, about ₹5 lakh crore was raised (that is, about 33% of just FY22's projected fiscal deficit (PRS India, 2021) - some of this, notably through stake sale to other PSUs. Given social and institutional constraints, India's ability to privatise firms will continue to be slow in the future (for example, BPCL's long-awaited journey). Clearly, this is a lever that is unlikely to raise significant revenue. Perhaps it is time to consider other options.

Going forward, outright privatisation (as opposed to stake sale) may not necessarily make sense. Air India aside, a recently held auction of about 21 oil and gas blocks had only three firms participating, of which two were PSUs; 18 blocks ended up with just a single bid. An additional push to privatise 12 rail route clusters attracted interest in just three routes, with only two bidders (again, one of which was a PSU). Meanwhile, in a market on the edge, with interest rate hikes coming, this may also not be the right time.

There is also the challenge of valuation - for example, about 65% of about 300 national highway projects have been recording significant toll collection growth (>15%, since they have been in operation); any valuations of such assets will need to ensure they capture potential growth in toll revenue, as NHAI's highway expansion bears fruit and the economy recovers. Instead, the Maruti model is instructive - the government had a joint venture with the Suzuki Corporation, but ceded control, despite Suzuki having only 26% shareholding, in return for a push by Suzuki for greater exports from India and manufacture of global models in India. Exits from Maruti were conducted in small tranches, ensuring a better valuation for the government. Empirical evidence highlights that stake sales are considered a preferred route (about 67% of all PSU sales in about 108 countries between 1977 and 2000 were conducted via this route), as it gives time to ensure price discovery, allowing improved performance to raise valuations over time,

Beyond revenue raising, there are serious social consequences with privatisation. PSUs have been significant generators of employment in the past, with multiplier effects - there were about 348 CPSUs in existence in 2018, with a total investment of ₹16.4 trillion (Srivastava, Vinay K., March 2021) and about 10.3 lakh employees in Central Public Sector Enterprises (in 2019). A push for privatisation is a push for mass layoffs, in a period of low job creation.

Greater concentration of public assets in select private hands is also a medium-term concern. In India, about 70% of all profits generated in the corporate sector in FY20 were with just 20 firms (in comparison, the situation in FY93 was about 15%). Across sectors, a whiff of oligopoly is emerging - cigarettes continue to be dominated by a single player (with ~77% market share in FY21), paints has one entity with ~40% in FY21, airports now has a new operator with about six airports plus a 74% stake in Mumbai's international airport, while telecom has just three players left. Such concentration, mixed with privatisation of public assets, is likely to lead to higher usage fees (already being seeing in telecom) and inflation, coupled with a loss of strategic control.

Selective PHU reform

Perhaps, another avenue of selective PSU reform could be considered. In China, for the past few decades, growth has been led by corporatised PSUs, all of them held under a holding company (SASAC), which promotes better governance, appoints leadership and executes mergers and acquisitions. Such PSUs that have scaled up are market leaders. In Singapore, the Ministry of Finance focuses on policymaking, while Temasek (the holding firm) is focused on corporatising and expanding its PSUs (for example, Singtel, PSA, Singapore Power, Singapore Airlines) towards a global scale. A PSU with greater autonomy, with the government retaining control via a holding firm, can also be subject to the right incentives (T.T. Ram Mohan, February 2021). Surely, Indian PSUs could aspire to be as large and efficient as the Chinese ones.

The time has come to take a relook at privatisation. Simply pursuing this path, while utilising such proceeds for loan write-offs or populist giveaways in the election cycle will not do. A hunt for immediate revenue should not overshadow the long-term interest of the ordinary Indian.

Feroze Varun Gandhi is a Member of Parliament, representing the Pilibhit constituency for the BJP

Relief for BJP, headache for SP

The two new fronts in U.P. may split votes and provide some relief for the BJP, which has witnessed a stream of exits

URMILESH

The recent resignations of several prominent Other Backward Classes (OBC) leaders from the Yogi Adityanath Cabinet and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have not only dealt a severe blow to 'Hindutva politics' in Uttar Pradesh but have also understood to have galvanised the Samajwadi Party (SP)-led Opposition alliance. The excitement in the Opposition is not without reason, as the BJP in recent times has never witnessed such large-scale resignations, that too in a State where it has been in power with an overwhelming majority. All those who resigned described 'Hindutva politics' as being against the interests of the Dalits and backward classes. The BJP was put in a defensive position. But the formation of two 'Bahujan fronts' seems to have provided respite to the party. The first front, called Bhagidari Parivartan Morcha, was formed by All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) leader Asaduddin Owaisi, Jan Adhikar Party president Babu Singh Kushwaha, and Bharat Mukti Morcha leader Vaman Meshram. Mr. Kushwaha was expelled from the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 2011 and was also an accused in the National Rural Health Mission scam. The second front, Samajik Parivartan Morcha, was formed by Bhim Army chief Chandrasekhar Azad, MPs Rajkumar Saini and Baburam Pal and others and comprises 35 groups.

Earlier, after his negotiations with Akhilesh Yadav failed, Mr. Azad accused the SP president of insulting him and Dalits by not giving them a respectful number of seats. He then announced that he would contest from Gorakhpur against the Chief Minister. This came as a surprise to the SP as it was already planning to field one of its local leaders against the Chief Minister in Gorakhpur and wanted the support of most of the Opposition parties. It turns out that Mr. Azad did not consult any Opposition party regarding his candidature from Gorakhpur and, meanwhile, also formed a new front.

Political implications

The two new fronts cannot be ignored even if there is no established party involved in them, except the AIMIM. The leaders involved in these fronts have their own caste base and will therefore make a discernible impact. Before discussing their influence, let us first understand a few points about them.

First, it is not a mere coincidence that these fronts were announced only after the resignations of OBC leaders. Second, the leaders of these fronts have justified their actions by referring to the widespread 'nepotism' prevailing in traditional Opposition parties (SP, BSP and Rashtriya Lok Dal) that forced them to look for a 'new path'. Third, the mass base of the leaders of these fronts has never been tested. These parties have not contested all the seats in U.P. earlier. Unlike leaders like Swami Prasad Maurya, who resigned from the BJP due to pressure from his social base, the leaders of these two fronts cannot even claim that their supporters forced them into the decision of forming a separate front. The truth is that most of their supporters wanted them to fight the election by joining larger anti-BJP fronts. When leaders such as Mr. Azad and Mr. Kushwaha tried and failed, they distanced themselves from the larger anti-BJP Opposition alliances with the excuse that they were not given enough tickets.

Mr. Azad contested the Bihar Assembly election in 2020 but this is his debut in U.P. In a way, Mr. Azad is like Mr. Owaisi, who goes anywhere to contest an election irrespective of whether he has any organisation or political base. In Bihar, Mr. Azad joined hands with Pappu Yadav's party. They earned the 'vote katwa' (splitting votes) tag. They contested more than 150 seats together but did not achieve anything. Will Mr. Azad's new front in U.P. just be called 'vote katwa' or will it achieve some political success?

As far as the Owaisi-Kushwaha-Meshram front is concerned, there is speculation already about the political equations of these leaders. Mr. Kushwaha was Minister twice in the Mayawati government, and even went to jail, allegedly for corruption. Cases related to some of these alleged scams are still pending in courts. A few years ago, he left the BSP and joined the BJP. But there was so much dissent about his induction that he had to quit the party. He then wrote to the then BJP president Nitin Gadkari and appealed to him to keep his membership on hold for a while. This shows that he has no ideological disagreement with the BJP. Similarly, Mr. Saini, who has joined hands with Mr. Azad, was a BJP MP from Kurukshetra for many years. Therefore, it is not without solid basis that these two fronts are being considered as a 'political relief' for the BJP and a 'headache' for the SP-led alliance. Whether the voters of U.P. reject these fronts or provide them with some consolation prize remains to be seen.

Urmilesh is a Delhi-based independent journalist and writer, and a former Executive Editor of Rajya Sabha TV. The article was translated from Hindi by Awanish Kumar, British Academy Newton International Fellow, University of Edinburgh

STATE OF PLAY

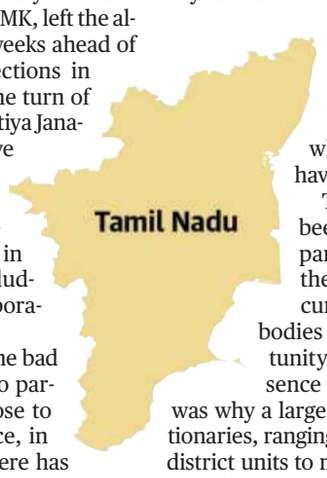
It is advantage DMK and its allies

The DMK-led combine has remained intact while the AIADMK has lost yet another ally

T. RAMAKRISHNAN

Elections make or mar alliances. In recent months, the AIADMK, which was ousted from power in the State in May last year after a 10-year reign, would have realised the value of this saying.

If the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), which fought the Assembly elections together with the AIADMK, left the alliance in September, weeks ahead of rural local bodies elections in nine districts, it was the turn of another ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to leave the coalition in the run-up to the February 19 civic polls, covering 12,838 wards in 649 local bodies, including 21 municipal corporations.



While there was some bad blood between the two parties after the PMK chose to walk out of the alliance, in the case of the BJP, there has been no apparent rancour, even though the development arose as a sequel to the failure in seat-sharing talks. In fact, even when the BJP's floor leader in the Assembly, Nainar Nagenthiran, made a scathing attack against the AIADMK a few weeks ago, the State unit president K. Annamalai immediately sought to make amends with the senior ally. His explanation seemed to have been approved by the AIADMK too, as the party's spokesperson and former Fisheries Minister D. Jayakumar asserted that the failure to reach a mutually acceptable accord on the sharing of seats of the urban local bodies had nothing to do with Mr. Nagenthiran's observation.

The main difference between the two parties, which at times called themselves "natural allies", was over the number of seats to be earmarked for the national party. While the AIADMK did not want to go beyond 10% of the seats, the BJP, which was provided with 9% of the wards in the previous local bodies polls, had demanded 20% in general. The AIADMK would have been prepared to give a greater share of seats in Kanniyakumari district, as the DMK did for the Congress, but it was not ready to accommodate the BJP's demands in the Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts in the western region, one of its traditional bastions. However, what remains unanswered is why the Dravidian major chose to adopt such a tough stand despite not having any ally of considerable strength. One possible explanation is that it is desperate to shake off the tag of being the BJP's 'B team', which its adversaries have attached to it.

The BJP, which has been struggling to expand its footprint in the State, views the current round of local bodies polls as an opportunity to make its presence felt. Perhaps, this was why a large number of its functionaries, ranging from secretaries of district units to members of the core committee, preferred to go it alone even before the seat-sharing talks with the AIADMK broke down. One important reason for this is that the party wants to test its real strength in urban areas, where the elections are going to be held.

The eventual political fallout of the development is not hard for anyone to guess. The DMK-led combine has remained intact and if one is to go only by arithmetic strength, its electoral prospects appear bright. But polls are decided not merely on the basis of arithmetic. Political chemistry, inter-party coordination within a formation, and cohesion in the ranks of the lead party of any alliance are equally important. There are reports of discord among the constituents of the front led by the ruling party with regard to seat-sharing. Also, the DMK faced a controversy recently over the distribution of free Pongal gift hampers through the public distribution system. But with the Opposition camp divided, it is now advantage DMK and its allies.

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DATA POINT

Can the world champions make the cut?

In the nail-biting Under-19 World Cup final on February 5, India secured the trophy for the fifth time by beating England. But for the two matches missed by captain Y.V. Dhull and vice-captain S.K. Rasheed due to Covid-19, the Indian team largely stuck to the same XI in the tournament. The team did not drop a single game in the series. In an interview with Sportstar magazine, Rasheed said that winning the World Cup is memorable, but he continues to chase his dream of playing for senior Team India in Test cricket. What are the chances of these players making it to the senior team after such a dominating display at a young age? Of the 44 players who were part of the playing XI in the four Under-19 World Cup finals won by India, only 14 players went on to represent the senior team. Of them, only six could play at the international level for a long time.

By **Jasmin Nihalani** and **Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

SOURCE: ESPNCRICINFO

How to read the tables | In the tables, ● indicates player not debuting for the Indian team in any format. ● indicates making a debut but not playing for a long period (minimum 10 Tests or 25 ODIs or 30 T20Is). ● indicates players who entered the senior team and were able to make meaningful contributions. ● indicates players who entered the senior team and have potential to play for a long time

Note | In the table, the years are shortened ('02 indicates 2002). Those who represented the senior team, "last match" indicates the last international match. For others, it indicates the last First Class or List A match

Year won WC: 2000

Name	Debut or not?	Year of debut	Debut in test	Debut in ODI	Debut in T20I	Tests played	ODIs played	T20Is played	Last match
AM Dave	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'06
M Kaif	Y	'00	'00	'02	-	13	125	-	'06
NK Patel	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'15
A Ratra	Y	'02	'02	'02	-	6	12	-	'02
RS Ricky	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'08
Manish Sharma	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'06
RS Sodhi	Y	'00	-	'00	-	-	18	-	'02
SJ Srivastava	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'10
MB Tripathi	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'04
Y Venugopal Rao	Y	'05	-	'05	-	-	16	-	'06
Yuvraj Singh	Y	'00	'03	'00	'07	40	304	58	'17

Year won WC: 2008

Name	Debut or not?	Year of debut	Debut in test	Debut in ODI	Debut in T20I	Tests played	ODIs played	T20Is played	Last match
AK Argal	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'15
SP Goswami	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
Iqbal Abdulla	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
RA Jadeja	Y	'09	'12	'09	'09	57	168	55	'21
S Kaul	Y	'18	-	'18	'18	-	3	3	'19
T Kohli	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
V Kohli	Y	'08	'11	'08	'10	99	258	95	'22
MK Pandey	Y	'15	-	'15	'15	-	29	39	'21
PJ Sangwan	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
TM Srivastava	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'20
SS Tiwary	Y	'10	-	'10	-	-	3	-	'10

Year won WC: 2012

Name	Debut or not?	Year of debut	Debut in test	Debut in ODI	Debut in T20I	Tests played	ODIs played	T20Is played	Last match
AD Nath	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
B Aparajith	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
UBT Chand	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'20
P Chopra	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
Harmeet Singh	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'20
K Passi	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'16
SK Patel	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
Ravikant Singh	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'19
Sandeep Sharma	Y	'15	-	-	'15	-	-	2	'15
GH Vihari	Y	'18	'18	-	-	13	-	-	'22
VH Zol	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'19

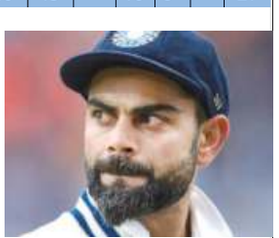
Year won WC: 2018

Name	Debut or not?	Year of debut	Debut in test	Debut in ODI	Debut in T20I	Tests played	ODIs played	T20Is played	Last match
Abhishek Sharma	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
HM Desai	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
Manjot Kalra	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
KL Nagarkoti	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
R Parag	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
IC Porel	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
AS Roy	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
PP Shaw	Y	'18	'18	'20	'21	5	6	1	'21
Shivam Mavi	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'21
Shiva Singh	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	'18
Shubman Gill	Y	'19	'20	'19	-	10	3	-	'21

Yuvraj Singh

Mohammad Kaif

Ravindra Jadeja



Virat Kohli

The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 10, 1972

Dangerous message

From an Editorial

President Nixon's observations, in his annual foreign policy message to the U.S. Congress, on the recent Bangla Desh developments will make no contribution to the restoration of friendly relations between his country and ours. On the other hand they can only raise the doubt if he is really anxious at this time, on the eve of his visit to Peking, to work for the reversal of the downward course Indo-American relations have followed since the Bangla crisis erupted. For his latest observations, despite all the overwhelming evidence against his old assumptions that has come to light in the last few weeks, reveal the same old anti-Indian bias plus a few more veiled insinuations against India. He is prepared for "a serious dialogue with India" in the future of Indo-U.S. relations but such a dialogue, it seems, will depend on India "having an interest in maintaining balanced relationships with all major powers" and "on the posture that South Asia's most powerful country now adopts towards its neighbours on the sub-continent." The insinuation here is clearly that India does not now have such "balanced relationships" and that it is in the Soviet camp and that its bona fide vis-a-vis the neighbouring countries are yet to be proved. If India is to prove these bona fides to Mr. Nixon's satisfaction to restore friendly relations with his Administration it would appear to be an impossible task, judging from his present frame of mind which seems firmly made up against India.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEB. 10, 1922

Flogging in jails

Lahore, Feb. 10: The following press communique has been issued: The attention of the Punjab Government has been drawn to an article headed, "A contradiction" which appeared in the issue of *Young India* dated 26th January 1922. From this article it might be inferred that political prisoners have been flogged in the Punjab jails. The Punjab Government desires to deny categorically the implication that political prisoners have been flogged in jails. The prisoners referred to in communique of December 16th were all of them convicted of crimes which were not of political character and the reason for their punishment was contumacious refusal to work and inciting other prisoners not to work. No political prisoner has been flogged for any offence.

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THE HINDU

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Text & Context

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NEWS IN NUMBERS

Cash seizure in U.P.

6.38 In ₹ crore, the "unaccounted cash" seized by the Noida Police ahead of the elections in poll-bound Gautam Buddh Nagar of Uttar Pradesh. Over one lakh litres of illicit liquor and 177 illegal firearms have also been seized from the western district since the model code of conduct was implemented on January 8, officials said on Wednesday. Challans under CrPC sections 107 and 116 have been issued to 22,287 such people, while 695 have been bound under CrPC section 110(G). PTI

Charges against police

1,439 The number of personnel belonging to the seven central police organisations who are facing criminal charges. About 200 others have also been slapped with corruption charges, Union Minister Nityanand Rai said on Wednesday. He added that among those who were facing criminal charges, 481 belonged to the BSF , 401 belong to the CRPF , 325 belonged to the Sashastra Seema Bal, and 273 were from the Central Industrial Security Force. PTI

Steel sales rise

20 The percentage rise in steel sales reported by Jindal Steel and Power in January 2022. Sales volume increased year-on-year to 6.95 lakh tonnes, as compared to 5.81 lakh tonnes in January 2021, the company said. Marginal improvement in rake availability during January, resulted in export shares rising to 31%, from 28% in December last year. Managing Director V. R. Sharma said that the Government's push in infrastructure and increase in outlay for capital expenditure will support growth for steel, cement and related sectors. PTI

Covid cases decline

17 The percentage by which global COVID-19 case counts have declined in the last week according to WHO. The weekly epidemiological report from the U.N. health agency, released on Tuesday, shows that the Omicron variant is increasingly dominant, making up nearly 97% of all cases tallied by the international virus-tracking platform known as GISAID. Just over 3% were of the Delta variant. The WHO reported more than 19 million new cases of COVID-19 and under 68,000 new deaths during the week from January 31 to February 6. PTI

A delayed dream

16 The number of years American snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis had to wait to get her gold medal at the Winter Olympics after the "shocking silver" she earned in Italy in 2006. Alone in the clear, Jacobellis could have practically crawled to the finish line in 2006. Back then, a 20-year-old Jacobellis, grabbed her board on the second-to-last jump before the finish line. Inexplicably —and some say inexcusably —she fell and settled for a silver. Now 36, she finally earned her gold in China. This was Lindsey's fifth Olympics. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

EXPLAINER

The coups in West Africa and the regional response

What have been the reasons for the rising number of military takeovers in Africa and West Africa in particular?

THE GIST

- Between 2020 and 2022, there already have been 6 successful military coups and 3 failed ones. Burkina Faso became the fourth country to be suspended by the African Union for the breakdown of democracy by such coups after Guinea, Mali and Sudan.
- In Burkina Faso, the military takeover in January 2022 took place after months of unrest due to anti-Government protests demanding the resignation of President Kabore. The unrest in Burkina Faso has been attributed as a fallout of the violent conflict organised by jihadist groups in Mali that began in 2012, that has since engulfed the entire Central Sahel region. President Kabore's regime used the military to quell the jihadist groups in the country, but with several instances of militant abuse and violent massacres happening, the jihadist threats only grew with some civilian support leading to the eventual takeover.
- The Economic Community of West African States announced sanctions on Mali seeking to discourage further coups, but this did not deter the coup in Burkina Faso. Regional and international actors should focus on reforms that could help governance in these countries rather than just military strategies.

SRINIVASAN RAMANI

The story so far: In the 35th African Union Summit featuring the heads of State and governments, the head of the AU's Peace and Security Council, Bankole Adeoye raised concerns over the increasing wave of military coups in the continent, especially in West Africa. This had led to an unprecedented number of member States being suspended from the bloc recently.

What has been the trend with coups in Africa recently?

Just a few weeks prior to the Summit, Burkina Faso became the fourth country to be suspended by the African Union after President Roch Marc Christian Kabore's regime was toppled by soldiers. Earlier, Guinea, Mali and Sudan were also suspended because of similar putsches that had occurred in the respective countries.

This set of recent coups in the continent reversed a falling trend in military coups over the years. A report in the BBC quoted research by Central Florida and Kentucky Universities to point that the number of successful coups fell from 26 in the 1960s to 18 in the 1970s to 22 in the 1980s to 16 in the 1990s to 8 in the 2000s to 8 in the 2010s, but between 2020 and 2022, there have already been 6 successful military coups. The corresponding numbers for failed attempts were 15 in the 1960s, 24 in the 1970s, 17 in the 1980s, 23 in the 1990s, 14 in the 2000s, 9 in the 2010s and 3 so far between 2020 and 2022.

Clearly the AU has been alarmed by the increasing frequency of military coups in the continent and have raised concerns about the rising number of suspensions of countries that have experienced these.

What explains the recent military coups in West Africa?

The reasons for the military coups that occurred recently in two of the three countries, Mali and Burkina Faso are related.

In Burkina Faso in West Africa, the military takeover in late January 2022 took place after months of unrest due to anti-Government protests demanding the resignation of President Kabore. A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) detailed that after these demonstrations took a violent turn in Ouagadougou and Bobo Diolasso, the country's two largest cities, a group of soldiers demanded the replacement of the chief of staff and director of the National Intelligence Agency besides the need for more troops to fight against jihadist groups that had wreaked terror in the region and for relief and care for wounded soldiers.

Within a couple of days, these actions by the soldiers turned into a putsch with their forcing President Kabore to sign a handwritten resignation letter and the formal takeover of power by a new junta called the Patrotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR). These moves were similar to what transpired in Mali where armed forces staged a mutiny and captured power from president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020.

The unrest in Burkina Faso has been attributed as a direct fallout of the violent conflict organised by jihadist groups in Mali that began in 2012 that has since escalated and engulfed the Central Sahel region encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. A UNHCR briefing in January 2022 by its spokesperson mentioned that 2.5 million people had fled their homes following the conflict with 2.1 million of them displaced by late 2021. The total number of internally displaced people in Burkina Faso alone has risen to 1.5 million by the end of 2021. The conflict in Burkina Faso peaked when a series of massacres took place including in Solhan in June 2021 when 160 villagers were killed. The fact that pro-coup crowds gathered in Ouagadougou to support the junta's putsch suggested that there was deep discontent with President Kabore's regime as the army waded in to capture power. Military coups have also not been uncommon in Burkina Faso. The ICG report points out that military regimes have held power in 48 out of 61 years since the country's independence.

President Kabore's regime sought to use the military to quell the jihadist groups in the country that included both local and regional militias, but with several instances of militant abuse and violent massacres happening, the jihadist threats only grew with some civilian support. After a lull in the violence following a ceasefire with two major jihadist groups, the violence returned in a brutal fashion with one outfit, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in particular being responsible for it. With several people affected by the violence and security forces complaining about the lack of adequate Government support, the regime's popularity waned and this soon led to the coup.

The Guinean coup d'état occurred on 5 September 2021 when forces led by military leader Mamady Doumbouya captured the President Alpha Conde after gunfire in the capital city, Conakry and announced the dissolution of the Government and the Constitution. In Guinea's case, Mr. Conde, the country's first democratically elected President had changed the Constitution by referendum to allow him to continue for a third term. This move had precipitated protests in the country which led to a Government crackdown on the protestors as well as an economic crisis. Yet again the military took advantage of a crisis to capture power and announced the dissolution of institutions and the Constitution.

How have regional and international actors reacted to these coups?

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced severe sanctions on Mali on 9 January, 2022, seeking to discourage further coups, but this did not deter the coup in Burkina Faso. Experts believe that the three new military regimes in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, will now seek to coordinate ties among themselves to resist pressure from the ECOWAS and other international actors. The suspensions by the AU were also to put pressure on the juntas to call for a return to democratic institutions and a constitutional order. ECOWAS would be the nodal authority that will strive to engage the new leaders in a dialogue process to seek a faster transition away from military rule.

The French led military intervention in Mali has sought to help the State defeat its jihadist threats but tensions have risen between the post-coup Government and the mission. With a purely military approach to tackle the jihadist threat not paying dividends in terms of halting the conflict, international actors would need to consider a course correction that focuses on reforms that could help governance in these countries in West Africa rather than just military strategies.

Reign of chaos: People gather in support of a coup that ousted President Roch Kabore, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on January 25, 2022. REUTERS

EXPLAINER

Understanding the new Central Media Accreditation Guidelines

How has the earlier policy been amended? What are the provisions under which a journalist's accreditation may be withdrawn?

ANURADHA RAMAN

The story so far: The Government has issued a slew of rules for the media under a new policy on accreditation for journalists. The Central Media Accreditation Guidelines-2022 have outlined the conditions for withdrawal of accreditation if a journalist acts in a manner prejudicial to the country's security, sovereignty and integrity, friendly relations with foreign states, public order or is charged with a serious cognisable offence. Most of the provisions are drawn from Article 19(2) of the Constitution which prescribes the restrictions to free speech guaranteed to every citizen of the country and are understood to serve as guidelines for the press and media.

How is this different from the past?

For one, the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting are more in the nature of proscriptions rather than prescriptions. In laying down the conditions for withdrawal of accreditation, they serve more as censorship rules rather than guidelines. Previous guidelines were more general in nature and did mention that accreditation would be withdrawn if found to be misused. In the new guidelines, there are 10 provisions under which accreditation to a journalist can be withdrawn.

How are they proposed to be implemented?

As per the guidelines, the Government of India shall constitute a committee called the Central Media Accreditation Committee chaired by the Principal DG, Press Information Bureau (PIB), and comprising up to 25 members nominated by the Government to interpret the guidelines for withdrawal of accreditation.

Why are these guidelines a matter of concern?

In 2020, the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked India 142nd among 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index 2020. Though freedom of the press is not explicitly stated in the Constitution, the ambit of freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution has been generally interpreted as having laid down the template for a free press in the country with subsequent pronouncements of courts ensuring it. These guidelines, point out experts, carry the threat of coming in the way of the functioning of a free media. Besides, they carry the risk of delegitimising reports, especially of an investigative nature. Any report critical of the Government could now be seen as prejudicial to the interests of the country and it will be left to the interpretation and discretion of the Central Media Accreditation Committee to read the guidelines and decide what is defamatory while denying accreditation to a journalist.

How do journalists get accredited?

A journalist with a minimum of five years as a full-time working journalist can apply for accreditation to the PIB, a process that is completed after a mandatory security check from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Any journalist working with a newspaper which has a daily circulation of 10,000; news agencies with at least 100 subscribers and digital news platforms with 10 lakh unique visitors can apply.

Accreditation helps in access to government offices and to special events and functions organised by the Government of India. Some Ministries like Home and Defence and Finance allow access only to accredited journalists.

Have there been attempts in the past to regulate the media?

Several attempts have been made by successive governments to keep the media in check by proposing guidelines more in the nature of censorship. As recently as 2018, the PIB, which functions under the I&B Ministry, had proposed a Fake News Guidelines under which accreditation could be cancelled if the journalist was seen as peddling content that was fake. This was seen as a move by the Government to counter other independent media outlets who had called out the Government and the political leadership for putting out fake content. The order was withdrawn under pressure. More recently the Government proposed a series of rules under the IT Act to check digital news content.

State Governments like Kerala and Rajasthan had come out with their own versions of proposed rules which were withdrawn under pressure and criticism. The most infamous move to control the press before the advent of private news channels was by former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi when he proposed the Defamation Bill in 1988. Under pressure from a unified media and several sections of the public, the Bill was withdrawn.

THE GIST

- The Government has issued The Central Media Accreditation Guidelines-2022 which outline the conditions for withdrawal of accreditation if a journalist acts in a manner prejudicial to the country's security.
- The new rules in laying down the conditions for withdrawal of accreditation, serve more as censorship rules rather than guidelines. This is concerning as the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked India 142nd among 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index 2020.
- In 2018, the PIB, had proposed a Fake News Guidelines under which accreditation could be cancelled if the journalist was peddling content that was 'fake'. This was seen as a move to counter independent media outlets who had called out political leadership for putting out fake content.

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No refuge: Migrant workers and their families walking to return home on the Mumbai-Nasik Highway on May 11, 2020. ▪ROY CHOWDHURY A

FROM THE ARCHIVES

No relief for the nowhere people

Policy responses to the migrant crisis reinforce the idea of two Indias

THE GIST

■ The labourers — men, women and children — are the classic nowhere citizens of India. They have no rights and entitlements in the areas in which they work and are also denied entitlements in the villages to which they belong. They have been invisible in policy discourse and there are no firm estimates of their numbers. Data from the National Sample Survey and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) show that these migrant labourers are mainly from rural areas and belong to the poorest socio-economic classes. They form the largest section of child, bonded and trafficked labour.

■ The lockdown has exposed India's labour market which operates through informal employment relations. We know that nearly 81% of wage workers even in non-agricultural sectors do not have any contract with their employers and enjoy no security of tenure. With the Government's sudden lockdown, wages for jobs already carried out remain unpaid. The Government side-stepped its major responsibility of paying compensatory wages to the informal workers during the lockdown. As the migrant workers tried to move to their homes, the Government responded with a strict clampdown on State and inter-district movement.

■ India needs a unified labour market and universal social security system which can ensure security, safety, and dignity to all workers.

RAVI SRIVASTAVA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a statement in the Lok Sabha accused the opposition and the Delhi State government of forcing migrants out of their workplace States and into their hometowns which according to him, increased the spread of the COVID-19 virus in these areas. This has led to strong reactions and bitter counter arguements on social media. In this article dated May 4, 2020, Ravi Srivastava explains how migrant labourers with no social security nor tenured work faced the entire brunt of the sudden nationwide lockdowns.

Jamalo Makdam, 12, died on April 18 walking back from the chilli fields of Telangana to her home in Chhattisgarh. She and a group of other workers decided to return home on foot, as many migrant workers did, after losing their jobs, incomes and even accommodation following the announcement of a nationwide lockdown. Her journey ended in death, possibly due to electrolyte imbalance and exhaustion, said health officials.

In the past month, migrant workers have died, been lathi-charged, herded into shelters with minimum facilities, sprayed with dangerous chemicals, and denied entry into their home villages by the dominant elite. These reports and images have seared our conscience.

No rights and entitlements

The labourers – men, women and children – are the classic nowhere citizens of India. They have no rights and entitlements in the areas in which they work and to whose prosperity they contribute. Being from the poorest and the socially discriminated groups, they are also denied entitlements in the villages to which they belong. Not surprisingly, they have been invisible in policy discourse. There are no firm estimates of their numbers. Estimates prepared by this author and updated from time to time suggest that short-term and circular migrants in the informal wage economy could number 60-65 million. About 40% of these migrants work in the construction sector and 15% in agriculture. The rest are engaged in manufacturing, transport, and other services. With accompanying family members, their numbers would not be less than 100 million. About half these labourers are inter-State workers. We exclude in this estimate longer-term circular migrants who also work in the informal wage economy and as self-employed workers in the urban economy.

Data from the National Sample Survey and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) show that these migrant labourers are mainly from rural areas in poor regions and States, and belong to the poorest socio-economic classes. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes are over-represented among them. They form the largest section of child, bonded and trafficked labour. They predominate in activities that are characterised by three Ds – dirty, dangerous, and difficult – and consistently face a fourth D – discrimination. Nearly 70% of migrants work in urban and peri-urban areas in and around growth centres in States in the north, west, and south of the country. Industry and employers are bemoaning, for the first time, the fact that activities in a number of crucial sectors and industries will not see revival without these workers.

The lockdown imposed by the Government has exposed the deep fault lines in India's labour market which operates in a sea of growing informal employment relations. We know that nearly 81% of wage workers even in non-agricultural sectors do not have any contract with their employers and enjoy no security of tenure. Many do not even know their final employer. The IHDS tells us that half the migrant labourers are hired through contractors. Their condition shows the dismal state of implementation of labour regulations, particularly with respect to inter-State migrants.

With the Government's sudden lockdown decision, wages for jobs already carried out remained unpaid. A large percentage of migrants remained saddled with debt taken as advances from their employers, contractors, or landlords. The Government's announcement of a tepid relief package on March 26 did not address any of the concerns of this section as the frail social security net largely does not cover them. Crucially, the Government side-stepped its major responsibility of paying compensatory wages to the informal workers for the lockdown, putting this onus on employers who are already hit hard by the lockdown.

As the migrant workers tried to move to their homes, the Government responded with a strict State and inter-district lockdown and ordered placing migrant workers in quarantines-cum-shelters, and the detention of workers who remained on the move. In a status report submitted to the Supreme Court on March 31, the Government argued that the movement of these workers to rural areas constituted a serious risk of spread of COVID-19, a fact that has remained unsubstantiated.

By the end of the first week of April, the Government submitted that about 6.3 lakh workers were in shelters run by governments in different parts of the country, while another 4.5 lakh were in shelters run by NGOs and others. Nearly 10 million workers were receiving food assistance through governmental and non-governmental sources. About 5 lakh to 6 lakh workers had reached their source States. As a matter of fact, reports from the ground suggest that a large proportion of intra-State migrants had trudged back home so the total returnees was probably closer to 25 million. At present, with about a million migrant workers in shelters or quarantines, at least 20 million such workers are still stranded at worksites or living in hovels. Most of these, as successive surveys attest, have not been able to avail of any food or cash assistance, and are on the brink of starvation.

Shifting the burden

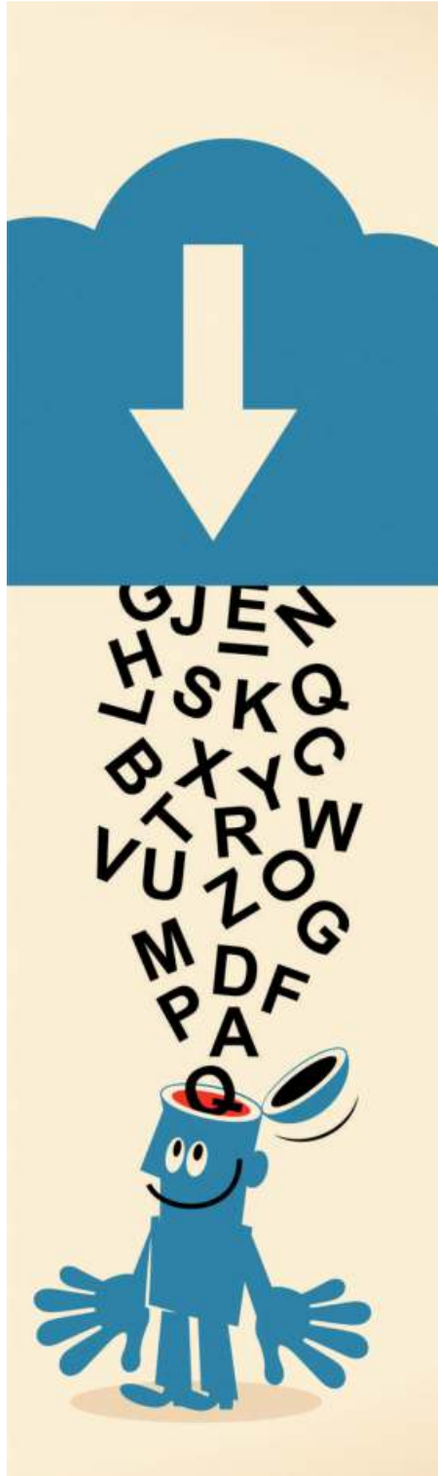
On April 19, the Indian government issued a standard operating protocol on movement of stranded labour, permitting the movement and employment of stranded migrant workers in worksites only within the States in which they were involuntarily detained in shelters. On April 29, the Central government issued another notification finally permitting stranded labourers and populations to travel inter-State to their homes only by buses. On May 1, the Railways were permitted to run special trains for migrants with coordination and costs being borne by the States and, in some cases, fares being paid by the hapless migrants. The receiving States, it must be pointed out, are precisely those which have the weakest fiscal capacity. The ensuing confusion and delay has also increased the plight of the migrants.

It goes without saying that it must be the responsibility of the Centre to coordinate the movement of the stranded populations by trains, air and buses, and to provide adequate resources, not only for transportation, but also for wages and food requirements of all such workers whose loss of jobs and incomes followed the national lockdown.

The fight against the pandemic can only be built on a vision of a society that is inclusive, equitable, and non-discriminatory.

India needs a unified labour market and universal social security system which can ensure security, safety, and dignity to all workers. Pandemics do not recognise artificial walls between living spaces and work spaces, and both have to be able to provide basic amenities and access to health security to all. However, it seems that current policy responses to the crisis and towards the migrants are still embedded in a short-sighted framework that recognises and reinforces the idea of two Indias.

Ravi Srivastava, former Professor of Economics at JNU, is now honorary Director of the Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, Delhi



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning."

"You went to Coimbatore last week, isn't it sir?"

"Yes, I did. I had some work there. You seem to know all about my movements. Incidentally, your use of 'isn't it' in this context is not correct. You tend to say "isn't it' after every statement. But there are some rules regarding this. 'He is going' is a statement. You can say. 'He is going, isn't he?' *Isn't he* is called a question tag. The question has been tagged on to the statement made earlier. A tag, as you know, is a label pinned to something. A question tag is added to a statement. If the statement is in the affirmative, the question tag should be in the negative. Example:

Ram is a fine fellow, isn't he?

If the statement is in the negative, the question tag should be in the affirmative.

Ram is not going there, is he? It is not good, is it?

I will give some more examples. You yourself will be able to see that there is a regular pattern in all these.

They are not coming, are they?; They are coming, aren't they?; Jane was unhappy, wasn't she?; Jane wasn't unhappy, was she?; She can come, can't she?; They have money, haven't they?; Ram came last night, didn't he?; He wants coffee, doesn't he?; He doesn't want coffee, does he?; You shouldn't borrow it, should you?; You should go there, shouldn't you?; It is a nice house, isn't it?; He will go, won't he?; He will not go, will he?; You have received it, haven't you?; He has come, hasn't he?; He drinks a lot, doesn't he?; He drank a lot, didn't he?.

"Question tags are used in conversation. Only the contracted forms like 'Isn't', 'can't', 'won't' are used in tag questions. The question actually is not a question. It seeks your approval. That's all. When you write, you must put a comma before the tag question. By the way 'comma' has two m's. With a single 'm', it will go into a coma".

"Coma reminds me of a friend of mine, sir. He was admitted to hospital last week. He was really dangerous. Now he is better".

"I am happy to hear he is better now. I hope he win be all right soon. By the way, no one is dangerous when he is ill. I suppose what you meant was your friend's condition was dangerous. People can be dangerously ill. They are not dangerous. It is not the individual but the illness that is dangerous. We pray that they come out of danger. I hope you understand. I'll pray for you friend's speedy recovery".

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye".

"Goodbye"

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

THE DAILY QUIZ

The nominations for the 94th Academy Awards ceremony, scheduled to be held on March 27, have been announced. Test yourself on the nominees for this year.

1 This film has secured 12 nominations, including Best Picture, and its director has become the first woman to be nominated for best director twice. Name the film and the director.

2 Thanks to nominations for best picture and original screenplay, which actor-filmmaker has become the first person to be nominated in seven different Oscar categories but is yet to win, however?

3 A new retelling of this romantic drama that won 10 Oscars six decades ago has got seven nominations and its legendary director has toted up nominations 18 and 19. Name the film and the director.

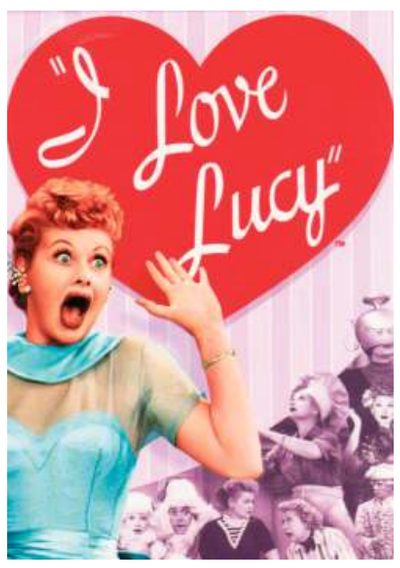
4 Will Smith has been nominated for Best Actor for essaying the role of the parent of which legendary sporting siblings?

5 What does the title CODA, the comedy-drama film that has been nominated for three Oscars, stand for?

6 Name the number by Billie Eilish and Finneas O'Connell that has been shortlisted for Best Original Song Oscar.

7 A couple who have been married since 2010 are in the running for the Best Actor and Actress honours albeit for roles in different films. Name the two.

8 One of the films for 'Best International Feature' is from a country neighbouring India. Name the flick and the country.



◀ Which film that shows the relationship between the leading stars of this classic sitcom has got three nominations? ▪IMDB

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

Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. 'International Lawn Tennis Challenge' was played between USA and Britain (British Isles), 2. Design and crafting of the wonderful trophy, 3. France and Great Britain with 10 triumphs each, 4. South Africa as India gave a walkover because of the former's apartheid policy, 5. Roy Emerson, 6. Nicola Pietrangeli (Italy), 7. Play for two countries. The trio has also donned Hong Kong colours, 8. Spanish footballer Gerard Pique, 9. Australia's Harry Hopman, who won the cup an unmatched 16 times (as player-coach).

Only respondent to get all the answers correct: Sriraam Kalingarayar

Compiled by: V.V. Ramanan

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WORDLY WISE

DOCUMENTARIES SHOULDN'T JUST REFLECT THE WORLD: THEY SHOULD TRY AND EXPLAIN WHY REALITY IS LIKE IT IS. — ADAM CURTIS

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

DIALOGUE IN SECRECY

By upholding ban on Media One, on basis of material in sealed envelope, Kerala HC has gone against Supreme Court verdicts

THE KERALA HIGH Court's verdict dismissing Media One TV's petition challenging the Union government's order barring its transmission, after the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) refused the Malayalam channel security clearance for renewing its licence, is deeply troubling. The court's decision is entirely based on an assessment of the "material" submitted by the government in a sealed envelope.

The reasoning in the 18-page verdict appears to be a dialogue between the state and the judiciary in secrecy even as a petitioner stood before the court alleging violation of fundamental rights. "Once the State is of the stand that the issue involves national security, the court shall not disclose the reasons to the affected party," the verdict states, justifying perusal of the ministry files in a secret envelope. While it is worrying that the government flatly refuses to justify its actions before the court, it is even more disquieting when the judiciary does not ask questions of the executive. The few reasons to justify the denial of security clearance without giving the channel an opportunity to be heard are vague and do not give any indication about the communication between the judiciary and the executive. The court seems to have gone by the "conclusions of the Committee of Officers and other responsible officers of the MHA" to rule that "Information and Broadcasting is a sensitive sector". However, the idea that the judiciary and state can exclude the citizens from democratic spaces, when their rights are at stake, goes against the fundamental precepts of the rule of law.

In a recent string of verdicts, the Supreme Court has insisted that the government follow the raised bar in bringing evidence to the Court while invoking the national security argument. In the 2020 decision in *Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India*, the SC held that no absolute immunity for national security grounds has been carved out. In the 2021 interim order, directing an investigation into the alleged use of Pegasus spyware on citizens, the Supreme Court said that the "mere invocation of national security won't render the Court a mute spectator". Ignoring such precedents, the Kerala High Court has held that "that in a situation of national security, a party cannot insist for strict observance of the principles of natural justice". Indeed, a substantive examination of issues when national security is involved is often beyond judicial competence and is the domain of the executive. But a procedural test, checking whether the action was taken under powers granted by Parliament and whether the state has used its powers proportional to the risk envisaged, is very much within the ambit of the Constitution. Constitutional courts, as the watchful guardians of the fundamental rights, must ask questions of the state, especially in cases of national security.

PLAY BY RULEBOOK

Tamil Nadu governor must not delay assent to anti-NEET bill. Doing so will invite suspicions of overreach

THE TAMIL NADU government is standing its ground on the promise to scrap the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET). Less than a week after the governor returned the bill that frees the state's medical colleges from the compulsion of admitting students through NEET, a special session of the Tamil Nadu assembly has re-adopted the bill — a first for the legislature. That's as strong a signal as the elected government can send to the governor about its intent. In returning the bill, Governor R N Ravi had flagged several concerns, and said it was "against the interests of students, especially (those from) rural and economically poor students of the state". But the Constitution is unambiguous about what the governor must do now — according to Article 200, once the bill is sent to him for the second time, he must give his assent, and send it onwards to the President.

There is much that is questionable about Tamil Nadu's position on breaking away from the NEET. The all-India test was conceived as a way out of longstanding problems with the medical admission system, from multiple entrance examinations to corruption. The fear that a section of Tamil Nadu's students might not perform well can be addressed if the state government invests resources and attention to modernising the curriculum. But while those may be grounds for the governor's reservations, constitutional propriety demands that he must act on the advice of the council of ministers of an elected government. It must be remembered that scrapping the NEET was a part of the election manifesto of the DMK, and that the bill enjoys support from other major parties of the state, including the AIADMK. Seen in this light, the Tamil Nadu government's displeasure at what it considers the governor's uncalled-for critique and his "big brother" attitude is not entirely without basis. Given the long history of governors being used by strong central governments to chip away at the federal compact and the more recent Centre-state tussles over several issues, from the jurisdiction of the BSP to IAS service rules, Ravi's action might invite suspicions of overreach, when he should be acting as a bridge between the state and the Centre.

The future of the NEET exemption bill is, of course, uncertain. It sets up the state government on a path of confrontation with the Centre. The bill needs the President's assent for it to become law. But while those contestations and debates will take their own course, the Tamil Nadu governor must play by the rulebook.

KHABAR LAHARIYA'S STORY

Rural women speaking their mind on camera: This is a compelling story that needs a wider audience

A FILM ABOUT the grassroots news organisation Khabar Lahariya has become the first from India to be nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Documentary Feature category. This alone is worth celebrating, considering the challenges of this filmmaking format, especially in India — few resources, low return on investment and, outside of a handful of international platforms, very little recognition. But an additional reason for celebrating the nomination of *Writing with Fire* is its subject: Directed by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh, the film offers a window into the life and work of the Dalit women who run *Khabar Lahariya*, and the obstacles they overcome — from unhappy husbands and unfriendly crowds to lack of funds and inexperience with technology — as they report on issues that matter the most to the communities they serve.

Twenty years after it was born as a newspaper, first published in Uttar Pradesh's Bundelkhand region, *Khabar Lahariya* continues to challenge popular notions about what journalism in India could and should be and for whom it is meant. The women who work at the organisation— which made a successful digital-first pivot in 2016 — have to wage a constant battle with the prejudices of caste and gender to pursue and bring to light stories of administrative neglect, crimes against women. In doing so, they frequently put their lives on the line — not just for asking tough questions or being out at all hours, often in hostile environments, but also simply for being Dalit women.

At a time when even a section of journalists working under relatively easier and more privileged circumstances have turned away from the stories that matter, it is heartening to know that the women of *Khabar Lahariya* carry on undaunted. Since 2002, they've worked hard to spotlight issues and stories that rarely get attention. That the world should now watch and honour *Khabar Lahariya's* own story is only right.

Not so uniform

Education institutions must not impose homogeneity on students in garb of dress code

PARINITHA SHETTY

I WRITE AS a teacher who for many years has taught students in Mangalore, a sharply polarised region in Karnataka that is seeing bitter clashes over a dress code in educational institutions. My students have come from different religions, castes and nations. They spoke different mother tongues, ate different kinds of food and wore different kinds of clothes and ornaments. Some wore the markers of their married status, some wore the habit of their religious order, some wore the clothes that denoted their geo-cultural location, some wore the symbols of their religion and caste, and all conformed to the protocols of gender. These differences in appearance and beliefs and practices of thinking and speaking and eating and appearance, never ever disturbed our sense of belonging to a classroom community.

In many ways, the classroom of a government educational institution is truly representative of the society within which it is instituted, since it provides democratic access to students from all sections of society. Moreover, it acknowledges that our society is hierarchically organised and that children from marginalised communities need to be given additional support and provided privileged access to the classroom and the social capital of education. The coming together of many social worlds within these classrooms makes it a location of perpetual epistemological disruption. Here, learning takes place not only through the protocols of institutionalised pedagogy but also through the many ways in which we go astray of ourselves, as we dialogue with that stranger who is a classmate, a student, a teacher and who slowly becomes a member of a classroom community that we build together. And how we structure and inhabit this community will inform all our future possibilities of living together as social groups.

This inclusive nature of the classroom space is one of its greatest contributions to the process of learning. It is this accommodation of the variety of social locations from which our students come that has contributed to the civil discussions and debates and conversations through which the process of thinking is initiated. It is these conversations that take place across the lines of gender and caste and religion and nationality that inaugurate the process of critical questioning. Learning, as an inherently disruptive process, always goes astray of the etiquettes of academia. Classroom conversations can reposition the participants in a radically egalitarian practice of speech. Such a conversation demands a difficult translation of social ontologies, a disorientation of knowing, a process of becoming unfamiliar to oneself. It is through such conversations that education becomes a radically transformative process of recognising the common vulnerability of all human beings and the mutual care and support that we owe each other if we have to survive as a species.

> When the uniformity of the classroom is shaped by political considerations and implemented through the authority of political power, then teaching is replaced by indoctrination, and learning is replaced by unthinking parroting of political ideologies. When the classroom is used to catalogue, classify and exclude, it inaugurates a future of insane hate and mindless cruelty. Such classrooms become the laboratories of those who have lost the sanity that is required to sustain human existence through the mutuality of kindness and love.

When the classroom becomes a space where students are disciplined into a narrow uniformity, then learning becomes a means of straitjacketing the body and the mind. When the uniformity of the classroom is shaped by political considerations and implemented through the authority of political power, then teaching is replaced by indoctrination and learning is replaced by unthinking parroting of political ideologies. When education becomes the handmaiden of hate, the creativity and joy that sustain the great variety of life are destroyed. When teachers become the gatekeepers of bigotry and parochial political interests, they forfeit their right to the trust and responsibility that a community places on them to guide and shape its future possibilities.

When the classroom is used to catalogue, classify and exclude, it inaugurates a future of insane hate and mindless cruelty. Such classrooms become the laboratories of those who have lost the sanity that is required to sustain human existence through the mutuality of kindness and love. In such classrooms, students are instrumentalised into votes and reduced to the colour of the shawls they drape across their shoulders or the scarves they wear over their heads. They are taught the mistrust of hate and trained in the violence of anger. Then, educational institutions will shut their gates to students who fail to display the uniformity of the uniformised body. And in the classrooms, teachers will close up the processes of thinking, wondering and questioning. And educational institutions will shut down the processes of learning and teaching and experimenting with the many ways in which we can build an equal, inclusive, compassionate and intelligent society.

Hence, it has become incumbent on us to initiate classroom dialogues and listen to the faltering, almost illegible, voices that speak from the shadowy social margins, that are in a constant struggle against invisibilisation. I have struggled for a friendship with my students that could only be achieved by disrupting the classroom hierarchisation of knowing and learning. I have tried to listen to the polyphonic social rhythms of their voices. I have tried to understand their speech through the grammar of their speech, and not mine. My students have shown me great generosity by bringing their worlds to the classroom. They have listened and spoken and argued with a civility that was disinterested and without rancour. They have constantly pushed me to the precarity of uncertainty.

Together we have maintained the dissonance of knowing and being. We have wrestled with texts that have shaken us and made us forever uncomfortable. We have together unpacked the orders of meaning and the canons of knowledge. And we have done this as companions, as friends, as equals. We have translated the multiple social worlds to which we belong, to each other. We have initiated a process of difficult listening and faltering speech. We have experimented at shaping enabling, egalitarian spatialisations of the classroom. Sometimes it has been an exhilarating process and sometimes a frustrating one. I thank the generations of students who have shared with me this process of learning the order of the world, excavating the genealogy of its making and interrogating the politics of its being. Without your companionship and your speech, this could never have been done. Let us protect this classroom, that we shaped together, from all onslaughts and guard it even as the world which should sustain it seems to be falling apart.

The writer is professor, department of English, Mangalore University

DON'T DIVIDE THE CLASSROOM

Hijab issue in Karnataka cries out for constitutionalism

FIROZ BAKHT AHMED

WHERE WAS THE "hijab issue" just a few months ago? Why has it suddenly erupted? These are important questions that we need to address as it's unfortunate and of great concern that young men and women are being divided along religious lines. A dispute over uniforms has been blown out of proportion by being politicised and communalised. A matter between the administrators of educational institutions and the community should not be turned into a mandir-masjid kind of a wrangle. We have seen enough of them and they have sapped a lot of the nation's energy.

Justice Krishna S Dixit of the Karnataka High Court has rightly emphasised that the court will have to decide the issue early as it is not a happy scene to see students marching on the roads every day. He has underlined the primacy of the Constitution over hot-headed emotions. Voices of sanity and reason must get primacy over those advocating an impassioned approach.

The protesting young women in Karnataka say that wearing "hijab" is their personal choice and key to their religious practice. That matter is also being contested in the court but in an educational institution, it's rule, and not just personal choice, that has to be followed. Interestingly, regarding the dress code, a cleric of Hyderabad once issued a "fatwa" (Islamic decree) that it was un-Islamic on the part of Sania Mirza to play tennis in skirts and she must use a "naqab" and cover her legs. A judge was a pious Muslim at home where she covered her face with a "hijab" but while on duty on the bench, she didn't. There are several examples like her. Many Muslim women are working in hospitals, with the government, as players and pilots. It's not possible to work in a hijab. These Karnataka girls, too, will be our future doctors, justices, teachers, pilots.

> In the Udupi controversy, the girls are being crushed in a grip between the college administration as well as the custodians of Islam who, in the name of secularism and Constitution, are fanning the flames. On the other hand, are ministers like Giriraj Singh, who too have not left a stone unturned by calling the deteriorating law and order situation 'Ghazwa-e-Hind' (capturing of India by Muslims).

In the Udupi controversy, the girls are being crushed between the college administration and the custodians of Islam who, in the name of secularism and Constitution, are fanning the flames. On the other hand, are ministers like Giriraj Singh, who too have not left a stone unturned by calling the deteriorating law and order situation "Ghazwa-e-Hind" (capturing of India by Muslims). Both sides are using these hapless and helpless girls as fodder for their political ambitions.

Each institution has a set of rules and regulations, norms and values. In a school or college, religious identity should not be the defining identity. An important question to ask is: Where are the other girls who are comfortable entering the classroom without the hijab and who wear it once they leave the school? The protesters are few, the silent students are many.

All those drawing and deepening the dividing lines over "hijab," chanting Jai Shri Ram and Allah-u-Akbar as a rallying cry, must know that this country will not be ruled either by "Sharia" or "Sanatan Dharma" but by the Constitution of India as drafted by Bhim Rao Ambedkar. The strain of radicalism among Hindus and Muslims — wearing religion on their sleeves — will cause further schisms in society and expand the influence of those indulging in the politics of religion.

It's high time that the government steps in and calms the waters lest the Opposition put the BJP government in the dock for fanning the Hindu-Muslim divide. As always, that has been a plank for the Opposition and it's time to wake up if this government wants India to make the "Vishwa Guru."

The writer is former chancellor, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad

FEBRUARY 10, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

Snap poll likely in Andhra, Karnataka

SNAP POLLS

THE CONGRESS-I HIGH command is thinking in terms of snap polls for the Andhra Pradesh Assembly. In the normal course, the state is due to go for polls in February next year, along with Karnataka. However, the high command seems to favour early polls in both states along with West Bengal, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Kerala may also be clubbed if the high command feels the Karunakaran ministry will survive. Though the idea of early polls was considered, a decision was not taken by the high command as it was awaiting the decision of the Election Commission on the allegedly inflated voters' list in West Bengal.

KERALA SPEAKER

KERALA ASSEMBLY SPEAKER A C Jose exercised his casting vote seven times to enable the Karunakaran Ministry in surviving its second trial of strength in the assembly on Tuesday. The ruling side and opposition were tied at 70 votes each when the motion of thanks to the governor's address and the opposition's amendments were put to a vote. The Speaker gave his casting vote on each occasion to the government, amidst shouts of "shame" by the opposition and the thumping of desks by members of the ruling parties, before the amendments were rejected. The motion of thanks was finally adopted and the House adjourned to meet again on March 25. The line-up was the same as on the previous occasion when the House rejected the opposition's no-confidence motion against the Government.

DUTT WITH ANTULAY

FORMER MAHARASHTRA CHIEF Minister A R Antulay on Tuesday declared in Bombay that the Pratibha Pratisthan would continue to function "because of its laudable objectives to help creative artistes in all fields". Talking to journalists, Antulay said that two more trustees — Daji Bhatavadekar, a well-known Marathi stage actor and Sunil Dutt, Bombay Sheriff — have been inducted into the trust.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Whether or not the world warms to these Games, even the IOC may one day come to wonder if they were really worth it. And though Beijing wanted the Olympics, and still considers them useful, they do not look like the Olympics that it wanted."

— THE GUARDIAN

Possibilities Down Under

Jaishankar's visit to Australia provides opportunity to strengthen Quad and boost New Delhi's ties with Canberra

AMITABH MATTOO

C R Sasikumar

AS INDIA'S EXTERNAL Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar enters the "old" Quad of the University of Melbourne on Friday morning, he will be greeted with what some may find to be an intriguing jugalbandi of the tabla and the aboriginal wind instrument, the didgeridoo. And even before he begins his conversation with academics on the future of the Indo-Pacific at the University's Australia-India Institute, he will have — in keeping with cultural protocol — acknowledged the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of the land, an overture that signifies contemporary Australia's many parallel realities.

It is this new Australia — coming to terms with its difficult past, almost confident of its future in Asia and yet bound to the Anglo-Saxon world — that offers New Delhi the possibilities of the most enduring partnership in the region; friendship based on the very first principles that mould relationships, a convergence of values and of interests. While the relationship has all but transformed in the last decade and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has been forged, it still requires leadership and political navigation if the vast promise has to translate into a sustainable reality. This ambition must be the centrepiece of Jaishankar's agenda.

But Jaishankar's visit is beyond the bilateral; what draws him for his first visit to Melbourne, in his current role, is the meeting of the Quad Foreign Ministers from Australia, Japan, United States and India, in person after more than two years. As the foreign ministers of this new, still-unblemished alloy arrive in Australia, a region that geographers of the old Empire had once described as the Antipodes — so distant and different as it was to their world — they do so in the realisation that this is the new centre of gravity and gravitas of international politics and the quest for balance and resilience in the face of strategic competition; of economics, markets and supply chains; of the battle against common challenges, including climate change, cyber security and Covid; and of ideas and innovation for a more habitable planet.

Understandably, Melbourne, voted consistently as one of the most liveable cities on the planet, recovering its joie de vivre after the pandemic — with a robust multiculturalism that includes a China Town and a Little India — is the natural setting this week for the critical discussions about these challenges to our planet and to the future of our region and beyond.

Bilateralism and multilateralism have not come easy for India. It is tempting to forget history, even be amnesiac about recent times, in the flood of affection that prevails today between New Delhi and Canberra. But it was just over a decade ago, in February 2010 that a prominent Indian news magazine ran a cover story on "Why the Aussies Hate Us" as attacks on Indian students in Melbourne led to a nadir in bilateral relations already at a low after Canberra's ferocious response to India's nuclear tests in 1998.

Today, however, it is difficult to find a single significant issue on which India and Australia have positions dramatically different from each other, and this convergence transcends the partisan divide in Canberra.

The Indian diaspora is finally coming of age in Australia; the population of Indian-born people has doubled in the last decade, and for the last five years, India remains the top source of skilled migration. The tourist and student traffic from India, which had been impacted by the sealing of Australia's borders because of Covid, should revive after the full opening of borders later this month.

The one bridge that is still to be built is of a robust bilateral economic relationship. Corporate Australia still finds it difficult to do business with India and the "champions" for the business relationship (identified by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) need to really position themselves in the vanguard of the relationship.

However, niggardly bureaucrats from both sides have prevented an even "early harvest" minimal free trade agreement (termed in bureaucratese as CECA — Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement) from being signed despite political will and many deadlines. This agreement must be concluded at the earliest.

The bilateralism merges seamlessly into the multilateral agenda for the Quad, which formally or on the sidelines, will spend much of its time devoted to Beijing, its belligerence, its revisionism and its revanchism across the region. India and Australia have both been victims of the persistent wolf-warrior diplomacy of Xi Jinping's China.

The concern about China has been aggravated by the increased levels of economic dependence on China. Recall that India, Australia and Japan had agreed to reduce their dependence on China and diverse supply chains through Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI).

> But Jaishankar's visit is beyond the bilateral; what draws him for his first visit to Melbourne, in his current role, is the meeting of the Quad Foreign Ministers from Australia, Japan, United States and India, in person after more than two years. As the foreign ministers of this new, still-unblemished alloy arrive in Australia, a region that geographers of the old Empire had once described as the Antipodes — so distant and different as it was to their world — they do so in the realisation that this is the new centre of gravity and gravitas of international politics and the quest for balance and resilience in the face of strategic competition; of economics, markets and supply chains; of the battle against common challenges, including climate change, cyber security and Covid; and of ideas and innovation for a more habitable planet.

The three countries had met in September 2021 to set into place mechanisms for trade diversification, to reduce their dependence on Chinese markets for medical supplies and other finished goods during the pandemic. While the jury is still out on the long-term success of SCRI, prima facie the dependence on China has not reduced in any significant manner even while the overall trade deficit has increased.

While the agenda of the Quad is broad, the challenge is to remain focussed on the Indo-Pacific, its stability, and not be distracted, for instance, by the shenanigans of Vladimir Putin's Russia in Ukraine or prematurely anticipate a military alliance being forged because of the flirtations of Xi and Putin, two of the most unlikely candidates for a serious relationship or even a tempestuous affair.

Regions are markers of geography but also constructions of a cartographic imagination. You imagine your neighbourhood as much as by where you are positioned, as by where you want to be. Your geographical compass, in sum, reflects your threats and your opportunities, your ambitions and your vulnerabilities — a distinct weltanschauung. On his first visit to Australia as India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, will have the opportunity to put a real imprimatur on two relationships that he has helped to craft: The Quad and bilateral ties with the government in Canberra. What is now vital is to demonstrate that these partnerships can truly deliver on transforming the reality on the ground by giving the Quad real substance and the Indo-Pacific a fighting chance at stability despite now predictable Chinese subversiveness.

The writer is Professor at JNU and University of Melbourne and former Founder-Director of the Australia India Institute

Ambitious, yet measured

Budget will spur growth, while taking care of equity aspects and remaining well within the available fiscal space

RAJIV KUMAR

THE UNION budget for 2022-23 is a landmark budget. It lays the foundation for taking the country towards a technologically frontline economy with world-class infrastructure that is seamlessly integrated and connects the farthest corners of the country with a multimodal logistics network. This is its unifying framework as the government attempts to lift the economy to a higher growth trajectory of 8-8.5 per cent in the coming decades.

There is unanimity across all shades of economic opinion that the current policy imperative is to generate employment at a massive scale. This must translate to the objective of fostering a higher growth rate that is shared across all geographic regions and by all income classes. The budget's underlying philosophical premise is that the higher growth will be triggered only by an upswing of private investment, especially in employment-intensive areas. The government's role is a supportive one, to facilitate such private investment growth through world-class infrastructure, green energy and adequate supply of required skills. The budget has also attempted to catalyse private investment by a massive increase in public capital expenditure. Moreover, states have also been encouraged to allocate greater resources to infrastructure development by making Rs 1 lakh crore available in interest-free 50-year loans to those that undertake such outlays.

This large dose of public capital expenditure is expected to "crowd in" private investment, thereby setting up a virtuous cycle of investment-enhanced employment, incomes and consumption leading once again to another bout of private investment as capacities are fully utilised. Let me add that better quality and expansion of infrastructure, including access to energy, ensures that the benefits of rapid growth percolate faster to lower-income segments. It reduces inequities and improves opportunities. Plus, the employment intensity of the infrastructure and construction sectors is on average five times that of other sectors. So, such public capex triggers private investment, helps generate employment and spread the benefits of growth over a wider set of beneficiaries.

This growth orientation of the budget was essential to pull the economy decisively out of the shadows of the pandemic-induced shock. In pursuit of this higher growth objective, the finance minister has not hesitated to let the fiscal deficit rise marginally to 6.9 per cent of the GDP in 2021-22 and keep it at 6.4 per cent in 2022-23. The fiscal hawks should note that as growth takes hold and is sustained above 8 per cent, all ratios that are relevant to the rating agencies will improve and will pose no risk of a credit ratings downgrade. Those who, sometimes mistakenly, simplistically correlate fiscal deficit with higher inflationary pressures would do well to recognise that the present inflation, still within RBI's tolerance range, is not demand-driven. It is a result of supply-side bottlenecks and constraints. As these constraints are addressed by improvements in logistics and rebuilding of supply chains, inflationary pressures will soften. Therefore, the budget's laser-like focus on growth and as a corollary on employment generation is just what was required.

The budget, however, is not single-mindedly growth-oriented. It does pay sufficient attention to improving the lives of those at the bottom of the pyramid and the MSMEs. By allocating Rs 60,000 crore for the Jal Jeevan Mission it will ensure that another 3.8 crore households will receive tap water to add to the 5.5 crore who have already been benefited. With Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, this will transform the lives of crores of citizens who received scant attention during previous regimes. The affordable housing programmes will further improve ease of living. It has several other allocations that will contribute to improving lives. These include an increase of 12 per cent in the education sector budget, which has received more than Rs 1 lakh crore for the first time. People in the arid and relatively poor Bundelkhand region, spread across UP and MP, will see a glimmer of hope of sustained growth as the Ken-Betwa link finally takes off. Five more such river links have been identified and will hopefully spur interstate cooperation to bring them to fruition.

For MSMEs in the contact-intensive hospitality sector, the budget has earmarked Rs 50,000 crore of the emergency credit link guarantee scheme. The scheme's allocation has been raised to Rs 5 lakh crore and the period extended to March 2023. These collateral-free funds will greatly help MSMEs access cheap credit. The sector will also receive an additional boost with the revamping of the CGTMSE scheme, which will ensure additional credit of Rs 2 lakh crore for micro and small enterprises. These measures will broad-base the growth impulse and ensure that employment generation activity is spread across the country.

The budget takes bold steps to usher in an era of chemical-free, ecologically-friendly natural farming in the country. A start will be made by encouraging natural farming on a five kilometre-wide corridor along the Ganges. This will generate income and employment along its entire course while sustaining the environment.

It is worth pointing out that the budget has once again adopted a conservative approach towards resource mobilisation possibilities by keeping tax buoyancy to just about one. This is normally higher especially during the upswing of an investment cycle. Such conservatism gives us the fiscal space to respond effectively to any emergency which may have to be faced in these uncertain times. It is always better to have some firepower in store rather than be strapped for resources. The budget does well to spur growth while taking care of equity aspects and remaining well within the available fiscal space.

The writer is Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog. Views are personal

The litigation labyrinth

Archaic laws, cases that drag on, unclear verdicts bedevil legal system

BIBEK DEBROY

THIS COLUMN is about three cases from January 2022.

The Supreme Court (SC) decided a case in January 2022 and the judgment made it to the headlines. If a Hindu man dies intestate (without a will), the daughter can inherit her father's self-acquired property. Gurunatha Gounder (I) had two sons, Marappa Gounder and Ramaswamy Gounder. Ramaswamy Gounder died before his elder brother, Marappa, who also died a long time ago, in 1949. A minor point was raised about whether Marappa Gounder died in 1949, or in 1957.

Why is that timeline important? Because the Hindu Succession Act was passed in 1956 and it governs intestate succession among Hindus. This bit, about the year of Marappa's death, was examined by a trial court (judgment of 1994) and the Madras High Court (judgment of 2009) and both courts decided Marappa died in 1949, not 1957. The SC saw no reason to question that established fact. Nor was another fact questioned: In 1938, Marappa bought the property through his own resources. It wasn't joint family property. He could have dealt with it as he chose, had he left a will. Unfortunately, he died intestate. Marappa Gounder had only one daughter, Kupayee Ammal, and no sons. She died in 1967 and left no children. Ramaswamy Gounder had one son and four daughters. The son was Gurunatha Gounder (II). The daughters were Thangammal (dead now), Ramayeeammal (dead now), Elayammal and Nallammal. Thangammal, dead now, was the original plaintiff, who applied for partition.

When Marappa Gounder died, who should inherit his property? Should it be Kupayee Ammal, the only daughter? Or, since she was a woman, should it be Ramaswamy Gounder's son, Gurunatha Gounder (II)? When Kupayee Ammal died, who should inherit the property? Should it be Gurunatha Gounder (II) and his heirs, or should his four sisters also have a share?

The SC decided: "Applying the above settled legal proposition to the facts of the case at hands, since the succession of the suit properties opened in 1967 upon the death of Kupayee Ammal, the 1956 Act shall apply and thereby Ramasamy Gounder's daughters being Class-I heirs of their father too shall also be heirs and entitled to 1/5th share in each of the suit properties." Incidentally, Gurunatha Gounder (II) is also dead. Most of the original parties are dead, including not just the one who first asked for the partition, but the original appellant.

Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav celebrates 75 years of India's Independence and we are setting out a template for India in 2047. Does it seem right that an issue of inheritance that should have been settled in 1949, or in 1967, is being settled in 2022? Imagine the mess in enforcing what the SC has decided. Lawsuits of fathers (or mothers) devolve on sons and daughters, up to the third or fourth generation.

Part of the mess is because of the complicated nature of inheritance and succession laws, even more so if the individual dies intestate. There are constitutional issues, one part of the Constitution vis-à-vis another. Despite the issue being controversial, we can't possibly deny we don't have a framework for personal laws suitable for a 21st century India. Add to that long delays in settling disputes, overload in the admission of cases and even the language of judgments.

Consider another recent case from Mumbai, the one where the metropolitan magistrate acquitted Shilpa Shetty of obscenity and indecency charges. In 2007, at a promotional event, Richard Gere kissed her and FIRs were filed in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Those FIRs were primarily under the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act and Sections 292, 293 and 294 of IPC (Indian Penal Code). I think anyone who reads those statutes and sections should agree, (a) those FIRs shouldn't have been lodged; (b) even if there was an FIR, the case shouldn't have been admitted in court; (c) it shouldn't have taken 15 years to decide. Police and courts should have better things to do. Shouldn't we be more discriminating about what cases are admitted in courts?

On language and plain English, I am repeating myself. (I have written about it in the past.) I am repeating myself because such incidents recur, especially in Himachal Pradesh, though Justice Sureshwar Thakur has now moved elsewhere, to the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

In January 2022, two judges of the SC couldn't understand a judgment authored by Thakur in 2017 and had to ask whether it was written in Latin. January 2022 wasn't the first time. (He was incomprehensible in the past too.) There were similar examples for the Himachal Pradesh High Court in April 2017, December 2018 and March 2021.

In most organisations, people learn from past mistakes. But there is the need to be careful about the Contempt of Courts Act of 1971. When we hear "contempt of court", we tend to think of civil contempt, where a court's judgment or direction is not complied with. But that 1971 statute also has provisions on criminal contempt. Any act that "scandalises or tends to scandalise, or lowers or tends to lower the authority of, any court" is criminal contempt. "Scandalising" is neither contempt by interference, nor contempt by disobedience. We inherited this expression from Britain. In 2013, following a Law Commission Report (2012), the UK's Crime and Courts Act, said, "Scandalising the judiciary (also referred to as scandalising the court or scandalising judges) is abolished as a form of contempt of court under the common law of England and Wales."

The writer is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL GAME

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Motion of attack' (IE, February 9). The contemporary Indian political scenario is governed by realpolitik, unlike real, issued-based politics that marked parliamentary debates during Jawaharlal Nehru's era. As noticed in Rahul Gandhi's observations on the President's address and the prime minister's reply, confrontation and one-upmanship are employed, in which the key issues get blurred. Opinions are treated as facts, facts are treated as unproven allegations and arguments have displaced logic and understanding. Content-wise, both Gandhi and Modi excelled in using rhetoric, selective data and misplaced self-assertions. What made the difference was in presentation skills. As long as this gap of articulation will persist between the PM and the opposition, the PM will win.

Y G Chouksey, *Pune*

POOR ARGUMENT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Controlling women's bodies' (IE, February 9). The people who put forth the argument that criminalisation of marital rape may result in false accusations have failed to understand one of the basic principles of our criminal justice system — 1,000 culprits may escape but one innocent person should not be punished. Another flaw in the argument is the assumption about "false accusations". They are a phenomenon that can occur in all kinds of crime. Should we de-criminalise fraud, theft etc, for the fear of false cases? All the actions that are morally incorrect should certainly be made legally punishable. Though categorised under the "offences affecting the human body", rape not only breaches the dignity of a woman but also soils the social fabric of our community.

Aerika Singh, *Chandigarh*

REGULATION NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article 'Undermining polls' (IE, February 9). The influence of the outcome of various opinion polls on the electoral process has been a subject of popular debate. The credibility of the procedure employed by the surveying organisations and the role of the commissioning media house in shaping the outcome of the opinion polls needs to be regulated. In the absence of necessary statutes to regulate the opinion polls, the ECI can very well step into this legal vacuum left unattended.

Sudip Kumar Dey, *Barasat*

IDEAS ONLINE

ONLY IN THE EXPRESS

● LATA MANGESHKAR, HEROINE OFF-SCREEN: AAKSHI MAGAZINE

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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

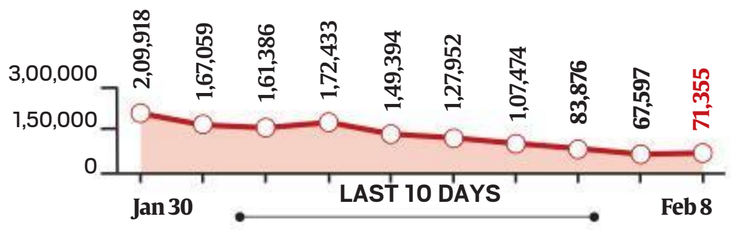
DASHBOARD, AS ON FEB 9

709 DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN

New cases	Active cases	Deaths
71,355	8,92,818	1,217

Weekly CFR: 0.33% | Overall CFR: 1.26% | Total deaths: 5,05,279

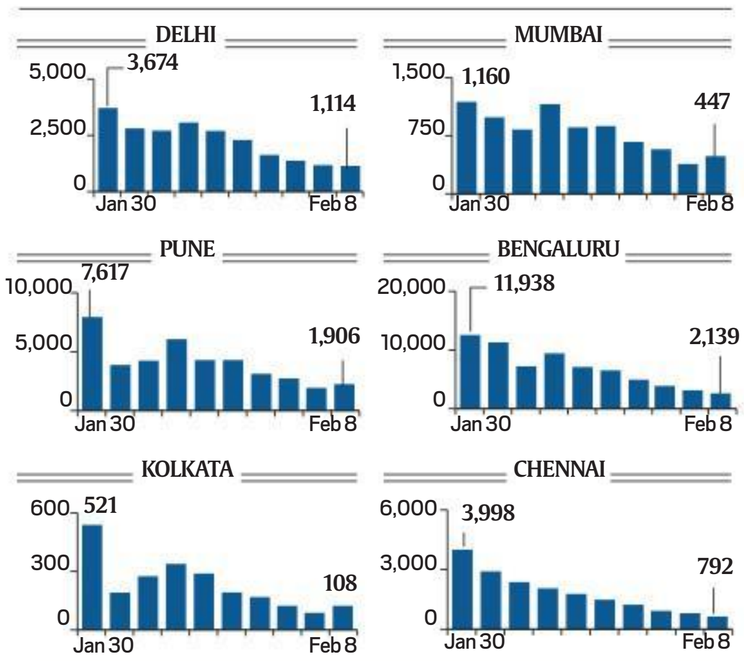
NEW CASES, DAILY



SURGE IN THE STATES

State	ON FEBRUARY 7			Weekly positivity
	New cases	Active cases	Deaths	
Kerala	29471	2,84,437	824	33.92%
Maharashtra	6107	96069	62	8.19%
Tamil Nadu	4519	90137	37	6.77%
Karnataka	4452	72448	51	9.26%
Rajasthan	3411	37278	16	11.95%

CASES IN THE CITIES, LAST 10 DAYS

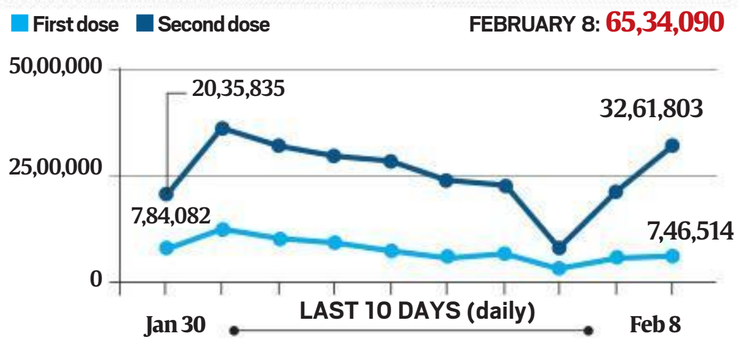


TOTAL TESTS 74,46,84,750

TESTS ON FEB 8	WEEKLY POSITIVITY	OVERALL POSITIVITY
17,76,629	6.37%	5.70%

INDIA TOTAL DOSES 170,87,06,705

(Adults 1st dose: 90,16,70,652; 2nd: 73,16,05,796; 15-18 age group 1st dose: 5,04,94,313; 2nd: 92,19,707; precautionary: 1,57,16,237)



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SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Unemployment report card

Government has said more than 25,000 died by suicide due to unemployment or debt during 2018-20. A look at the state of employment in poll-bound states, and trends among youth, the educated, and women.

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 9

ON WEDNESDAY, during the debate on Budget 2022-23, the government informed Rajya Sabha that more than 25,000 Indians died by suicide due to either unemployment or indebtedness between 2018 and 2020. According to the data, suicides among the unemployed have been increasing and touched a high (3,548) in 2020. The growing stress due to unemployment is in line with the persistently high levels of unemployment — acknowledged even by the government's own annual surveys, known as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).

However, unemployment is not evenly distributed across the population. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) show that unemployment in India:

- is highest among the youth;
- rises with educational attainment; and
- is higher among women.

So where do the poll-bound states stand on these metrics?

Instead of looking at just the unemployment rate (number of unemployed expressed as a percentage of the labour force), which fails to take into account the shifts in labour force participation rate (number of people demanding work expressed as a percentage of the total working-age population), this analysis will look at the employment rate in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. In other words, the tables detail the total population belonging to the concerned category and the total number among those who have a job. The ratio is calculated as the employment rate (i.e. total employed expressed as a percentage of the total population in that category) to help us compare the state with each other as well as the national average.

The data have been compiled for three time periods:

- September-December 2016 (as it provides the picture just before the start of the Assembly term
- Sept-Dec 2019 (as it provides a comparable picture before the Covid pandemic)
- Sept-Dec 2021 (as it is the latest available data and provides a clear 5 years of trend)

Of the five states going to polls, CMIE has not compiled data for Manipur.

UTTAR PRADESH: On all three counts — employment levels among the youth, among the educated and among women — Uttar Pradesh is not only far behind the national average but has also seen a sharp decline over the past five years.

For instance, in December 2016, 15.39 million youth had a job. Five years later, even though the total youth population had swelled by 9 million (or 90 lakh), the total employed had shrunk by over 3 million (or 30 lakh).

This should put in perspective the claims of job creation by the ruling government. It also shows that UP's youth have been suffering the worst fate because the state failed to create new jobs.

The employment rate among those educated up to the level of graduation or higher moved up marginally between 2016 and 2019, but has fallen sharply since then.

As far as women are concerned, UP has always been behind. In the last five years, this situation has become even worse. While the population of working-age women went up by 12 million, the number of women with a job halved from the already paltry number of December 2016. Less than 2% of all women belonging to the working-age population (15 years and above) have a job.

PUNJAB: Youth employment rates in Punjab are much better than the national average but the fact remains that they have been coming down over the past five years. While the total youth population has gone up by 10 million (or 1 crore), the number with jobs has come down by 5 million.

Similarly, the employment rates both among graduates (and above), as well as women, have fallen sharply. Much like UP, the employment rate among women in Punjab was also quite low five years ago, but it has fallen below even UP's level.

GOA: Past analysis of RBI data has shown that Goa is one state where per capita incomes have contracted (instead of growing) over the past five years. As such, it is not a surprise to find a rather precipitous decline in the youth employment rate.

In December 2016, the youth population was 4.05 lakh. Of these, 1.71 lakh had a job. But over the last five years, even though the youth population has shrunk by a lakh, the number of young people with a job has shrunk to just 30,000. In percentage terms, the fall in employment rate — from 42% to 10% — is the steepest in the four states considered here.

The situation is much better if one looks at graduates and those with a higher education. But the employment rate in 2021 (49%) is far lower than what it was in 2016 (62%) and is now below the national average.

The proportion of working-age women with jobs, too, has plummeted in Goa — from 27% to 3%.

UTTARAKHAND: This is yet another state where the youth employment rate has taken a massive hit. The employment rate among youth, which was already quite low (22%), has gone down to one-fourth (just 5%) over the past five years.

However, the employment rate among the highly educated has increased — from 46% to 50% — and, in this regard, Uttarakhand is an outlier.

But employment for women again follows the broader trend of a collapse — from 8% to 2%.

Why does youth unemployment matter?

In the recently released Global Risks Report, the World Economic Forum pointed out "Widespread youth disillusionment" as one of the main risks for India.

By "widespread youth disillusionment", WEF refers to " youth disengagement, lack of confidence and/or loss of trust of existing economic, political and social structures at a global scale, negatively impacting social stability, individual well-being and economic productivity."

Scenes of young people demanding jobs in UP, the most populous state in India, are a pointer that unemployment may well be a key deciding factor for many voters, especially the young, the educated, and women.

UTTAR PRADESH (SEPT-DEC EACH GIVEN YEAR)

TABLE 1
AMONG THE YOUTH (AGE 15-29)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp rate (%)
2016	62.07	15.39	24.79
2019	66.22	13.57	20.49
2021	70.99	12.17	17.14
India 2021	375.31	73.11	19.48

TABLE 2
AMONG THE EDUCATED (GRADUATE+)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp rate (%)
2016	18.97	9.30	49.02
2019	19.83	9.92	50.03
2021	18.09	7.91	43.73
2021	99.95	49.31	49.33

TABLE 3
AMONG WOMEN (AGE 15+)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp rate (%)
2016	68.91	2.65	3.85
2019	77.37	2.15	2.78
2021	80.47	1.51	1.88
India 2021	502.55	41.15	8.19

PUNJAB (SEPT-DEC EACH GIVEN YEAR)

TABLE 4
AMONG THE YOUTH (AGE 15-29)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp rate (%)
2016	76.67	25.02	32.63
2019	81.96	23.6	28.79
2021	86.99	20.08	23.08

TABLE 5
AMONG THE EDUCATED (GRADUATE+)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp Rate (%)
2016	30.20	14.5	48.01
2019	33.10	14.60	44.11
2021	31.94	13.63	42.67

TABLE 6
AMONG WOMEN (AGE 15+)

	Total population (mn)	Total employed (mn)	Emp rate (%)
2016	10.66	0.59	5.53
2019	11.13	0.34	3.05
2021	11.36	0.13	1.14

Source: Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt Ltd & Express Research

Geomagnetic storm that killed Starlink sats

ANJALI MARAR
PUNE, FEBRUARY 9

ELON MUSK'S Starlink has lost dozens of satellites that were caught in a geomagnetic storm a day after they were launched on February 3. Up to 40 of the 49 satellites were impacted, Starlink said, causing them to fall from orbit before they could be commissioned.

"(Rocket) Falcon 9's second stage deployed the satellites into their intended orbit, with a perigee of approximately 210 km above Earth, and each satellite achieved controlled flight. Unfortunately, the satellites deployed on Thursday (February 3) were significantly impacted by a geomagnetic storm on February 4," Starlink said in a statement on Tuesday.

The satellites were designed to burn up on reentry into the Earth's atmosphere, and did not create debris in space. However, the loss of 40 satellites — most of a launch batch — in a single solar event has been described as "unheard of" and "huge".

Solar storms/flares

Solar storms are magnetic plasma ejected at great speed from the solar surface. They occur during the release of magnetic energy associated with sunspots ('dark' regions on the Sun that are cooler than the surrounding photosphere), and can last for a few minutes or hours. The solar storm that deorbited the satellites occurred on February 1 and 2, and its powerful trails were observed on February 3.

"The emerging data suggest that the passing of the latter part of the storm, with its high density core, possessed speeds higher than what was recorded during the storm's arrival — something we did not expect," said physicist Prof Dibyendu Nandi, head of the Centre of Excellence in Space Sciences India (CESSI) at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Kolkata.

The storm was unusual, unexpectedly massive, and of a kind not seen in the recent past, Prof Nandi said.

Effect on Earth

Not all solar flares reach Earth, but solar flares/storms, solar energetic particles (SEPs), high-speed solar winds, and coronal mass ejections (CMEs) that come close can impact space weather in near-Earth space and the upper atmosphere.

Solar storms can hit operations of space-dependent services like global positioning systems (GPS), radio, and satellite communications. Geomagnetic storms interfere with high-frequency radio communications and GPS navigation systems. Aircraft flights, power grids, and space exploration programmes are vulnerable.

CMEs, with ejectiles loaded with matter travelling at millions of miles an hour, can potentially create disturbances in the magnetosphere, the protective shield surrounding the Earth. Astronauts on spacewalks face health risks from possible exposure to solar radiation outside the Earth's protective atmosphere.

Predicting solar storms

Solar physicists and other scientists use computer models to predict solar storms and solar activities in general. The February 1-2 phenomenon that knocked out Starlink's satellites was predicted on January 29.

"Current models are capable of predicting a storm's time of arrival and its speed. But the storm's structure or orientation still cannot be predicted," Prof Nandi said.

Certain orientations of the magnetic field can produce a more intense response from the magnetosphere, and trigger more intense magnetic storms.

With the increasing global dependence on satellites for almost every activity, there is a need for better space weather forecasts and more effective ways to protect satellites.

Governor's powers, friction with states, and why this happens often

DEEPTIMAN TIWARY
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 9

LAST WEEK, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee blocked Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar on Twitter. She said she was "forced" to do so because of his "unethical and unconstitutional" statements and accused him of treating government officials like "his servants". Dhankhar responded with a series of tweets on the "essence and spirit of democracy" and saying the CM's move was "against constitutional norms".

Days earlier, the Tamil Nadu government had taken exception to Governor R N Ravi's Republic Day speech articulating the benefits of NEET, the medical entrance exam. Tamil Nadu has passed a Bill to exempt the state from NEET; Ravi has sent it back to the state.

These are two of many examples of bitterness between states and Governors.

What is the law on Governor-state relations?

Although envisaged as an apolitical head who must act on the advice of the council of ministers, the Governor enjoys certain powers granted under the Constitution, such as giving or withholding assent to a Bill passed by the state legislature, or determining the time needed for a party to prove its majority, or which party must be called first do so, generally after a hung verdict in an election.

There are, however, no provisions laid down for the manner in which the Governor and the state must engage publicly when there is a difference of opinion. The management of differences has traditionally been guided by respect for each other's boundaries.

What have been the friction points?

In recent years, these have been largely about the selection of the party to form a government, deadline for proving majority, sitting on Bills, and passing negative remarks on the state administration.

In November 2018, then J&K Governor Satyapal Malik dissolved the Assembly amid indications that various parties were coming together to form the government. This paved the way for the Centre to later bifurcate state into two Union territories, by considering the Governor as the government.

In November 2019, after a hung verdict in Maharashtra, Governor Bhagat Singh Koshiyari quietly invited BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis and administered him oath as CM. This government lasted just 80 hours. Six months later, Koshiyari refused to nominate CM Uddhav Thackeray to the Legislative Council, leading Thackeray to meet PM Narendra Modi to resolve the issue.

In West Bengal, Dhankhar has often commented on law and order and political violence. Ravi, in his previous stint as Nagaland Governor, had criticised affairs of the state and allegedly interfered in administration.

In December 2020, Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan turned down a request to summon a special sitting of the Assembly to debate the three central farm laws.

Following the Karnataka polls in 2018, Governor Vajubhai Vala invited the BJP to form the government and gave B S Yeddyurappa 15 days to prove majority. Challenged by Congress and JDS in the Supreme Court, it was reduced to three days.

Is such friction recent?

Allegations of the Centre using the Governor's position to destabilise state governments have been made since the 1950s. In 1959, Kerala's E M S Namboodiripad government was dismissed based on a report by the Governor. Several state governments have been dismissed since then, including 63 through President's Rule orders issued by Governors between 1971 and 1990. These have include the Birender Singh government in Haryana (1967); Virendra Patil government in Karnataka (1971); M Karunanidhi government in Tamil Nadu (1976); B S Shekhawat government in Rajasthan and SAD government in Punjab (1980); Janata Party governments in UP, Odisha, Gujarat and Bihar (1980); N T Rama Rao government in Andhra in (1984); and Kalyan Singh governments in UP (1992, 1998). These became less frequent during the coalition era at the Centre and the emergence of strong regional parties.

Why does this happen?

"Because Governors have become political appointees," said NALSAR chancellor and constitutional expert Faizan Mustafa. "The Constituent Assembly envisaged governor to be apolitical. But politicians become Governors and then resign to fight elections."

Constitutional expert Alok Prasanna of Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy said: "The CM is answerable to the people. But the Governor is answerable to no one except the Centre. You can sugercoat it with ideas of constitutional morality and values, but the truth is there is a fundamental defect in the Constitution."

There is no provision for impeaching the Governor, who is appointed by the President on the Centre's advice. While the Governor has 5-year a tenure, he can remain in office only until the pleasure of the President.

In 2001, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, headed by retired CJI M N Venkachaliah and set up by the Atal Behari Vajpayee, said, "... because the Governor owes his appointment and his continuation in the office to the Union Council of Ministers, in matters where the Central Government and the State Government do not see eye to eye, there is the apprehension that he is likely to act in accordance with the instructions, if any, received from the Union Council of Ministers... Indeed, the Governors today are being pejoratively called the 'agents of the Centre'."

In the Constitution, there are no guidelines for exercise of the Governor's powers, including for appointing a CM or dissolving the Assembly. There is no limit set for how long a Governor can withhold assent to a Bill.

What reforms have been suggested?

From the Administrative Reforms Commission of 1968 to Sarkaria Commission of 1988 and the one mentioned above, several panels have recommended reforms, such as selection of the Governor through a panel comprising the PM, Home Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker and the CM, apart from fixing his tenure for five years. Recommendations have also been made for a provision to impeach the Governor by the Assembly.

No government has implemented any of these recommendations.

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Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. ... Attachments obstruct the flow of life. And without mindfulness, attachment always becomes aversion

Thich Nhat Hanh

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

— Ramnath Goenka

SELECTIVE AMNESIA ON TURBULENCE OVER STATE BIFURCATION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's argument in Rajya Sabha on Tuesday that the Congress was responsible for the intractable problems thrown up by the bifurcation of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh is far from convincing. The PM targeted the Congress, obviously to paint it as the villain of the piece. If both the Congress and the TRS took exception to the comments, it is understandable as the PM had glossed over the fact that he owed an explanation to both states as to why the promises made in the AP State Reorganisation Act, 2014, had so far not been kept by the government.

In his reply to the motion of thanks to the President's address in the Upper House, Modi said that if the embers continued to smoulder even now in both the states, it was because the Bill was passed during UPA rule without any discussion in Parliament, after mikes were switched off and doors shut, with pepper spray used freely. The PM recalled how Atal Bihari Vajpayee had created three states without any blowback during 1999–2004, which, he said, had proved that the BJP was in favour of smaller states and that it would split them in consonance with the highest traditions of democracy. But how come the Vajpayee government then did not divide Andhra though the BJP state unit at its executive meeting at Kakinada had earlier passed a resolution that it would offer two states for one vote?

Even if one condones the BJP for its amnesia, why has it not addressed any of the pending problems including one of the most vital ones—deciding the share of Krishna and Godavari waters between the two states after bifurcation? The PM has not found time even once during the last eight years to convene a meeting of the heads of two states for a negotiation on the issues. Rubbing salt into the wounds, even before the TRS assumed power after winning the election in 2014, the Modi government brought its first ordinance in late May and transferred seven revenue mandals in the erstwhile Khammam district in Telangana as well as the Lower Sileru Hydel Project to Andhra Pradesh. Instead of blaming others for the post-bifurcation ills, the PM should have given a roadmap for addressing the thorny issues that are crying for attention in the two states.

TN'S ANTI-NEET BILL BACK IN GUV'S COURT

The Tamil Nadu Assembly has once again passed the Bill seeking exemption from the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for admissions to medical courses. After the Bill was first passed on 13 September 2021, Governor R N Ravi sat on it for 142 days before he decided to send it back to the Assembly for reconsideration. But since it has been passed for the second time, the Governor must give his assent or reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President, but cannot return it again. The Governor can exercise a 'pocket veto' and may keep the Bill pending as no time frame has been stipulated by the Constitution. According to Clause 2 of Article 254 of the Constitution, when a law made by a state Legislature on a matter enumerated in the Concurrent List contains any provision repugnant to the provisions of law made by Parliament, then the law shall prevail in that state if it has received the President's assent.

While a three-member Supreme Court Bench has ruled in the Christian Medical College case that admissions to medical and dental courses should be based on NEET, the state is well within its rights to seek exemption from it as per the 2016 ruling of a five-judge Bench in the Modern Dental College vs State of Madhya Pradesh case. As per that order, a state is not denuded of its power to legislate under Entry 25 of the Concurrent List, which talks about the powers of Union and state governments to legislate on education. "The intent of our Constitution framers while introducing Entry 66 was limited only to empowering the Union to lay down a uniform standard of higher education and not to bereft the state Legislature of its power to legislate in relation to 'education'. ... no one can be a better judge of the requirements and inequalities-in-opportunity of the people of a particular state than that state itself ...," the Bench had said.

Accordingly, if the anti-NEET Bill gets the assent of the President under Article 254, the state can get exemption from the exam. Any move by the Governor to delay it will be seen as political.

The problem with political discourse in India, particularly in recent years, is that it never relies on logic or research. It takes the easy way out and brands the opponent as anti-national

TO STRENGTHEN FEDERALISM, REVISIT THE CONSTITUTION

G S VASU
Editor, *The New Indian Express*

SOUMYADIP SINHA

Those branded as anti-nationals or accused of/charged with sedition can now draw some solace. They have company. Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao is the latest public figure to be called anti-national, with leaders of both the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress demanding that prison is the place where he should be. We are truly progressing well as a democracy!

What's KCR's crime? For the benefit of those who missed his press conference on the day the Union Budget was presented, KCR vented out his anger at the Centre for ignoring the interests of states and said it was time to take a deep relook at the Constitution. "It's now 70 years since we adopted one. We have failed to address the needs of people even after such a long period. As someone who spent 50 years in public life, I am proposing that the country debate and discuss my suggestion for a complete review of the Constitutional document to meet the emerging needs."

The crux of his argument was that in line with our federal nature, instead of strengthening the states as we evolve as a nation, Union governments, whether ruled by the Congress or BJP, have been weakening them by way of centralisation, and that proposals such as 'one nation, one identity' or the more recent move by the Centre to provide itself the power to take on deputation any IAS officer from any state without the need for consent go against the basic tenets of the Constitutional spirit. The Opposition pounced on KCR, labelling him as one who gives least respect to democratic functioning and that his demand amounts to insulting Dr Ambedkar. By extension, they called KCR anti-Dalit. The problem with political discourse in India, particularly in recent years, is that it never relies on logic, reason or research. It takes the easy way out and brands the opponent—could be a young climate activist, a comedian, a writer, a poet, a tribal activist or a political leader—as anti-national. This episode is no different.

So, what are the facts? Is this the first time someone is proposing a relook at the Constitution? In the 71 years since we adopted it, the Constitution has been amended 100-plus times, a majority of them by Congress-led governments at the Centre. Neither is it uncommon to rewrite Constitutions as several countries have done, for good or bad reasons.

What we were taught through NCERT textbooks (not sure if they still exist given the way this government has been trying to correct distorted notions of India) was: "The Constitution naturally reflects the efforts to tackle the problems of the society at the time of writing the document. But it's not a frozen, unalterable document and is open to revision, changes or re-examination." The Constitution makers, Dr Ambedkar included, hoped that future generations would respect it but at the same time recognised that it may require modifications, which is precisely why provisions have been created for changes.

Saffron leaders now seeing red over KCR's proposal may perhaps do well to read up a bit. The proposal to review the Constitution was one of the promises in the national agenda the NDA came up with in 1999 ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Soon after coming to power, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government constituted in February 2000 a 11-member committee headed by eminent jurist M N Venkatachaliah. The terms of reference for the panel are worth recollecting. "The Commission shall examine, in the light of past 50 years, as to how best the Constitution can respond to the changing needs of efficient, smooth and effective system of governance and socio-economic development of modern India within the framework of parliamentary democracy and to recommend changes, if any, that are required in the provisions without interfering with its basic structure." After exhaustive discussions, the commission recommended dozens of changes, 58 of them involving amendments to the Constitution and 86 requiring legislative measures. They relate to, among others, Union-state relations, decentralisation and devolution. That it remained unimplemented, like the multiple recommendations made by the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-state relations, is a different matter.

> Whether it is the one card, one nation issue that KCR flagged or other attempts to foist common rules, what is clear is that it's in plain violation of not only the constitutional spirit but against the very diverse nature of this nation. All of them are important issues that merit serious discussion involving multiple sections and cannot be dismissed with political slogans and personal attacks

Let's keep aside the merits/demerits of KCR (since it's not the subject of this piece), even if one were to assume there is some truth in the criticism that he is autocratic, has a feudal mindset, shouts down those who talk back and so on. But he is no Maoist either. KCR's traits should not distract attention from the reasons he put forth to seek a review of the Constitution, the essential point being the weakening of states vis-a-vis the Union government. Does it not amount to violation of the spirit behind Article 1 of the Constitution that describes India as the "Union of States"?

A few other examples. To begin with, the recent move by the Union government in regard to IAS officers. Law and order being a state subject, what if KCR or another chief minister, in a counter move, says they would manage with their own police officers without drafting from the pool of All India Services? There is nothing wrong in doing so, legally speaking. Take education as another example. It was on the States List until the 42nd Amendment in 1976 when it was moved to the Concurrent List. Through the 42nd Amendment during Emergency, the Indira Gandhi government indulged in substantial tinkering of the Constitution, including an attempt to change the Preamble. It was a mix of good and bad and some of the changes were reversed when the Janata Party came to power post-Emergency.

Going back to education, if we are to accept the fundamental thesis that equality is meant for equals, how fair is it to pit a student coming from a village or small town with another brought up in a metro by adopting a common curriculum or test? In one such case, the late Justice Krishna Iyer observed many decades ago that even in a developed state like Kerala, there can't be a uniform standard for all regions. Whether it is the one card, one nation issue that KCR flagged or other attempts to foist common rules, what is clear is that it's in plain violation of not only the constitutional spirit but against the very diverse nature of this nation.

All of them are important issues that merit serious discussion involving multiple sections and cannot be dismissed with political slogans and personal attacks. The Constitution surely needs to be saved and reformed to strengthen it further, and the only way forward is to discuss and debate. Heckling those with whom one has disagreement, clamping down on protests or arresting critics only weaken the Constitution instead of strengthening it. This principle ought to be the common code for all those in public life.

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REFLECTIONS ON BUDGET AND ANALYSES ABOUT IT

KARAN BHASIN
New York-based economist

Over the last several days I have read through many opinion articles, several emails and of course WhatsApp messages about the Budget, each of them expressing their thoughts about it and its likely impact on the economy. Not all of them were positive, but even those who were a bit pessimistic were more so on the tariff changes rather than any other part of the Budget.

Even the harshest of critics have appreciated this Budget—and that is a testament to the ability of the finance minister and her team to stick to what is necessary for the economy. To be fair, even I was one of the harsher critics of her first Budget. But ever since then, every Budget has pushed me hard to find any critical flaw. Not that there aren't any flaws, and of course there are things that could be better, but then again, no Budget can be perfect on all accounts. Moreover, with time it has dawned upon me that most of the Budget analyses are done with respect to a subjective wish list that the authors have. If the Budget meets those wishes, then it is great, else not so much. This is truer for financial analysts and commentators and even occasionally, for me too.

Another confession is that many of us, especially those who study economics, have fallen victim to our sophisticated data-driven empirical methodologies. We tend to rely on them extensively even as we ignore the social and political context. As a result, many times we extrapolate the results to comment on issues with a definitive answer. But more often than not, the correct answer would be: it depends. For instance, if you ask if raising the minimum wage would lower unemployment, the instant answer would be either yes or no depending on the economic worldview of the individual. In reality, it depends on the extent of market power of employers and workers. In fact, on most issues, the answer is not as definitive as one would expect it to be. This is one of the reasons why the economic survey that comes one day before the Budget talked extensively about a more agile policymaking.

The Budget in many ways is a business-as-usual one, but not so much in terms of its innovative approach towards capital expenditures. More so as the government recognises its own constraints on being able to undertake capital expenditures and also in terms of its execution of disinvestments. Given these constraints, on the former, it has decided to allow states to borrow up to ₹1 lakh crore for capital expenditures, while on the latter, it has been conservative in its projections.

> Many of us, especially those who study economics, have fallen victim to our sophisticated data-driven empirical methodologies. We tend to rely on them extensively even as we ignore the social and political context. As a result, many times we extrapolate the results and have a definitive answer to complex issues

Conservatism has crept in within the finance ministry's thinking—even on revenue generation numbers, as very likely these will exceed the budgeted figures over the coming years. This is not a criticism of the approach. It is rather welcome that for once we have a finance minister who is more than happy to be conservative and over-deliver, instead of being like some of her predecessors who were ambitious and almost always underdelivered.

A non-eventful Budget was precisely what was required as the government was already fiscally constrained, and thus in a volatile global environment, economic fundamentals are desirable. The key, however, will be execution of a bulk of the capital expenditure plans going forward. As long as the states and Centre can ensure speedy execution, we should see a major transformation of our infrastructure over the coming couple of years.

Ultimately, this Budget was one that mentioned economic growth repeatedly and thus it has to be evaluated against that benchmark. The answer to many questions on public policy might be 'it depends'. But to the question 'Is growth desirable?', the answer is a unanimous yes, given that central banks are hiking rates and so will the US sometime in March. Consequently, global growth is likely to slow substantially as the financial year progresses. Against that backdrop, an 8% growth is exceptionally good and would further endorse the pandemic response of the Indian government. There is extensive optimism regarding our economic prospects and while there is still uncertainty regarding the progression of the pandemic, one certainly expects the optimism to convert into real economic growth.

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TN decision historic

It was a historic move by the TN government to re-adopt the NEET Bill unanimously without any amendments. Despite a plethora of ideological differences, the ruling and opposition parties have evolved a consensus. The Governor is duty-bound to forward the Bill for the consideration of the President. It is high time the President considers the interests of the state before coming to a decision.

M Rishidev, Dindigul

Why even a Lok Ayukta?

As per the new amendment implemented in the Kerala Lok Ayukta Act, the state government has the right to reject the recommendation of the anti-corruption watchdog. So, it is better to dissolve the Lok Ayukta as it will have no power from now on.

A K Anil Kumar, Neyyattinkara

Back to school

A massive compensation education programme has to be implemented at school level, especially at the primary stage (*Addressing India's education crisis*, Feb 9). Introducing more play activities, psychological guidance and counselling will be very helpful to the children. Parents, children, teachers and the whole society expect a reverberating school campus.

P Prema, Thanjavur

Investors and small biz

The article *In defence of small businesses, dear sharks* (Feb 9) has perfectly highlighted the problems with the culture of investors, who only seek to support certain ideas that can grow 100x. But India is also about small and medium businesses. There are many ideas that might generate less revenue but offer a 100x benefit to society, such as the upcycling waste example mentioned.

Sankalp Sanjay Shanbhag, Karwar

Religion, edu and politics

The wearing of headscarves by minority community female students in Udupi created a lot of controversy and now this row has spread to other places too. Political parties are trying to fish in troubled waters. Religion and education cannot be mixed. Wearing a common uniform in institutions will help in safety and security, and is also a marker of equality among students.

Ram Saran Singh, Bengaluru

Make uniforms compulsory

With the hijab row in Karnataka threatening to open up communal sores, uniforms must be made compulsory in educational institutions. The directive of Karnataka's primary education minister to this effect couldn't have been more appropriate. As long as we are incapable of differentiating between religiosity and spirituality, it is not advisable to allow people to flaunt their faith in places like schools.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

Not private visits

The justification given by the Telangana CM and the TRS for skipping the PM's two meetings on February 5 in Hyderabad, calling them 'private' visits, is ludicrous. The PM attended the golden jubilee of ICRISAT, whose work benefits farmers, and the unveiling of the Statue of Equality of Saint Ramanujacharya, a monumental event for a large Hindu community cutting across caste, political, linguistic and regional lines.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

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Opinion

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2022

ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE TENSIONS

French president Emmanuel Macron

This shared determination (principles of a 2014 peace agreement) is the only way allowing us to create peace... Calm is essential from all parties in words and in deeds

Education spend needs a boost

The Centre needs to do more of the heavy-lifting if public spending on education is to hit 6% of the GDP

THE UNION BUDGET pencils in an outlay of ₹1.04 lakh crore in FY23 for the ministry of education; this is an 18.6% jump over the revised estimate of spending last year. While that may seem impressive, the fact is that FY20 spending was a 11.3% jump over FY19's, and education spending saw a 6% fall in FY21 from the FY20 spending, thanks to the pandemic; it rose a very modest 4.5% in FY22.

Within the overall spending projected for the next year for the department of school education and literacy, the biggest jump is in allocation for the National Education Mission; again, the jump here is moderate, read against the spend the year before the pandemic and the ambition articulated just before the global contagion broke out. The allocation for the mid-day meal scheme, now called PM POSHAN, is below both the amount budgeted in FY22 and that spent in FY21. Against the backdrop of dropouts because of the prolonged pandemic-forced school closure—and the raft of studies that detail the salutary effect mid-day meal has on school enrollment—the cut in funds for mid-day meals seems ill-advised. More so, given the economic turmoil the pandemic has inflicted on low-income households. In the department of higher education, Digital India e-Learning has seen only a modest increase from the spend in FY22, and a fall from the amount budgeted for that year. Given how the Centre has sounded gung ho about giving e-learning a push, this certainly should bring to mind the old money-mouth gap.

The larger picture on Union government expenditure on education is cause for concern. The spend on the education ministry, as a percentage of GDP, has remained in the 0.4-0.5% range during FY18-FY22. This is disheartening and virtually negligible for a developing country like India. At just over 3% of the GDP, public expenditure on education (the Centre + the states) lags the 6% goal significantly; bear in mind, the 6% aspiration is of 1968 vintage, adopted in the National Education Policy that year. That this had to be reiterated again, in the National Education Policy last year, shows how little movement has happened over the decades. And the trend in central spending perhaps indicates that the burden of realising the goal will largely fall to the states even though education, as a governance subject, features in the concurrent list. Contrast this with China, where the public education spending has averaged above 4% since 2012, with a stated aspiration to improve this further; the OECD average, meanwhile, stands as 11%, ranging from 7% to 17%. Just two decades back, India and China were at a similar level of public expenditure on education (as percentages of their respective GDP) and, indeed, China lagged India before that. Needless to say, to be a education (and, consequently, R&D) superpower, India needs considerable stepping up of central and state government spending on education.

Also worrying is the fact that a whopping ₹62,000 crore of the ₹1.04 lakh crore outlay is funded from the various education cesses—Rema Nagarajan points out in *The Times of India*—with just ₹42,000 coming from the Centre's own kitty. Indeed, the Cenre has been leaning more and more on cesses since 2017, having cut its own outlays. Given cesses don't feed the states' coffers—and thus the states likely have little say on the spending from such sources—there seems very little that could accrue in focused intervention to address local needs. A key sector like education cannot be funded by cesses. Even as the finance minister's Budget speech was heavy on the government's intention on pushing digital in education and making it future-ready, there has to be greater thrust on fixing present and legacy problems.

PAIN POINTS

COVID-19 IS JOINED BY RISING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS, INFLATION, HOUSEHOLD FINANCIAL VULNERABILITY, AND MARKET VOLATILITY

The winter of our discomfort

MOHAMED A EL-ERIAN

Professor at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

THE START OF 2022 has been marked by a deepening sense of unease, and not just within governments as they confront challenges relating to health, the economy, geopolitics, and, in some cases, national and financial security. Households and a wide range of companies are feeling it, too. All have been pushed out of, or kept away from, "normality" much longer than expected.

Covid-19 is a relevant factor, of course, but it has been joined by several other developments, from rising geopolitical tensions and inflation to household financial vulnerability, labor shortages, and market volatility.

The Omicron variant has driven Covid-19 infections to levels that would have been deemed very dangerous with previous dominant variants such as Alpha or Delta. Fortunately, Omicron has proven to be less severe, with new cases much less likely to lead to hospitalization or death. Indeed, many hope that Omicron eventually will allow a transition from the highly disruptive pandemic of the past two years. In this scenario, the coronavirus would become endemic but relatively manageable, especially if we adjust how we do certain things.

> Vaccine inequality persists as a particularly serious problem, because the door will remain open to the emergence of new variants until the global population has been immunised. China's zero-Covid policy could fuel new supply-chain disruption

Nonetheless, Omicron is still a major source of discomfort for now. Not only has it forced many people to self-isolate after testing positive, which has added to labor and supply disruptions, and caused income losses among the most vulnerable segments of society. It also has led to different countries adopting different Covid-management strategies, amplifying the prior lack of sufficient coordination globally.

Vaccine inequality persists as a particularly serious problem, because the door will remain open to the emergence of new variants until the global population has been generally immunised. Similarly, China's zero-Covid policy could fuel new rounds of supply-chain disruptions, further adding to the uncertainty.

Such disruptions would create more upward pressure on prices just as inflation has become the number-one public concern in the United States. What started as a contained price shock for many has evolved into something much broader. As a result, consumer sentiment has declined and household vulnerability is increasing, particularly for already-challenged segments of the population.

The persistence of labour shortages has spillover effects in both directions. While it contributes to inflationary pressures as companies pass higher labor costs on to consumers, it also helps boost wages, following a multi-decade erosion in real earnings. This second effect is especially important for those at the lower end of the income spectrum, whose wage gains have lagged behind productivity growth for many years.

Another source of discomfort is market volatility. So far this year, there has been a pronounced increase in unsettling asset price swings, because geopolitical and economic concerns have been turbocharged by the growing realization that major central banks are on the cusp of a major policy change. After years of providing massive support for asset prices, and having made a major error by insisting until the end of November 2021 that inflation was "transitory," the US Federal Reserve is being forced to pivot hard to a less accommodative policy stance. It now must react forcefully to the high inflation that it previously failed to understand and address—and thereby allowed to become more entrenched.

This withdrawal of monetary-policy accommodation—which included highly repressed interest rates and a record level of monthly liquidity injections for most of 2021—risks triggering a notable tightening of what had become unprecedentedly loose financial conditions. The risks to livelihoods will be particularly pronounced if a behind-the-curve Fed is forced into an excessively contractionary policy.

> Most of today's problems have created a deep, widespread discomfort, increasing the probability of errors and misjudgments at every level of society. While they can be overcome as standalones, recovery from a combination would be difficult

This could mean a three-pronged approach in which the Fed, within a very short span of time, not only ends monthly asset purchases but also hikes interest rates and starts to unwind its massive balance sheet. This would come after a period when the Fed has been exceptionally supportive of asset prices, both directly and indirectly, by continuously repressing volatility and encouraging more risk taking. If it stumbles again on its policy responsibilities, it could cause an otherwise avoidable recession, inflicting a double blow on society of higher inflation and lower incomes.

Finally, there is the added discomfort caused by geopolitics. Heightened Russia-Ukraine tensions are adding to the uncertainty and inflationary pressures. With most assessments of the situation unable to predict confidently either an open military conflict or a durable diplomatic resolution, many feel stuck in the muddled middle. And a similar phenomenon is playing out in the Sino-American relationship, albeit to a lesser degree.

Each of these developments would cause considerable uncertainty on its own. Together, they have created a deep, widespread discomfort, increasing the probability of errors and misjudgments at every level of society. While most of today's problems can be overcome as standalones, recovery from a large combination of them would be difficult.

In the past, a robust mix of resilience, agility, and optionality has been essential for sound decision-making under unusually uncertain circumstances. We must double down on all three, while also ensuring that we do more to protect the most vulnerable segments of our societies.

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Awaiting justice

BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, EAC to the PM

Long delays in settling disputes, overload in admission of cases, and even language of judgements mar justice delivery in India

THIS COLUMN IS ABOUT three cases from January 2022. The Supreme Court (SC) decided a case in January 2022 and the judgement made it to the headlines. If a Hindu man dies intestate (without a will), his daughter can inherit his self-acquired property. Gurunatha Gounder (I) had two sons, Marappa Gounder and Ramaswamy Gounder. Ramaswamy died before his elder brother, Marappa. Marappa also died a long time ago, in 1949. A minor point was raised about whether Marappa died in 1949, or in 1957. Why is that time-line important? Because Hindu Succession Act was passed in 1956 and that governs intestate succession among Hindus. This bit, about the year of Marappa's death, was examined by a trial court (judgement of 1994) and Madras High Court (judgement of 2009) and both courts decided Marappa died in 1949, not 1957. SC saw no reason to question that established fact. Nor was another fact questioned. In 1938, Marappa bought the property through his own resources. It wasn't joint family property. He could have dealt with it as he chose, had he left a will. Unfortunately, he died intestate. He had only one daughter, Kupayee Ammal, and no sons. She died in 1967 and left no children. Ramaswamy had one son and four daughters. The son was Gurunatha Gounder (II). The daughters were Thangammal (dead now), Ramayeeammal (dead now), Elayammal and Nallammal. Thangammal was the original plaintiff, who applied for partition.

When Marappa died, who should inherit his property? Should it be Kupayee Ammal, the only daughter? Or, since she was a woman, should it be Ramaswamy's son, Gurunatha II? When Kupayee Ammal died, who should inherit the property? Should it be Gurunatha (II) and his heirs, or should his four sisters also have a share? SC decided, "Applying the above settled legal proposition to the facts of the case at hands, since the succession of the suit properties opened in 1967 upon death of Kupayee Ammal, the 1956 Act shall apply and thereby Ramasamy Gounder's daughters being Class-I heirs of their father too shall also be heirs and entitled to 1/5th share in each of the suit properties." Incidentally, Gurunatha II is also dead. Most of the original parties are dead, including not just the one who first asked for the partition, but the original appellant. Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav celebrates 75 years of India's Independence and we are setting out a template for India in 2047. Does it seem right that an issue of inheritance that should have been settled in 1949, or in 1967, is being settled in 2022? Imagine the mess in enforcing what SC has decided. Lawsuits of fathers (or mothers) devolve on sons and daughters, up to the third or fourth generation.

> We can't possibly deny we don't have a framework for personal laws suitable for a 21st century India

Part of the mess is because of the complicated nature of inheritance and succession laws, even more so if the individual dies intestate. There are Constitutional issues, one part of the Constitution vis-à-vis another. Despite the controversy, we can't possibly deny we don't have a framework for personal laws suitable for a 21st century India. Add to that long delays in settling disputes, overload in admission of cases and even language of judgements. Consider another recent case from Mumbai, in which the Metropolitan Magistrate acquitted Shilpa Shetty of obscenity and indecency charges. In 2007, at a promotional event, Richard Gere kissed her and FIRs were filed in Rajasthan and UP. Those FIRs were primarily under the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act and Sections 292, 293 and 294 of IPC (Indian Penal Code). I think anyone who reads those statutes and sections should agree, (a) Those FIRs shouldn't have been lodged; (b) Even if there was a FIR, the case shouldn't have been admitted in court; (c) It shouldn't have taken 15 years to decide. Police and courts should have better things to do. Shouldn't we be more discriminating about what cases are admitted in courts?

On language and plain English, I am repeating myself. (I have written about it in the past.) I am repeating myself because such incidents recur, especially in Himachal Pradesh, though Justice Sureshwar Thakur has now moved to Punjab and Haryana High Court. In January 2022, two judges of SC couldn't understand a judgement authored by Sureshwar Thakur in 2017 and had to ask whether it was written in Latin. January 2022 wasn't the first time. (He was incomprehensible in the past too.) There were similar examples for Himachal Pradesh High Court in April 2017, December 2018 and March 2021. In most organisations, people learn from past mistakes. But need to be careful about the Contempt of Courts Act of 1971. When we hear "contempt of court", we tend to think of civil contempt, where a court's judgement or direction is not complied with. But that 1971 statute also has provisions on criminal contempt. Any act that "scandalises or tends to scandalise, or lowers or tends to lower the authority of, any court" is criminal contempt. "Scandalizing" is neither contempt by interference, nor contempt by disobedience. We inherited this expression from Britain. In 2013, following a Law Commission Report (2012), UK's Crime and Courts Act, said, "Scandalising the judiciary (also referred to as scandalising the court or scandalising judges) is abolished as a form of contempt of court under the common law of England and Wales."

Assuming summary toxicity

SEBI's new norms on related party transactions norms risk being a policy overkill

KAUSHIK DUTTA
SOUVIK SANYAL

The authors are with the Thought Arbitrage Research Institute

RELATED PARTY TRANSACTIONS (RPTs) often are the route taken by Indian companies for easy access to capital, managing contract delays, mitigating supply constraints, curtailing costs, etc. Yet, RPTs a key concern for regulators as their abuse has contributed corporate frauds. Their mere existence is often considered suspect, contrary to existing research highlighting their beneficial impact in terms of business continuity and competitiveness. A 2022 OECD report says, in 2006, approximately 5.5% of the total income for top 500 listed companies came from RPTs, which rose to 11% in 2019.

> The changes would make compliance a burden while adding little to the quality of oversight

Regulatory actions in recent times have highlighted issues such as diversion of funds involving related parties acting as sole distributor, non-disclosure of RPTs, bypassing scrutiny of audit committee, etc. Research by TARI shows over 51% of the financial fraud between 2012 to 2018—investigated by regulators and resulting in indictment—have used RPTs as the favoured mechanism.

Balancing RPT benefits and risks is a challenge. SEBI recently approved key changes with respect to how companies deal with RPTs, plugging key loopholes but has left much to be concerned over the feasibility and use of some of the changes. A key change is including "promoter" within the definition of a related party, and including any person/entity holding equity shares either directly or on a beneficial interest basis, amounting to 20% or more with effect from April this year, and 10% or more from April 2023.

From April 2023 onwards, a transaction between a listed company or any of its subsidiaries on one hand and any other person or entity on the other hand—the purpose and effect of which is to benefit a related party of the listed entity or any of its subsidiaries—will also be an 'RPT'. Regulation expects companies to determine if any transaction involving the consolidated group and any other person could or intend to benefit any related party. To determine if such a transaction could potentially benefit a related party at any leg of the transaction can be extremely difficult for the management and for independent directors.

It is normal for financial and other strategic investors to enter into transactions with multiple listed companies or their subsidiaries under normal course of business, with no intention of exercising any control, and considering such investors as related parties will only complicate the compliance at the investee company level. Even government companies, which deal with other government companies will need to be compliant.

Yet another point is that some companies, innovation driven and relying on proprietary know-how, would often prefer working within the group to keep trade secrets. Seeing such transactions with an eye of suspicion can be counterproductive to the competitiveness of firms and also impact efficiencies. The SEBI Working Group on RPTs, in its report in 2020, had highlighted fears of companies using their subsidiaries as a conduit to move assets away from the company.

As part of the revised framework, listed companies' audit committees would now have to approve transactions undertaken between two or more of its subsidiaries. Further, audit committee approval is required if the value of the transaction with a subsidiary (either individually or taken together with previous transactions during a financial year) exceeds 10% of the annual consolidated turnover of a listed company, as per its last audited financial statements. The requirement shall also apply to transactions undertaken between two or more foreign subsidiaries, in which case oversight by audit committees of the Indian holding company also raises issues of feasibility and legality.

As of March 2020, listed companies in NIFTY 50 index have an average number of approximately 50 subsidiaries/ step-down subsidiaries. For large companies, the numbers of subsidiaries are far higher and keeping track of all such transactions would be difficult. On a practical basis, the requirement could adversely impact the workings of audit committees and would reduce efficiencies of board and the company itself.

Another key change is revising the materiality threshold for obtaining shareholder approval to cover transactions that exceed ₹1,000 crore or 10% of the annual consolidated turnover, whichever is lower. Accordingly, large transactions, even in the ordinary course of business, can be undertaken only pursuant to shareholders' approval. For instance, in the Nifty 50, during FY21, 47 companies had annual consolidated turnover ranging from ₹2,000 crore to ₹5,40,000 crore; for the largest companies, the ₹1,000 crore threshold does not constitute even 1% of the turnover while, for smaller companies, it will never be breached. A more meaningful way would perhaps be to determine it in relation to a company's turnover.

Unlike the Companies Act, 2013, SEBI has not chosen to provide any exemption to transactions done in the ordinary course of business and on an arm's length basis. The changes made by SEBI would make compliance a burden while adding little to the quality of oversight.

SEBI's recent amendments hold the risk of a policy overkill and could adversely impact the business climate in India. The purpose of a business is to be in business and create value for all its stakeholders. However, if regulations get too stringent for the entire business universe due to infractions by a few, then the ability of those businesses which are fair and just but strive to remain competitive and productive become severely challenged, and that cannot be the purpose of regulations.

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Words are but the signs of ideas
Samuel Johnson

Suicides during Covid expose a dark reality

Data presented in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday shows the horrifying Covid impact on human lives in 2020. Around 3,548 people committed suicide due to joblessness during that year and around 5,213 ended their lives because of financial difficulties. Over 25,000 people committed suicide due to unemployment or financial bankruptcy between 2018 and 2020.

The crux of the matter is that these human tragedies revolve around the economic impact on lives, largely a lack of fiscal resources and inabilities of individuals and families to deal with necessities of life. The figures amplify that support systems have failed, and the focus on lives is lost.

In this context, the budget unveiled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman should have addressed the fiscal imbalance and the need to restore life, rather than having a long term vision. The critical component here is about creating employment opportunities. The Central government, on the contrary, has ignored this pressing issue and went about sketching a digital India and setting long-term goals. Not a line about bailing out common citizens in distress by providing jobs and security of living. Surprisingly, Sitharaman makes a vague promise of 60 lakh jobs across five years, despite the failure to deliver on earlier employment targets.

Although Goa has not witnessed suicides on account of unemployment, the State government has woefully fallen short of delivering on jobs

Cut into Goa, and the scenario is almost similar. Although the State has not witnessed suicides on account of unemployment, the State government has woefully fallen short of delivering on jobs. It has failed to offset inflation and usher in ease of living. What's worse is that the State is currently caught in a web of job scams and gross irregularities in selection procedures.

What's worse is that the election is used as a perfect platform to exploit job failures with parties promising to open up employment opportunities in their manifestos. The Aam Aadmi Party has announced a cash dole of Rs 3000 for unemployed youth till they get jobs, a promise of one job for each family and 80 per cent reservation in private sector jobs for locals. The TMC has promised 2 lakh jobs in 5 years with a guarantee of 10,000 vacancies in the government sector in the next three years. The Congress manifesto has an emphasis on job creation and party leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has assured Rs 500 crore for employment generation. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said that apart from the 10,000 jobs which would be created soon there would be nearly 30,000 job openings in the private sector.

The people continue to bear the brunt of the pandemic and parties continue to belt out offers without any thought of an already depleted treasury. Worse is, there is fine print that says "if voted to power". A mockery is being made with these high promises that appear as baits for voters trapped in a helpless Covid situation. It is important for the common citizens not to get overwhelmed by this illusion of a better life post elections.

OPEN SPACE >>

Voting for corrupt, criminal candidates a bigger crime

A whopping 26 per cent of all candidates in the fray have been accused of being law-breakers after having criminal cases against them.
To make matters worse, the number of candidates with serious criminal charges has increased sharply over the last four assembly elections, according to Association for Democratic Reforms which released its report.
The question that comes to mind is how can highly educated people like doctors, engineers, educationists, lawyers digest the fact that we will have to vote for such criminals and law breakers?
Voting for such people will it not be accepting their criminal acts and there by promoting crime?
The ADR report also paints a gloomy picture on the educational background of the candidates. 29 of these candidates have not even cleared their 5th Std and some are not even 10th pass. Some of us being graduates and post-graduates and yet unemployed will blindly walk into the polling booth and vote for such uneducated candidates just because of the party or the candidate.
Yes, the clock is ticking and just a few days are left for us to enter the polling booth. We need to keep in mind that we deserve to respect our Goa and vote for educated candidates who will bring about a change in the next five years.
Our conscience should not permit us to vote for candidates with criminal antecedents. Don't vote for the candidates who have sold Goa and have not given jobs to the deserving youth. It's time to say not to defectors, turncoats

GASTON DIAS, *Sarzora*

Budget for education: What did we miss?

The fact that allocated provisions for education are revised downwards, paints a poor picture that don't justify govt's intentions

>The author is a PhD in Economics and an Associate Professor in the subject

DR MANASVI M KAMAT

The proposal in the budget 2022-23 that allocation for education has crossed a landmark of Rs 1 lakh crore has been received very well. The issue we discuss now is whether this news is good enough to set up solid edifice of quality education in the country in view of the detailed relative provisioning under different budgeted heads for education over the years.

The school education department has allocated around Rs 63500 crore, an increase of Rs 9000 crore while higher education got around Rs 41000 crore in the new budget 2022-23.

This translates to more than 6 percent increase over the financial provisions in the last budget 2021-22. Though this trend seems attractive at the first glance, it is disheartening to note that the total outlay for education has relatively decreased as a percentage of total expenditure in the budget.

Unfortunately for the ensuing year 2022-23 the allocation to education in new budget in relation to the GDP has come down to around 2.5 percent. Earlier, the scientific community had urged the government to allocate at least 10 percent of the central budget and 30 percent of state budgets to education while the Kothari Commission few decades ago, had talked about minimum 6 percent spend on education.

In budget 2022-23, the country's biggest school education scheme, the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan scheme is allocated Rs 37000 crore with an increase of more than Rs 6,000 crores from budget 2021-22. This figure however seems very pale considering that the allocated budget of Rs 39000 crore for this scheme way back in 2019-20.

The allocations for scholarship incentive scheme for girls; children from scheduled tribes and rural areas has seen huge downsize in last two years. The post-matric scholarship and the merit-cum-scholarship offered by the Ministry of Minority Affairs have seen cuts as well.

The National Scheme for Incentive to Girls, a scholarship incentive scheme for girl child has been allocated no budget this year.

The review of last year's budget 2021-22 show considerable under-utilisation of budgeted allocations for education

This scheme had faced a cut of more than Rs 100 crore in earlier budget of 2021.

To make things worse the Padhna Likhna Abhiyaan scheme focussing on adult education and basic literacy has not been allocated any funds for the next financial year. Compare this with Rs 250 crore allocated in budget 2021-22. Similarly, the 'PM Poshan scheme' which replaces the Mid-day Meal scheme has been allocated around Rs 10000 crore. In comparison this scheme was allocated close to Rs 11,000 crore for 2021-22.

Despite the push in the digital education field, allocation under the digital India e-learning programme including for the 'PM e-Vidya scheme' has been reduced to Rs 421 crore in 2022-23 from Rs 641 crore in 2021-22. Lower allocations to various flagship schemes for education in the ensuing year 2022-23 coupled with heavy cuts in the proposed expenditures during the current year 2021-22, casts double whammy on education.

The review of last year's budget 2021-22 show considerable under-utilisation of budgeted allocations for education. Out of Rs 93000 crore earmarked for education in the 2021-22, only around 50000 crore have been utilised so far, according to a response by the Ministry of Education to a parliamentary question. Similar has been the fate of spending related to various flagship schemes related to education. The spending for Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), IMPRESS, scheme for funding to promote social science research, and IMPRINT for funding for research in premier institutions, as well as UGC grants for research for the passing year 2021-22 show consistent under-utilisation.

In 2021-22, Rs 3000 crore was allotted for RUSA but unfortunately this figure has now been revised to Rs 793 crore only. Similarly in 2020-21, only Rs 12 crore of Rs 25 crore allotted was spent under IMPRESS. Same remains the case of IMPRINT, for which Rs 53 crore was set aside in 2019-20, but only Rs 47 crore was utilised. The grants released by the UGC under Minor and Major research projects for science and humanities have also been falling.

Provision for this scheme was drastically cut from Rs 43 crore in 2016-17 to mere Rs 38 lakh in 2020-21.

Responding to another question in the current session of the Lok Sabha, the government has said that in 2021-22 the unspent balance as on January 2022 of central universities and centrally funded higher education institutes stood at Rs 7100 crore. The corresponding figures were Rs 275 crore in 2020-21 and Rs 355 crore in 2019-20 This clearly suggests under-spending or lower than planned coverage for the current year that will end in March 2022.

The union government has spent 79 percent of the budget allocated for its flagship programme Beti Bachao–Beti Padhao (BB-BP) on advertising so far. The report tabled in Parliament in Dec 2021 highlighted that out of a total of Rs 446.72 crore released during the period 2016- 2019 for BB-BP major amount was spent only on media advocacy, instead of welfare interventions on education and health of girl child. Likewise the other department very closely associated with education, the Union Ministry of Science and Technology has been granted Rs 14200 crore in the 2022-23 budget registering a drop of 4 percent from last year.

Over all it seems that the fact that budget for education receiving allocation of over Rs 1 lakh crore hides many factual underpinnings. Relatively not only that the allocations for education have reduced but the fact that allocated provisions are revised downwards, paint a poor picture that the governmental actions for cause of education don't justify its intentions.

THE INBOX >>

Qualities of an ideal candidate

It must be said that there has been a sharp increase in the number of candidates with serious criminal charges over the last four elections. A whopping 26% of all candidates in the fray in the 2022 assembly elections have reportedly criminal cases against them.
What is even more disturbing is that twelve candidates reportedly have declared cases related to crime against women. Ironically these law-breakers hope to become law-makers as members of the Goa legislative assembly.
It is for the voters to decide whether they want to be ruled by those with criminal antecedents. Besides not having a criminal record, other qualities that the voters need to look into is the educational qualification of the candidates.
The candidates should possess leadership qualities. They should have proper work ethics, selflessness, be broadminded and adjustable to the times and needs of the society.
They should be easily accessible to the citizens and available at any hour of the day and night during an emergency. Obviously they need to be non-corrupt and be the people's voice in the assembly.

ADELMO FERNANDES, *Vasco*

Winnability trumps non-criminality

All political parties have ignored the Supreme Court's instructions while selecting candidates for the assembly elections opting for winnability over candidates with no criminal background.
Parties have given unfounded and baseless reasons like popularity and likeability which indicates their indifference to electoral reforms. This complete lack of will and reprehensible predilection in nominating candidates should invite the wrath of the Apex Court which has been reduced to being a hand wringing, mute spectator of the proceedings.
In some parties almost half the candidates have cognisable offences against their names, this clearly shows that our democracy will continue to suffer at the hands of lawbreakers who become lawmakers.
Ordinances should be promulgated by which candidates convicted for heinous crimes would be permanently disqualified from the electoral process and the ones with civil cases should be barred from contesting elections for a certain period. Status quo would push the country deeper into the dirt.

REKHA SARIN, *Benaulim*

Don't get fooled by manifestos

Every political party in fray promises the moon to enhance the degree of Goa's paradise. These are neither backed by sworn affidavits or oaths to hold them accountable.
Manifestos to be taken seriously must indicate year-wise past schemes or projects achieved. Similarly the parties must declare year-wise what will be delivered and how.
Schemes, projects will have to be backed by financial resources and legislative provisions. Any promises beyond the term of Assembly is hogwash.
The parties which have been ruling in the past have not adhered to their manifestos. They cannot be trusted.
AAP is only party so far that has categorically declared that if they fault on their promises of time-bound delivery, not to vote them again. That is a fair challenge of accountability with determination and responsibility and can be considered.
Hence it is wise not be enamored by grand manifestos, as none will refer to them once elections are over and will be confined to archives to be retrieved and modified.

NELSON LOPES, *Chinchinim*

Panaji needs a clean and honest MLA

Of the seven candidates in the fray for the Panaji constituency, former bureaucrat Elvis Gomes is undoubtedly the best and brightest of the lot.
The young and dynamic Elvis who has always been very soft-spoken carries with him a rich administrative experience which would assist him in being a very able legislator representing Goa's capital city.
We now have an opportunity to elect a very clean and knowledgeable person with no criminal antecedents whatsoever who can lead the city and rescue it from the current mess and decay it has been embroiled in.
A proven professional whose honesty and integrity are beyond question and whose firm hand coupled with intelligence and an unswerving dedication to good governance are qualities that people are crying out for in today's leaders.

AIRES RODRIGUES, *Ribandar*

Panjimites need better, they now have choice

The BJP has taken the correct stance in not spoon-feeding Utpal Parrikar. The BJP has stood behind self-made men rather than papa's and mama's boys. Once Utpal has proved his mettle, I'm sure that any party will welcome him with open arms. I urge the people of Panaji to come out and vote for a clean and new face. Others have been given the chance already and failed.
The people will also now appreciate that the BJP was not out to shortchange them on the casino issue. It was also unfortunate that a deserving candidate, Siddharth Kuncolienkar got left out from the election fray for no fault of his or his party.

VINAY RODRIGUES, *Margao*

Migrants entering State by droves

It's election time in Goa and it's not unusual to see candidates canvassing and parties having their meeting that are attended in large numbers.
But what is unusual to notice is hordes of migrants setting foot in the State. Hundreds of migrants are seen arriving in trains and buses in Vasco, Margao, Mapusa and Ponda.
This migrants who are brought for elections as vote banks get all the facilities like money, return ticket, food and alcohol. Concerned authorities need to keep a watch on these migrants who can turn around the fortunes of candidates.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, *Chandor*

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EDITORIAL

A matter of shame

It is a matter of national shame that Indian society and polity has touched such a low where one is forced to debate what the people should wear and what they should not. India's clothing diversity has always been a subject of pride and fascination. Unfortunately, under the garb of uniformity in educational institutions and maintenance of public order, a religious dress of Muslim community has been banned in certain schools and colleges under the BJP-led government in Karnataka. The issue around the ban on religious headscarves, which was ignited towards the end of 2021, is escalating further with each passing day. This is no more just an issue between the college administrations in question and protesting Muslim girls. It has threateningly spread its scope to become a people versus people confrontation, with mobs of Hindu students confronting their Muslim counterparts. It should not come as a shock if, in absence of positive state intervention, incidents take an untoward turn in the coming days. The incidents unfolding in Karnataka offer a textbook example of how hate is ignited and allowed to spread to secure political benefits for a few. The abrupt decision of college administration and unilateral approval by the state government have led the state to a situation with compromised public order and national security — the terms that governments hold so dear to their heart. Setting aside the debate over the legitimacy of the ban on headscarves for a while, the question that needs to be asked is who is responsible for the turmoil in the state? Is it to be blamed upon a handful of Muslim girls who, at least in their own belief, are fighting for the rights they have been entitled to under the Constitution of India? Hopefully, the nation has not crossed the limit of shamelessness to answer this question in affirmative. Neither the protesting girls in black headscarves nor the boys in saffron shawls, and not even the students with blue headscarves are to be blamed for the grim situation. They are not the cause of chaos in Karnataka. They are rather the victims, or tools at best, all collectively, in the larger context of religious bigotry and political opportunism. Is the college administration to be blamed? Yes, partly, notwithstanding the legality of the headscarves ban — that is better left to the courts. The intent behind the dress code and also the procedural fallacies in implementing those is highly questionable. Students and their parents must be considered as stakeholders in educational institutions, who need to be consulted and taken consent from before arriving at such decisions. The anarchic manner in which the students were turned away from classes for wearing headscarves and shawls is unjustifiable. Going by the accounts of protesting Muslim girls, the college administration also allegedly used coercive methods to make the protestors resign. The larger objective of educational institutions is being defied in front of our eyes. Even bigger question is how has the state government allowed the deterioration of the situation under its nose? The state's silent support to the educational institutions in question is one of the key factors behind emboldening the college administrations. Political analysts will question whether the silence and support have to do anything with saffron votes, riding on which the government came to power and must be looking forward to winning again in upcoming assembly elections. Furthermore, no less disturbing is the silence of Central leadership. It is true that their condemnation of the ongoing developments in Karnataka may hurt them politically at this moment. But at least, they should speak to defend the principles of the Constitution and the fundamental rights to religion and education. They must speak harshly against the unfolding hatred between sections of students. Hate, as is known, spreads like fire — sweeping everything that comes its way. The headscarves ban issue is already making negative headlines the world over and is being condemned globally. Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai tweeted "Refusing to let girls go to school in their hijabs is horrifying". She related the ban with "Objectification of women". These are grave allegations, and offer a reason to feel ashamed because India — a country that is known to teach the world the lesson of love — is being preached against hatred, and not without reasons. While the judiciary decides on the legal aspects of the matter, all the concerned stakeholders must understand their responsibility in propagating love, not hate.

Dear Editor

HATE PEDDLERS

This is in reference to the editorial, 'Traders of hate'. The genie of hate has been set free after the BJP assumed power. Believing that the party would lead them to the glory of the past, there are many who feel that attacking the minorities for what they perceive to be a threat is the best way to take revenge for what may have happened hundreds of years ago. Like the Hijab controversy, the actions of SRK have been blown out of proportion. The social media is infested with the IT trolls of all parties, but most belonging to the BJP. It is going to take a lot to put the genie back into the bottle. Those who support the minorities are deemed to be traitors to the cause of Hinduism. All these are ominous signs for the future of a pluralistic democracy.

— ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI via email

A SERIOUS FLAW

JNU seems to attract controversy every other month. It is upsetting that cases of misconduct levied against the new Vice Chancellor have already been proved and she has been punished for those. Yet she will be holding a high administrative post in one of India's premier universities. This is utterly disappointing and what's more despairing is the fact that interviewers on the board were not even aware of her dubious past. Their excuse is simply that any investigation is done after the interview by MoE and it is the ministry's responsibility. Well, that is a serious flaw in the selection process as it puts the horse before the cart. This poses some serious questions about the evaluation procedure and level of integrity of professors who pass it.

— ABHILASH GUPTA, GHAZIABAD via email

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Leveraging technology

The soaring success in first phase of tool-based registration of development projects in Gumla District through gramsampati.com augurs well for the future

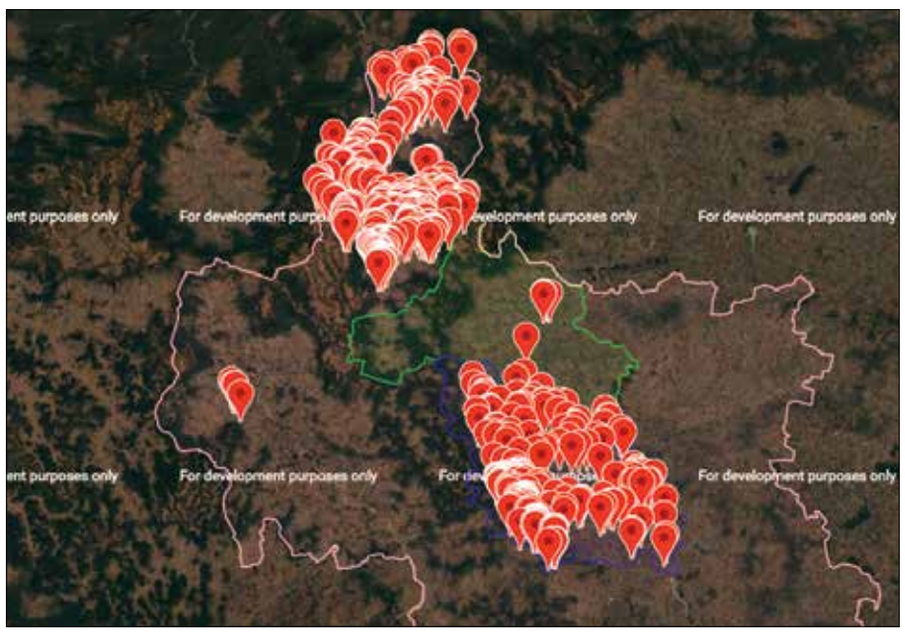
Nexus of Good

ANIL SWARUP

Technology can be a gamechanger in governance and administration. Fortunately, a number of young officers are making use of such tools to bring about improvements in delivering services. Though the true beneficiary of such initiatives is the common man, in the initial phase, it is more of an internal management. Technology tools are available with us. The key question is about the attitude and the ability to appreciate the potential of such tools.

Karn Satyarthi, a young officer belonging to the 2016 batch of the IAS, was posted in Gumla, Jharkhand, last year in October. Before this, he had spent a year as a probationer in Deoghar, and two years as SDM in Sahibganj district. In both his previous assignments, he had observed that civil assets worth hundreds of crores lay dead and decaying or unused for years, resulting in enormous loss in terms of opportunity cost. Karn felt that this was also true of large projects where huge costs are incurred on account of delay and 'decay' but these are at least in the limelight and have some monitoring mechanism like the Project Monitoring Group (PMG). However, smaller projects suffer even more as they are rarely on the radar of authorities. With a view to addressing this issue in the context of smaller projects, a portal, www.gramsampati.in, has been conceived in Gumla. The district administration is trying to achieve two objectives. First, to create an asset register that can account for depreciation and serve as institutional memory. And second, to monitor ongoing projects for timely completion — just like Project Monitoring Group monitors systemically important infrastructure projects.

> All completed and ongoing civil asset projects will be geo-tagged and marked; a single click of mouse will then fetch the picture of any civil asset and information on 20 data points



More than 750 completed assets and 61 ongoing projects have been onboarded on the digital asset register

Concept

The driver behind www.gramsampati.in is the growth in web-based application technologies over the last few years. Gumla district administration has started preparing a digital asset register where all completed and ongoing civil asset projects will be geo-tagged and marked; a single click of mouse will then fetch the picture of any civil asset and information on 20 data points like start date, end date, estimated amount, purpose, ownership etc. related to the asset. For ongoing-projects, a monthly update will become available for both physical and financial progress of the project.

Advantages

The digital asset register will help in many ways:

1. Assisting in monitoring projects and curtailing project delays.

2. Measuring performance of myriad engineering departments like NREP, Special Division, Building Construction Department, ZIla Parishad etc.

3. Assessing contractor performance which can then be leveraged for technical specifications.

4. Avoiding duplication of effort.

5. Evaluating geographical distribution of government expenditure and helping achieve a balance in that regard.

6. Making informed decisions about reviving assets as their depreciated value will be available.

7. Detecting fake assets since all assets will be geo-tagged and will be in the public domain.

8. Providing analytical tools to optimise the use of civil assets.

9. Convergence between various schemes of the GOI as well as GOJ.

10. Key information on civil assets will be readily available.

A beginning has already been made. More than 750 completed assets and 61 ongoing projects have been onboarded on the digital asset register.

Impact

During the first phase, the aim was to get a proof done for the concept to demonstrate that the idea was technologically achievable. However, the results exceeded expectations. During the process of data collection alone, projects worth more than Rs 39.36 crores could be identified for revival. Many of these unused or stalled works have already been revived or revival has been planned keeping strict timelines. Ways to converge schemes like Shyama Prasad Mukherjee National Rurban Mission, 15th Finance Commission, District Mineral Fund Trust as well as Critical Gap funding through GOJ's untied funds have been discovered. Quite interestingly, some of the education department's assets were geo-tagged outside the district's boundaries. This was a clear example of either carelessness or mischief (on enquiry it was found that it was carelessness). Fake geotags (all these cases will be pursued to their logical conclusion) also came to notice.

Future plans

Buoyed by the efficiency gains achieved in the first phase of gramsampati.in, there is a plan to expand the project further. The aim is to replicate an Enterprise Resource Plan like structure for all completed and ongoing projects in the district. This would include enhanced analytical tools to help detect slack or sub-optimal use of resources. In the long-run, assets — other than civil assets — like land can also be included in the portfolio. Currently, this assets register is focussed primarily on improving G2G procedures with citizens using it for the purpose of information. In the medium-term, it can also be opened to citizens for registering grievances as well as marking ghost assets, assets in need of maintenance etc. Maintaining and updating a high-performance web application with high traffic might be a challenge in the medium term.

What is happening in this remote district, Gumla, can truly be transformational. A beginning has been made and the initial results are quite encouraging. As mentioned earlier, the problem was not the non-availability of technology. It is available. Worthy of appreciation is the attitude shown by this young officer, Karn Satyarthi who under the able guidance of the Deputy Commissioner, Shishir Sinha is bringing about a change through use of technology. Taken to its logical conclusion, it can be transformational. What is happening in Gumla is a wonderful example of Nexus of Good. Here a model is being evolved that can easily be replicated and scaled.

Views expressed are personal

Stepping stone to new India

The Union Budget 2022-23 is all inclusive and appears to lay a sound foundation for self-reliant growth of the nation in coming decades

SANJAY MAYUKH

With highest focus on welfare of the common man, the Union Budget 2022 is yet another testimony to the current government's commitment to the holistic development of the nation. Under the leadership and guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has presented a visionary Budget to build a self-reliant India, which will lay the foundation for a new India 25 years ahead.

Along with benefiting the poor through numerous public welfare schemes, this Budget aims to make modern technology available to the common people, including better connectivity to farmers and start-ups to the youth. Alongside the 'ease of doing business', special attention has been paid to 'ease of living'.

The Budget has ushered in a new confidence towards development by integrating the basic mantra of '*sabka saath, sabka vikas aur sabka prayas*'. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in the Union Budget, 80 lakh families will be provided houses with the overall expenditure cost of Rs 48,000 crore in this financial year. Under the Jal Mission, clean water will be provided to 3.8 crore homes by spending Rs 60 thousand crores. A plan has been made to provide integrated benefits to women and children through Mission Shakti, Mission Vatsalya, Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0. Two lakh Anganwadis will be upgraded into Saksham Anganwadis. For the first time in the country, by starting Parvatmala scheme, connectivity will be increased in hilly and remote areas in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu & Kashmir, and Northeastern states, this will improve the standard of living of the people. Under Parvatmala scheme, work will start soon by issuing contracts for eight ropeway projects of 60 km length.

> Whether for people living on inaccessible hills or in plain areas, farmers or entrepreneurs or industrial workers — schemes are included to provide basic facilities to the people and raise their standards of living

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has presented a visionary Budget to build a self-reliant India

This Budget has been prepared keeping in mind the interest of the farmers. For the purchase of wheat and paddy in the current financial year, Rs 2.37 lakh crore will be paid directly in the account of farmers. In the coming days, a scheme to encourage chemical-free natural farming will be implemented. In the first phase, a 5-km corridor will be developed by selecting the land of farmers along the banks of the Ganges; this will increase the income of the farmers. At the cost of Rs 44,605 crore, Ken-Betwa link will be implemented to increase employment opportunities and provide irrigation access to farmers. This will provide the facility to irrigate more than nine lakh hectares of cultivable land. Apart from this, farmers and the local population will also get the opportunity for other types of livelihoods. In order to make use of the right variants of fruits and vegetables to the farmers, the Central government will give a consolidated package to the state governments so that the yield of the farmers can increase. In this Budget, special emphasis has been laid on making agriculture benefit from state-of-the-art technology. A plan is also included to provide proper benefits to the farmers by using high-tech and digital technology, and by taking their products to the market. For this, spraying of six nutrients and insecticides through drones will also be encouraged. Financial resources will be made available to agricultural start-ups and rural entrepreneurs through NABARD. Apart from this, Railways will develop efficient logistics for small farmers and entrepreneurs so that the supply chain of local produce can be developed in a proper manner. Under this, One Station, One Product scheme will be launched.

This Budget will prove to be a milestone in the direction of making a strong India on the global stage. It incorporates prospects for better infrastructure development, more investment, more growth and more jobs. It will also pave the way for green jobs in the area. Special attention has been paid to the development of infrastructure. To improve mobile connectivity, 5G spectrum will be made available to the common people by issuing contracts in the current financial year. The scheme of laying optical fiber to the villages will be implemented. Rs 20,000 crore will be spent on the expansion of 25,000-km highway within a year. Apart from this, highways will also be constructed in the border areas. To increase connectivity, 400 new technology-lens Vande Bharat trains will be made to run in the next three years. For the development of business and industry, 100 cargo terminals will also be built over the next three years. With this, the goods of need will be available throughout the year in hilly and inaccessible areas. New innovative avenues will be adopted to upgrade the metro system in cities. This is a step towards a self-reliant India.

In fact, this Budget has come with the prime objective of making India self-reliant. For example, in the defence sector, 68 per cent of equipment and materials will be procured from the domestic industry in the current financial year, whereas earlier 58 per cent of the capital procurement of the Budget was done from the domestic industry.

This will encourage the country's defence equipment and weapons manufacturing industry as well as increase employment opportunities. With a special focus on the security of the country, a defense Budget of Rs 5.25 lakh crore has been earmarked for an increase of ten per cent over the previous year. To take the textile sector to new heights, there are plans to set up seven big textile parks in the next three years. It will be provided with modern infrastructure, common facilities, transport and other facilities including research and development laboratories. This will create huge employment opportunities. Important steps have been taken in the direction of making a self-reliant India by giving tax incentives to business and industry including start-ups.

The Central government has presented a Budget to implement the plans for the coming 25 years, in which special attention has been paid to Ease of Living. Whether for people living on inaccessible hills or in plain areas, farmers or entrepreneurs or industrial workers — covering every perspective in this Budget, schemes are included to provide basic facilities to the people as well as to raise their standard of living. The most important thing is that by making a huge increase in the amount of investment, work has been done to give a boost to the economy. Gati Shakti Yojana will not only make the country strong but also create more than 60 lakh employment opportunities. This will raise the standard of living of the common people.

The writer is a member of Bihar Legislative Council and BJP's National Media Co-in-charge and Spokesperson. Views expressed are personal

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Letters to the : Cuss words directly or indirectly target women

Sir — There is no ignoring sexist cuss words in our day-to-day lives. There have been attempts at reclaiming swear words — terms such as 'gay' and 'ginger' are instances of abuses that have been rebranded as badges of honour. Curiously, an overwhelming majority of cuss words directly or indirectly target women, especially family members like mother, sister, daughter and so on. But it is not just cuss words that are problematic. The word, sa**a, which is popularly used to address one's brother-in-law, actually translates to 'he, whose sister I bed'. A woman's identity thus remains intricately linked to that of her sexual partner even in common parlance. That is no less humiliating than abusive words. Sir — The governor of Tamil Nadu should not have sent the bill seeking exemption for the state from the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test back to the assembly for reconsideration. It is clear that the Centre has been using governors to exercise control over states where the Bharatiya Janata Party is not in power.

The governor's reasoning that the bill is 'against the interests of rural and poor students' cannot be accepted. NEET's admission data have shown that it places students from marginalized backgrounds, first-generation learners and state-board educated students at a disadvantage. After all, what standardized tests end up measuring is social advantage — access to coaching classes, preparation guides and so on. Sir — Mukul Kesavan's article, "Open season" (Feb 6), was illuminating. He is absolutely right 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. One cannot help but speculate that it is Owaisi's religious identity that determined the Opposition's tepid response to the attack. Had the reaction of the political fraternity been the same if, say, some Congress leader had been shot at? Sir — There is a good chance that Punjab will be retained by the Congress after the upcoming assembly elections. The farmers are still unhappy and the Union budget only made things worse. Charanjit Singh Channi has been declared the face of the Congress for the polls after a tense deliberation between Navjot Singh Sidhu and him. Channi holds sway over the backward classes and castes in Punjab. Whereas Sidhu has been known to be argumentative and indisciplined. Although it remains to be seen how Sidhu reacts to Channi's ascent, the latter is the right choice to lead the Congress. Sir — The retired Indian Foreign Service officer, Vivek Katju, is right in refuting the apprehension of a genocide — described as the deliberate killing of millions of people by the State or State-inspired groups — in India ("Warning signs", Feb 4). He has presented a detailed argument for his disagreement with Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, over the latter's warning of such a possibility. Influential figures should be more careful about using sensitive words like 'genocide'. Sir — Narendra Modi has long been known to campaign for the Bharatiya Janata Party during state elections. He is perfectly entitled to do so. But is it right for him to use prime ministerial privileges while doing so? While he is on the campaign trail, the party and not the public exchequer must foot his bills. However, in a country where politicians rarely accept responsibility, this might be too much to ask for.

In full retreat

The Thin Edge | Boris Johnson and his grotesque fancy-dress party

For those who haven't been following the ongoing drama in the politics of the United Kingdom, here's the basic storyline: after an initially botched response, where it ignored the seriousness of the Covid-19 virus, Boris Johnson's government declared strict lockdown protocols for the whole country; as 2020 and 2021 unfolded, Britain witnessed, and suffered under, further incompetencies and the lack of concern from Johnson and his team; scandals to do with the government also began to emerge, including one where a huge contract for PPE suits for the National Health Service was allegedly given to a crony manufacturer; all the mistakes and misdemeanours of the prime minister and cabinet were put into the shade, however, when it came to light that parties might have been held at 10 Downing Street at the height of the lockdown, when ordinary people couldn't even attend to dying loved ones much less meet each other for any small family gatherings. These substantial accusations of flagrant disregard for rules he had himself made for the rest of the country have now got Johnson teetering on the edge of the precipice, one from where he may be pushed over by his own Conservative Party MPs and Tory grandees.

Like many current counterparts in other countries, Johnson is famous for never knowingly speaking the truth. Like other prime ministers and presidents we know, Johnson has his own — typical — methods of avoiding answering hard questions; a favourite trick is what one might call the 'chaff release' method, named after the bunches of tiny aluminium or zinc strips warplanes release as decoys to electronically confuse missiles coming at them; in the case of people like Johnson and Donald Trump, this often involves doing something or making some outrageous statement that steals the headlines, taking media attention away from whichever critical questions people may be asking them. Facing impending defenestration from 10 Downing Street, under the cosh from the sharp questioning in Parliament by the leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer, Johnson recently let fly with a counter-accusation at his tormentor. Before he became leader of the Labour Party, Starmer had been Director of Public Prosecutions and head of the Crown Prosecution Service, the government department that prosecutes criminals in court.

During his time in charge, around 2009, while he was overseeing around 900,000 cases, one sub-division of the CPS decided there was insufficient evidence to prosecute Jimmy Savile, a famous DJ and, by then, an octogenarian, for multiple accusations of child-sex abuse. Savile died soon after and a posthumous enquiry concluded that the lawyers in the sub-division could have handled the multiple cases differently. It was also very clear that Starmer was in no way responsible for the decision not to prosecute Savile. Nevertheless, unfounded posts by right-wing trolls accusing Starmer of this 'failure' began to spread on social media after he became leader of the Labour Party. Facing Starmer in a debate where he was catching the worst of it, Johnson flailed out with this patently false slur. What is interesting is what happens after Johnson repeats this calumny. Ministers in his cabinet distance themselves from Johnson over the matter, and with alacrity. Other MPs in Johnson's party ask him to apologize and withdraw the comments. His head of policy resigns, saying in her resignation letter that "it is so desperately sad that you let yourself down by making this scurrilous accusation against the leader of the opposition." A lawyer who represented Savile's victims tells the BBC that Johnson's accusation was "fundamentally baseless". Johnson himself releases further decoys from his mouth, claiming he never meant to accuse Starmer personally. Krishnan Guru-Murthy, one of Britain's seniormost television anchors, confronts Nadine Dorries, secretary for culture and one of the few remaining Johnson loyalists in the cabinet, and asks her bluntly: "How can you have a Prime Minister just repeating fake news like that?" Dorries's response is to shuffle sideways, saying first that she knows nothing about Starmer's background, second, reaching for whataboutery, that Starmer himself also said things that were inappropriate and, third, that she only has Guru-Murthy's word about Starmer's record. None of this washes with the TV journalist. "He's just repeating a meme!" says Guru-Murthy before adding, "He [Johnson] said things that were untrue, he misled the House today!" It's clear that Johnson's government is in a complete shambles, generously self-garnished with disgrace and vicious mendacity. It's clear that the British prime minister is incompetent, completely indifferent to the fate of the poorest people under his care as he bends over backwards to serve his rich friends, that he is completely narcissistic, and willing to blow apart any principle or truth that obstructs his continuation in power. This much is closely comparable to what we are facing in India today.

Whether they stem from geographical or demographic scale, from history or culture, what should concern us are the differences in what can and can't happen from this point on. For instance, it's unlikely that the Conservative Party or the Tory press will allow any kind of a personality cult to encrust around Johnson. Next, it's clear from the outrage at the revelations about the Downing Street parties that the abhorrence for certain double standards cuts across class and political affiliation — think of it as an instance of queue-jumping triggering if not a revolution then at least a palace coup. Thirdly, there still seems to be some kind of weird half-life left in the notion of 'fair play', at least for white men of a certain class or above — Johnson's ill-judged attack on Starmer may actually gain the Labour leader vote-catching sympathy among the wavering borderline voters who voted Tory last time. As the suffering audience of our own, ongoing grotesque fancy-dress party, we will have to arrive at our own route to ending the mehfil of the few.

Too tall

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

Has the shadow of a colossal ruler fallen upon the republic? Narendra Modi's government is unlikely to answer this question. It seldom answers queries. But voices in the Opposition seem to be apprehensive about New India being eclipsed by its tallest icon. The Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, has alleged repeatedly that the orchestrated charisma of the prime minister has ended up alienating India's current leadership from the problems faced by the common man. Concern about this perceived chasm was recently voiced by another parliamentarian. Responding to the president's address that mentioned B.R. Ambedkar's vision of an India that honoured the principle of equality, Manoj Jha, a Rajya Sabha member, reminded the august House that Ambedkar had also forewarned India about the perils of the personality cult. Mr Jha's warning is pertinent, given India's long enchantment with towering political leaders. Nearly every era of Indian politics has centred around a principal leader. So much so that the fragility of coalitions that have ruled India in brief interludes — they relied on the collective rather than the individual — was taken as a sign of the paucity of charismatic leaders. It can be argued that Mr Modi's ascendancy and sustained public appeal embody the resurrection of India's unfailing deification of heroes.

Icons, unfortunately, can be injurious to the health of a democracy. The burden of colossal figures weakens checks and balances instituted within a democratic polity, enervating its institutions. Policy, consequently, runs the risk of getting centralized. Be it demonetization or the controversial farm laws — they were, albeit, repealed later — India has had its share of such policy-making in recent times. Yet, what is worrying is that a number of functioning democracies — India, Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines and so on — have elected such leviathans, leading to the rise of an authoritarian form of democracy. There is an explanation for this. One of the persistent failures of the liberal political project around the world has been its inability to make countries more egalitarian. This has made it relatively easier for messiahs to emerge by pledging equality. One possible deterrent against this variant could be the strengthening of the ideal of dissent. Debates and dissent — they are integral to the democratic ethos — can go a long way in deflating the inflated chests of leaders. But for this to happen, the argumentative Indian and the argumentative media must rediscover their voice.

Hindutva's inner conflicts

Selective enumeration and eulogizing of Hindus reveal the utter lack of compassion within Hindutva

As the regime that vouches for Hindutva goes on to complete its sojourn in political power, the inherent contradictions that are its essence are coming to the fore.

Hindutva began in 2014 with a promise of development and growth alongside communal polarization. It implied the stoking of Hindu pride and a strong economic presence in a globalized world. The economy is sliding, job opportunities are shrinking, and India is yet to take major strides in its global presence. The BJP-RSS has, therefore, been pushing the communal button harder in the belief that Hindutva would compensate for poor economy and abysmal governance. But economic recovery needs purchasing power and liquidity. This, in turn, is contingent upon a participatory polity and social citizenship. Hindutva, contrastingly, is a project of undermining citizenship to create hierarchies, exclusion, and anxieties cutting across castes and classes. It undermines the trust necessary for market transactions, the innovation necessary for start-ups, and the security necessary for global capital. Hindutva is fraught with contradictions in terms of strategies of mobilization too. While patronizing aggressive, masculine behaviour manifest through street violence and mob lynching, it offers various reasons — including the theory of karma — to explain its failure to meet legitimate demands and concerns. Assam's former health minister had said cancer patients are afflicted with the disease because of their past karmas; pollution in Uttar Pradesh is, similarly, blamed on Pakistan. This contradiction is unsustainable in the long run, as is evident from the BJP's mistake while dealing with the protesting farmers on the assumption of an easy switch between hysteria and passivity. The BJP's critique of dynasty politics was welcomed as a progressive move to liberate politics from the patron-client relationship. With time, the contradiction between the critique of dynasty and extreme centralization has raised questions. Had centralization resulted in efficiency, it could have been read differently. But a diarchy contradicts the critique against dynasty politics. Dynasty politics in India is associated with patronage that comes with the promise of welfare. A critique of dynasty politics can also be seen as a veiled critique of welfarism. Hindutva is about aggression against Muslims, but does that necessarily mean compassion for Hindus? Do we become Hindus only when mobilized against the minorities and not as migrants, farmers, students, and the urban poor? Selective enumeration and eulogizing of Hindus reveal the utter lack of compassion within Hindutva. Hindutva politics promised a new horizon. Narendra Modi was the personification of this transformation. But the claims of a strong leader can become a liability if contradictions become overt, and there is no visible attempt to overcome them. Given the social character of Hindutva, recalibration will not be easy: this was demonstrated during the repealing of the farm laws. The prime minister had to offer an apology without conceding that he was mistaken to begin with. He continued to blame the lack of understanding among farmers.

This leads to no man's land, pushing the leadership to appeal to a core constituency and live in its self-image. This, over time, creates a disconnect with larger social groups that are not part of its core constituency. This distinction between the core and those outside it has got blurred for a leadership that is hesitant to rethink or evaluate objectively. By relying only on force, propaganda and aggression, the regime has been left clueless about why it has stopped being appealing to the masses, especially since it had looked invincible not so long ago.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Knotty scarf

The Karnataka hijab case is complicated; it's a matter of several competing rights

The Karnataka hijab controversy case will take time to find a legal resolution. Being heard by a single Bench of the Karnataka High Court, it stands referred to a larger Bench because of the multiplicity and sensitivity of the issues involved. The High Court did not provide any interim relief to the petitioners — the Muslim girls asked not to attend classes in hijab — during the pendency of the case. The case is quite complicated. That is why it is important to get the sequence of issues right. Essentially, it is about the legality of a citizen's right to choose a religion of choice and the freedom to practice it. Several judgments uphold them. Then follows the right to privacy of the petitioners, that protects their decision to wear a hijab in class. The Kerala High Court had stated that the hijab is an essential religious practice in Islam. And finally comes the question of whether the State's interference in matters concerning essential religious practices is warranted. Four arguments exist here. One, whether a school or college management has the right to prescribe a uniform for all students without permitting any extra clothing or accessory that are essential religious practices. Secondly, since an earlier judgment of a High Court stated that the hijab is an essential religious practice in Islam, should it not be allowed, with or without a uniform, especially when accessories that form an essential practice of other religions are worn over and above the uniform? The Sikh '*patka*' is an example.

Thirdly, the Karnataka Government said in its order upholding the ban on the hijab by the college authorities that public order must be preserved. It needs to be determined how wearing a hijab, which is a private affair, is a threat to public order. Rather, the public order was disturbed when a group of students entered the college wearing saffron shawls to protest some girls wearing the hijab. It needs to be clarified who threatened public order and how. Thus, the Government order itself becomes subject to legal scrutiny. Four, the case throws up the question of how to resolve a situation where two fundamental rights compete with each other. The reference is to the right of the college management to introduce a uniform and the right of the petitioner students to wear an item of additional clothing because it is an essential practice of their religion. There is a High Court order in another case that the individual interest (of the petitioner, in this case) must yield to the larger interest (of the management). The court needs to rule on which of the two — imparting education and maintaining public order — is the larger interest inside an educational institution. The immediate priority of the larger Bench which would now hear the case is to decide on the interim relief request of the petitioner girls so that they do not lose out on education more than they already have.

PICTALK

Students perform 'Surya Namaskar' during the 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' celebrations, in Karad PTI

Flighty course

The TN Government is playing with lives of the poor students by scrapping NEET

The farce being staged in Tamil Nadu over the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to undergraduate medical courses basically is 'much ado about nothing'. The Bill adopted by the Tamil Nadu Assembly scrapping NEET was sent to Governor RN Ravi for approval. The Governor, after seeking legal counsel, sent it back to the Government stating that scrapping of NEET was against the interests of students, especially the rural and economically poor students. He also pointed out that the Supreme Court in the Christian Medical College Vellore Vs Union of India (2020) case had upheld NEET as it prevented economic exploitation of poor students. It is in this backdrop that one should see Tamil Nadu Government re-sending the Bill back to the Governor. Chief Minister MK Stalin knows well that the Governor would not sign the Bill and sit over it indefinitely. The NEET is a gift to the country by the Congress-led UPA regime in 2010 and the DMK was the second largest constituent of that Government. Though the then Chief Justice Altamas Kabir had pronounced the move as unconstitutional, a Constitution Bench unanimously ruled in favour of NEET, which was implemented by the Narendra Modi Government in 2016.

Tamil Nadu boasts of many private medical colleges where the admission was based on the management's discretion which used to sell each MBBS seat for ₹1 crore. The Dravidian parties portrayed isolated cases of suicide by students who failed to make it to the MBBS courses as fallout of the NEET fiasco. But the fact that many poor and economically backward students could get admission to MBBS courses has been conveniently blacked out from public knowledge by these outfits. The media in Tamil Nadu, which make a killing through advertisements issued by these private medical colleges, sing paeans to the management and the State administration. "The Government must find a permanent solution to eliminate the menace of capitation fee and profiteering by private medical colleges. More than ₹20,000 crore is collected annually by these colleges by way of capitation fees. Formulating an all-India policy for medical admissions is the need of the hour. NEET will solve the problem to some extent," a pro-DMK newspaper had said in 2016. The Tamil Nadu Government's failure to bring in much-needed reforms in its school education syllabus is not being discussed by anyone who matters.

A few reasons why Tollywood languishes

PRAFULL **GORADIA**

Bengali scriptwriters and directors were into making 'pure', intellectual, non-masala films which had talent but little success at the cash register

Mati-ul-Islam, a right-hand man of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and later the Finance Secretary of Bangladesh, first met Satyajit Ray to import some films for the benefit of Bangladeshis. The prices paid would astound today's generation. The maximum was for *Apur Sansar* — a handsome price of ₹25,000. In all, he purchased 12 films. This incident apart, the Bengal film industry, popularly called Tollywood, has not marketed its products as profitable as it might have. Or conversely perhaps, it has produced what is intellectually attractive but commercially not much viable.

Uncannily, Bengali men and women, in most segments of Bollywood, have played a role as big as any other community, including setting up studios. Bombay Talkies was founded by Devika Rani and her husband. Her role cannot be underestimated when one realises that Dilip Kumar aka Yusuf Khan was her exclusive find.

Bengalis sent nightingales, men and women of distinction, to the song and music world of Bombay, most notably Hemant Kumar, Manna Dey and the inimitable Kishore Kumar, not to forget Geeta Roy (later Geeta Dutt) and the veteran Juthica Roy, whose rendition of *Ghoonghat ke pat khol re, tohe piyaa milenge* resonates even today. We cannot also forget that the immortal KL Saigal was a product of New Theatres, founded by BN Sircar. So were Saigal's renditions *Babul mora* and *Jab dil hi toot gaya*, which still ring in our ears. Incidentally, Saigal had been singing Rabindra sangeet in Kolkata. The golden voice of *ghazals* in the Bombay film world, Talat Mehmood, also began his career in All India Radio, Calcutta, under the pen name of Tapan Kumar.

One could conclude, and not without justification, that Tollywood has had talent but little success. The directors and filmmakers that come to mind are many, but let us mention the legendary Bimal Roy (who gave us *Do Bigha Zameen, Kabuliwala* and many other classics), Hrishikesh Mukherji, Basu Bhattacharya and Shakti Samanta, among the prominent ones.

It is true that Tollywood has produced some Hindi and Urdu films such as *Devdas*, but the net cast by Bengali directors has been narrow and confined mainly to Bengali movies. By the same token, not many non-Bengalis got much space on the Tollywood screen. The reason is that unless one is a son of the soil, it is difficult to pick up spoken Bangla, which is first a melody and then a language. For example, one is pronounced '*Ayk*' while 21 is '*ek*'; 51 is '*ek anno*' and 61 becomes '*ek sutti*'. Not many who are not born in Bengal can cope with this variation of melody first and language later. Many of even those born on its soil are not conscious of this variation.

As a result, once Bollywood got going, Tollywood could not compete. Also, Tollywood selects subjects without any marketing strategy, and lacks a proper distribution network. The West Bengal Government is silent about promoting good cinema while other States pursue it seriously. Another reason may be that Tollywood did not traverse from the *zamindari* psyche to that of businesspeople and eventually to the respectable middle class. The Bengali *zamindar*, once *zamindari* was over, continued to look down upon business as an OBC occupation; he descended straight into the middle class. The contempt for business persisted as before. Occupationally, the *zamindar* took refuge in either intellectualism or trade unionism.

> ANYONE WHO COULD DEAL IN MASALA STUFF AND WANTED TO MAKE MONEY HAD TO TAKE A TRAIN FROM THE ERSTWHILE BENGAL NAGPUR RAILWAY TO BOMBAY. BUT IT IS NOT TOO LATE FOR TOLLYWOOD TO CATCH UP

When it came to films, Tollywood's scriptwriters and directors produced 'pure' and intellectual films, without any masala being allowed to touch the *kadhai, a la* Satyajit Ray, Ritwick Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. Anyone who could deal in masala stuff and wanted to make money had to take a train from the erstwhile Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR) to Bombay.

It is not too late for Tollywood to catch up. For this, the Kolkata film world needs to think anew, devise new strategies and join the race. The normal or run-of-the-mill explanation of financial paucity would not come in the way. As American businessmen say, "Money follows a bright new idea with the confidence to manage it. Ideas and management do not follow money." To take an example of a film that was a simple idea, which was followed by plenty of finance, it was *Gandhi* by Sir Richard Attenborough. From the most elderly and learned intellectuals to the youngest of schoolchildren, everyone could identify with the classic movie and enjoy it. Why did we have to wait for an English knight to produce a classic on an Indian giant?

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, India produced any number of giants. The saga of Netaji Subhas remains an epic, for instance. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was poetry and music personified, besides being India's first Nobel laureate for Literature, for *Gitanjali*. Bankim Chandra was an inspiration for heroes, for Tollywood or any other 'Wood' to produce movies on. Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda are spirituality epitomised.

Coming to themes, is there any shortage in West Bengal or any other part of India? Sandakphu, the Sunderbans with its Royal Bengal Tigers, the collieries and tea gardens are landmarks of the State. *Kapurush* deals with tea gardens, but not with tea-growing; they use these gardens as a stage for dubious romance.

(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

RESOLVE THE HIJAB ISSUE PEACEFULLY

Sir — It is the need of the hour that there should be engagement with reason, fairness and common sense as Pakistan has already entered this unhealthy controversy which could have been avoided if an amicable solution were sought at an early stage. The episode revolves around just scarves, which is a pity and could have been resolved at the local level. Can religious symbolism in a person's appearance — a turban, a *tilak*, a crucifix around the neck be a threat to law and order? This is just one example of the confusion and conflict underlying the theme of "coexistence" in India.

Saffron scarves are symbols of Hindutva, but not quite on the same plane as hijab which, apart from customary use by the faithful, passed the Supreme Court's earlier "essence of religion" test. Yet, all courts approach such issues by the same route. Does secularism mean stopping girls from studying if they wear hijab? The High Court has referred the matter to a larger Bench and not given any interim relief. The State Government should ensure peace and harmony. Till the verdict, both sides should practice restraint in national interest. Utmost care is required to prevent the spread of such developments.

Yash Pal Ralhan | *Jalandhar*

WRONG TO BLAME THE CONGRESS

Sir — The Congress might have given free tickets to labourers at railway stations to go and "spread Coronavirus", but did the party workers operate the trains too? Besides, wageless starving bankrupt migrants were inhumanely charged high fares for their return home after getting stranded in alien places due to the instant lockdown for months. Therefore, the free tickets offered by the Congress actually worked as a balm on the wounds of the vulnerable working class. By offering to pay railway fares from the Congress fund, that "Italian" proved to feel the pain of the poorest of the poor migrants in India.

Perhaps the Government needs to urgently amend the meaning of "responsibility" in the dictionary. Thanks to the sudden announcement of lockdown, the stranded poor not only found themselves without livelihood and food, lakhs of them were thrown out of their accommodation for their failure to pay rent. When sanity and humanity demand repeated apologies from the Centre for the unfathomable pain 'gifted' to poor migrants, we are made to believe that the Congress was a "super-spreader" of Coronavirus. It's time the Indian electorate learned to evaluate its leaders through their compassion, qualities and attitude, not race or birth which is nothing but mere destiny.

Kajal Chatterjee | *Kolkata*

OPPOSITION NEEDS TO MOVE FASTER

Sir — There is no denying that the Congress is a drowning ship because its policies have been challenged head-on by the BJP which emerged as a national party only in the 1980s. Since 2014, the BJP has left no political space for anyone else and is ruling with an iron hand. It has become so emboldened that the Prime Minister does not think twice before criticising everybody else, particularly the Congress. Though there is no creditworthy achievement on any front by the BJP in more than seven years, there is nobody else to challenge it.

The Congress is struggling to win three-digit seats, and the way BJP is moving in northern States, its job is not easy. Mamata and Stalin do not like the BJP's rule at the Centre. In such a scenario, a united front is the only way to counter the BJP at the Centre. Since BJP is getting roughly 40 per cent of the vote share, there must be 60 per cent who are not supporting it. Unless it has a different plan, the Congress should not waste time in stitching an alliance with the regional parties and merge its identity. Not doing so would be a big loss for the Congress.

RK Arya | *Faridabad*

Only pre-poll rhetoric

One may agree or not, but participating in the debate on the motion of thanks in Parliament, PM Narendra Modi's speech was not in line with the points raised by the Opposition, but with an eye on the upcoming mini election. Modi has shown his oratory skills but he forgets that people want to hear about current achievements, future actions and the points raised by the Opposition. Instead, Modi chose to accuse the Congress of being the "leader of the *tukde-tukde* gang" (in reality, the BJP is dividing the country on the basis of religion and language). He even mentioned that "Mahatma Gandhi wanted the Congress dismantled because he knew what would happen".

Interestingly, though Modi called the Congress leader of '*tukde-tukde* gang', but when a question was put up in Parliament asking who the members of the gang are, the Minister concerned replied: "We have no data available on the *tukde-tukde* gang." Congress leader P Chidambaram has correctly called the NDA Government as the "No Data Available" Government because it doesn't have any data on medical oxygen shortage deaths, the bodies flowing in the Ganga in UP, how many migrants walked back to their homes or on doubling farmers' income, which should have been done in 2022. People are sorry to hear almost two election speeches in two days from PM Modi instead of clarifying his Government's position in terms of performance.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | *Faridabad*

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

SOUNDBITE

We believe that criticism is an essential part of democracy...but not blind opposition to everything.

Prime Minister — Narendra Modi

The reports about Pegasus, if they are true, are of a very serious nature.

Israeli Prime Minister — Naftali Bennett

Shark Tank ke saare episodes mein main hoon, kyun ki main faltu aadmi hun.

Founder and CEO, People Group and Shaadi.com — Anupam Mittal

I never said anyone had sexually assaulted me in any way. It's a huge misunderstanding.

Chinese tennis star — Peng Shuai

We would strive to implement NEP 2020, especially in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary areas of study.

JNU's first woman V-C —Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit

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FIRSTCOLUMN

NORTH KOREA: THE STING IN THE TAIL

The Pyongyang-Washington tiff interests nobody

GWYNNE **DYER**

They want to have a deterrence system that is like a scorpion's tail," said Prof. Kim Dong Yup, a former South Korean naval commander. "North Korea's main purpose is not to attack but to defend themselves." They want a "diversified deterrent capability," and who could blame them? It's a welcome distraction from the daily warnings of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, and even less likely to end in an actual war. North Korea test-fired seven different missiles in a month, US President Joe Biden retaliated with more sanctions against Kim Jong-un's hermit state, and everybody got their warhorses out for a brisk trot around the track. The reality, however, is that nobody in a position of authority is in the least excited by this little back-and-forth between Pyongyang and Washington. Pyongyang hasn't tested any nuclear weapons since 2017, but it is believed to

have 50-60 warheads by now. Neither has it test-launched its intercontinental ballistic missiles (the ones that can reach anywhere in the United States) since then. The January tests were of 'hypersonic' missiles, 'intermediate-range' missiles, cruise missiles and similar hardware. Most of those missiles can probably carry nuclear warheads too, but only as far as South Korea or Japan, America's local allies. It's a formidable investment for a small, quite poor country (same population as Australia, but one-sixtieth the size) - but it's not that extravagant when you consider that all these nukes are intended to deter the United States. No American diplomat or military officer will admit publicly that North Korea's fear of an American nuclear attack is justified, but the more intelligent ones realise that the rules of nuclear deterrence are exactly the same for democratic superpowers and dwarf tyrannies. If your enemy has nuclear weapons, then to be safe you must have them too. From the perspective of Pyongyang, American nuclear weapons are a mortal threat, and nobody can persuade the North Korean regime that they would never be used against it unless it attacked first. Americans wouldn't forego nuclear weapons if China and Russia made such promises, nor would they take America's word for it. Too much is at stake to take a chance.

This is the universal dilemma of nuclear weapons. North Korea has just as much right to worry about it as the United States, and it will never give its own nukes up so long as the current confrontation in the Korean peninsula persists. (71 years and counting.) Any meetings or 'summits' between US and North Korean diplomats or leaders will be driven by North Korea's perpetual desire to end UN and US trade sanctions and/or America's futile quest to get Kim to agree to unilateral nuclear disarmament. Neither is going to happen, but there is no crisis either. The North Korean regime is vicious, but it is not crazy. A reasonably stable cold peace has prevailed in the peninsula since the end of the Korean War in 1953, guaranteed since the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006 by mutual nuclear deterrence between the US and North Korea. There's no urgent need to 'fix it' or 'shore it up' now. The United States cannot bring itself to publicly acknowledge this fact, but the Pentagon and the State Department privately accept that by now it is the long-established reality of the US-NK relationship. "They very much understand the significance of moving up the ladder on range," a senior Biden administration official said on Sunday, implicitly recognising that the North Koreans had not tested any new missiles capable of striking the American homeland. There really is a mutual understanding. They just can't talk about it.

(Gwynne Dyer's new book is 'The Shortest History of War'. The views expressed are personal.)

Pak's security policy is a flawed exercise

PK **VASUDEVA**

It is part of the focused effort to change the global perception of Pakistan as a 'national security State', obsessed with chasing an elusive parity with India

Pakistan recently released a public version of its National Security Policy (NSP) document. The document was authored by Moeed W Yusuf, previously Special Assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan on National Security and Strategic Policy Planning, later re-designated as the National Security Adviser (NSA). Drawing from his experience as former associate vice-president at the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace, Khan managed to provide a scholarly appeal to the document, with clever use of bombastic language that could impress amateur international audiences.

From Pakistan's strategic perspective, the document feeds into the ongoing efforts of the 'miltablishment' (military establishment) to reinvent itself as a 'change-agent' of a new narrative, based on the prioritisation of geo-economics as the key driver on national priorities, rather than the earlier paradigm based in pure geo-politics. Essentially, given the precarious economic situation facing Pakistan, and its fallen international standing after the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, the reality has dawned upon the miltablishment that it cannot be business as usual, of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. Therefore, the NSP has to be seen as a part of the focused effort to change the international perception of Pakistan as a 'national security state', obsessed with chasing an elusive parity with India, and maintaining the dominance of its military in every sphere, at any cost.

The document has incorporated all the right terms that would appeal to Western audiences. Sample some; "safety, security, dignity and prosperity of the people", "sustainable and inclusive economic growth", "preservation of diverse cultural heritage", "good Governance to strengthen the State-citizen contract", "ensure transparency and accountability", "strengthening the human security pillar of comprehensive national security", "seeking a peaceful neighbourhood based on mutual co-existence, and so on. The repeated emphasis on enhancing trade, investment and connectivity is also given to make a mark in international business circles.

A finer reading of the document reveals that from India's point of view, the publication is nothing but a sophisticated exercise in insincerity. Almost all direct and indirect references to India have a negative connotation. Perhaps, the only saving grace in the entire document is the line "Pakistan, under its policy of peace at home and abroad, wishes to improve its relationship with India" (page 36, under "India"), and the restoration of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution by India is not mentioned as a pre-condition in the context of any bilateral proposition.

The document has other references to domestic security issues, which are nothing but clever attempts to paper over the serious problems that have not been acknowledged, let alone acted upon with due sincerity by Pakistan, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The most blatant onesoncern terrorism and narcotics trafficking. In the discussion under "Terrorism", one finds the absurd claim that "Pakistan pursues a policy of zero tolerance for any groups involved in terrorist activities on its soil" and "…with national resolve and dedication, Pakistan has fought one of the most successful wars against terrorism in the past two decades". Subsequently, under "Narcotics and Organised crime", it is claimed that "Pakistan has been declared a poppy-free country since 2001". The vacuity of this statement is belied by the fact that a majority of Afghanistan-origin opium, heroin and methamphetamine is trafficked through Pakistan, with the tacit support of state agencies, primarily the Inter-Services Intelligence.

> THE EMPHASIS IS UNDOUBTEDLY ON DEFENCE. THE DOCUMENT IS OVERLOADED WITH CONCERNS OVER INCREASING ASYMMETRY IN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS WITH INDIA. REDRESSAL IS SOUGHT IN THE GROWTH OF ECONOMY AS A NECESSARY PREREQUISITE. IF THE CONTRADICTIONS AND DEMANDS OF A DEPENDENT AND FRAGILE ECONOMY ARE FUNDAMENTAL, THEY HAVE TO BE SET RIGHT FIRST

(The writer is former Senior Professor, International Trade and Member, Vivekananda International Foundation. The views expressed are personal.)

There is a major lacuna of the document in the absence of any serious proposition concerning addressing the serious human rights situation in Afghanistan. There is also a subtle endeavour to underemphasize the burgeoning dependence upon China on vital matters of national interest. The publication has already come under sharp criticism by domestic critics within Pakistan, who have called it high on platitude and low on substance. Despite its claim of bringing in the factor of "geo-economics", alongside "geo-strategy", the publication does not make any commitment to reduce or rationalize the unsustainable Defence Budget of Pakistan, which remains largely out of public scrutiny.

The document adopts a slick presentation style, summarising the discussion of its six thematic sections in Policy Objectives, at the end of each relevant chapter. There is, however, no discussion on the "hows" of the vaunted objectives listed in enigmatic language. It is a major weakness of the document - in absence of even broad allusion to the main components of the Policy Objectives described, the infirmities of the discussion will only become magnified in time.

The document has been given a time frame of four years by the authors. As a sincere exercise in self-delusion, and a ploy for diverting the attention of the world from the real problems, which strike at the root of Pakistan's anachronistic existence, the document may become redundant in less than half its intended time frame, on an optimistic note. For India, it is another proof in evidence that the insincere miltablishment of Pakistan will use every trick in the book to buy time and attempt to encash on tactical peace to achieve its unflagging grand strategic objective of remaining the ultimate arbitrators of Pakistan's destiny.

The existing national security paradigm could provide neither state security nor human security to Pakistan. One wonders how a new concept of national security can emerge without critically drawing the right conclusions from past devastating military adventures. While keeping the failures of a moribund security paradigm under the carpet, the question must be asked, what is so new in the "first" national security policy document, on which so much self-praise is being showered?

It is being belatedly admitted that without ensuring economic security, "traditional security", i.e., defence, is not possible. The fact of the matter is that under the burden of traditional security, an impoverished economy has collapsed. And, consequently, traditional military security has also come under mounting pressure. The published NSP document provides only an abstract analytical and disjointed framework, although it is reluctant to unambiguously draw a line between traditional security and human security.

What ought to be the contours of a meaningful paradigm shift? In simple and clear words, human security, as opposed to the security of the state, demands the security of people based on their fundamental rights. But, this basic feature of any qualitative change is mentioned casually and superficially, and that too in the last chapter of the document. Five chapters deal only with traditional security and other matters related to it, another chapter covers foreign policy and one chapter deals with economic security.

The emphasis is undoubtedly on defence. The document is overloaded with concerns over increasing asymmetry in conventional weapons with India. Redressal is sought in the growth of the economy as a necessary prerequisite. If the contradictions and demands of a dependent and fragile economy are fundamental, they have to be set right first. Then, logically, all aspects of traditional security must be subjected to economic imperatives, which warrant peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial economic cooperation, and recalibration and resolution of the "core issues" through protracted and patient negotiations. Rather than taking a maximalist approach towards the most intractable "core" issues, it would require taking a path towards a peaceful settlement of disputes with all neighbours, promotion of mutually beneficial trade and investment across borders, and building economic synergies to strengthen economic interdependence.

Conclusively, Pakistan's NSP is a flawed exercise in futility.

POINTCOUNTERPOINT

OWAISI'S SECURITY THREAT HAS BEEN REASSESSED AND THE GOVT HAS DECIDED TO PROVIDE Z-CATEGORY SECURITY TO HIM.
— UNION HOME MINISTER
AMIT SHAH

THE VALUE OF MY LIFE IS NOT MORE THAN THE LIVES OF 22 PEOPLE IN UP WHO DIED IN THE CAA PROTESTS.
— AIMIM CHIEF
ASADUDDIN OWAISI

Post-pandemic Railways at an interesting crossroad

The pandemic presented a unique business opportunity to Indian Railways to concentrate on its two most profitable business segments

SUSHIL K **LUTHRA**

Information about the working and the finances of the Indian Railways has become scarce in recent years. Discontinuance of a separate Railway Budget since 2017has taken the limelight away from the Railways. Now it features as a single paragraph in the Union Budget.

As a result, little is now publicly discussed about new projects, new trains, or demands for new lines or projects by different states or politicians. High-profile or controversial subjects like the High-Speed Corridors, the Train-18 project, or the Private train Operations schemedo find occasional mention in the press, but a holistic view of the actual health, direction or growth of the Indian Railways -the biggest employer in the country, and arguably one of the biggest enterprises in the world -is no longer available to the country at large. Since 2017, the Ministry does not even have a full-time Railway Minister. Both Piyush Goyal (on taking over from Suresh Prabhu in September 2017) and the present incumbent Ashwini Vaishnav have been given charge of other important ministries along with Railways, further exacerbating matters.

(The writer retired as Chief Administrative Officer of one of IR's Production Units. The views expressed are personal.)

Consequently, the specific impact of Covid on IR, has not been sufficiently evaluated in the public domain. In the absence of an objective assessment about the rebound - if any - by the Railway sector, and in the run-up to the upcoming Budget presentation, an attempt was made to compile and compare available prov-

sional data on IR's website for the 9-month period April-December 2021 with April-December 2019, two years back. This is considered the fairest possible comparison, considering the return of Covid in January 22, which is again likely to vitiate comparisons.

Surprisingly, the numbers reveal a robust buoyancyin its freight business.Freight carried increased from 891 million MT to 1030 million MT in this period, an increase of 15.6per cent, and Freight revenues a very healthy 20.9

Per cent, from ₹86.706cr. to ₹104,789 cr.over 2 years - a 10 per cent annual rise.

The passenger segment, however,is a very differentstory. While total passengerscarried have reduced from 6278 million to 2300 million (- 63 per cent), revenue from passengers fell from ₹39,528cr. to ₹ 27.092cr.(-31.5%), for the 9-month comparison period. The biggest reduction is in the suburban passenger numbers, which explains why the loss in revenue is disproportionately less in relation to the drop in numbers. The PRS segment - within which the sleeper class, AC-3 tier, AC chair car and AC-2 tier constitute almost 90 per cent of the total numbers and almost 75 per cent of the segment revenue - has almost recovered fully in December 21 to the December 19 levels, while the non-PRS/Suburban continues to operate at less than 50 per cent of the December 2019 levels.

Freight, passenger and sundry earnings taken together show that IR's earning have fully recovered: earnings this year till December are ₹ 1,37,393 cr. against ₹1,32,931 cr. in 2019-20, a modest 3.4 per cent increase over the two-year pandemic period.

The improved freight performance may partially owe it to the reduced passenger operations, with more paths, more locomotives/crew available, and easier mobility possible. The pandemic's adverse effect on the trucking business, and elevated fuel prices, may also have favoured rail freight. These are advantages IR would do well to capitalise on, and build on further. The gradual, partial opening-up of the two Dedicated Freight Corridors are also adding capacity (they moved about 6 billion NTKMs till recently - a significant, although still a miniscule part of IR's traffic). A sustained increase in freight, at a level higher than the GDP growth, as achieved in the last two years, will help win back much needed modal share of the major, non-coal commodities to rail.

The pandemic, and the phased recovery of the economy has presenteda unique business opportunity to Indian Railways in that they are able to concentrate on their two most profitable business segments - Freight and long-distance, reserved passengers - keeping the grossly subsidised and capacity guzzling suburban and short/medium distanceordinary passenger services to the bare minimum. The temporary suspension of many concessions on the passenger services would also have helped in adding to revenue, and in improving availability to full-fare paying passengers. All this offers clear clues to the Rail Ministry in long-term measures aimed at improving its revenues, profitability, and rewinning its importance and relevance. It is hoped that thiswindfall - which may be partially circumstantial, and not a positive act of the IR management - will not be allowed to wither away.

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The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

UP & down

It is because Uttar Pradesh is the politically most dominant and electorally most significant state in India that the Assembly election is perhaps more vital for the Bharatiya Janata Party than for other players in the mix.

This is not to say an improved showing by the Congress would not help it clutch on to a semblance of relevance, or that the Bahujan Samaj Party does not need to prove it can arrest its decline, or, indeed, that a Samajwadi Party victory would not give the Opposition at the national level a huge fillip.

But the point is that even if the Congress' seat tally fails to make it to double digits, the BSP's vote percentage slips, and the SP falls short of a win, it would only reiterate these parties' political-electoral limitations which, in turn, would have very limited, if any, impact on their respective leaderships.

Not so, for the BJP. For the ruling dispensation, the results of the UP poll are likely to have a substantial impact both in Lucknow and Delhi ~ ideologically, organisationally, and in terms of the leadership succession issue after the 2024 General Election within a year or so of which Prime Minister Narendra Modi will attain the age of 75, his self-imposed ceiling for BJP leaders to take a step back from holding positions in party and government.

There are multiple reasons why the 2022 UP election is expected to set the course for the BJP over the next few years. First, the state is an exemplar of the party's strong Hindutva pitch combined with wide-ranging welfare programmes and a call to nationalism which has been the SOP for the BJP across North India. In Yogi Adityanath, the party has not just a chief minister who has cultivated a no-nonsense image but also a leader who campaigns robustly headlining these issues and is committed to them ideologically.

Also, he is in his late 40s, which makes him a contender for a larger role at the national level post-2024, especially given the state to which he belongs sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha. If he can pull off a win in UP, Adityanath will seek to buttress his position nationally, even though he will be the first to concede there are other deserving candidates in the government and in the party.

It is evident that the entire party machinery is going full tilt in the campaign to retain Uttar Pradesh. In the midst of the dust kicked up in what is turning out to be a keenly contested poll, however, there are those in the backrooms who understand that the issues which may find resonance in North India do not necessarily work in the South and East of the country. Ditto, the leadership. Interesting times lie ahead; in the interim, the BJP has everything to lose if it does not win UP.

What next?

Western capitals are abuzz with one question above all others ~ what happens if Russia invades Ukraine? The issue has acquired urgency as neither Moscow nor Washington and its European Union (EU) allies show any signs of backing down and negotiations including the initiative a couple of days ago by French President Emmanuel Macron having little chance of success.

Russian demands are far-reaching and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) could never agree to them. So, what next? A recent piece in The Atlantic by Thomas Wright offers some insight into the emerging thinking in Washington where the realisation has struck home that even if the argument of those pushing for concessions to be made to Russia ~ regarding what the Kremlin terms its security environment due to what it sees as the unrelenting eastward expansion of Nato ~ is accepted, it would not defuse the crisis.

For, even if the trans-Atlantic alliance were, say, to make a statement that Ukraine would not be admitted to Nato for the next 10 years, it would still not stop Kiev's move away from Moscow and into the West's and more specifically the EU's embrace. In these circumstances, a consensus is emerging among experts and policy establishments in the USA and Europe that there can be only two scenarios which will now play out.

First, if Russia invades Ukraine, it would accentuate as opposed to assuage Moscow's security concerns as US-led tough economic and technology sanctions combined with a West-backed insurgency to drive Russian troops out of Ukraine would most likely come into play. Additionally, fresh US Army deployments in eastern and northern Europe would rise exponentially and would include offensive weaponry.

An invasion could, writes Wright, lead even traditionally circumspect Scandinavian countries that neighbour Russia such as Finland and Sweden to join NATO. So, the Kremlin would have a trophy win by wresting control of Ukraine, the nationalists at home would be chuffed, and President Vladimir Putin may well preen at his legacy of having made a substantial advance in reclaiming the power of the erstwhile Soviet Union by its successor Russian state, but the country will be much less secure.

The second scenario is that if Russia de-escalates, the West would be ready to offer a substantive negotiation over Europe's security architecture including on new, reciprocal arms-control agreements that could address Russian concerns over Nato deployments in eastern Europe.

President Putin would have to give up his ambition of immediately gaining control of Ukraine and collapsing the European security order; but as recompense, he would have additional influence within that order. As things stand, there is no possible third outcome. Those responsible for the Ukraine crisis need to keep this fact on the top of their minds.

Cooperative federalism

It has been iterated that officers would be posted on Central deputation only in consultation with the States but also been made clear that 'once the number of officers to come on deputation to the Centre is fixed after mutual consultation, the Central Government should have overriding powers to get those officers'

The florid phrase 'Minimum government and maximum governance' is obviously not having the desired impact in terms of a need for senior officers by the Union government. The move of the government to make changes in the Indian Administrative Service (Cadre) Rules, 1954, aims to avail the services of IAS officers on deputation with the Union government from the respective state cadres.

However, there is an avalanche of opposition from many states, so much so that there is a forewarning of launching a people's movement by a state like West Bengal. The Chief Ministers of West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have written to the Prime Minister strongly opposing the proposed changes. Many other States, including Maharashtra, view the move as an erosion of India's federal structure.

The states, especially those not ruled by the National Democratic Alliance, are apprehensive that the proposed changes would confer overarching powers to the Union Government in the posting of IAS officers. This may be followed by similar changes in the service rules of other All India Services (AIS) such as the Indian Police Service and the Indian Forest Service.

Under the extant Rule 6 (1) of the IAS Cadre Rules, 1954, "A cadre officer may, with the concurrence of the State Government concerned and the Central Government, be deputed for service under the Central Government or another State Government or ~ body ~ wholly or substantially owned or controlled by the Central Government or by another State Government."

But the proviso to the rule says, "Provided that in case of any disagreement, the matter shall be decided by the Central Government and the State Government concerned shall give effect to the decision of the Central Government."

The fierce tussle is over the changes proposed in Rule 6. The proposed amendment has a new proviso ~ "Provided that each State Government shall make available for deputation to the Central Government, such number of eligible officers of various levels to the extent of Central Deputation Reserve (CDS) prescribed under Regulations referred to in Rule 4(1), adjusted proportionately by the number of officers available with the State Government concerned vis-a-vis the total authorised strength of the State Cadre at a given point of time. The actual number of officers to be deputed to the Central Government shall be decided by the Central Government in consultation with the State Government concerned."

The original proviso under Rule 6(1) has been retained with this addition ~ "within a specified time". That means, in case of disagreement between the State and the Central Government, the decision of the Central Government shall take effect within the time-line stipulated in the deputation order, which may be in the nature of a 'marching order' for the officer.

The argument of the State Governments is that an officer

whom the Central Government may choose to take out of a state without the agreement of the State Government under whom he/she is serving, will stand released from his/ her current assignment forthwith.

Some non-NDA ruled states find the revised amendment proposal more draconian than the former...; against the basic structure of India's Constitutional scheme and destructive of the nation's federal polity. They apprehend that it will create 'fear psychosis', promote arbitrariness and would "completely render" the officers and all State governments "at the mercy of the Central Government."

There is lurking fear of immense potential for harassment and vendetta politics. Many retired civil servants have publicly forewarned about the adverse consequences and appealed for stalling the move.

The Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India, has denied that the Centre was trying to accord itself undue powers and clarified that the States have not been sending officers for central deputation as per fixed ratio.

It has also been iterated that officers would be posted on central deputation only in consultation with the States but also made clear that "once the number of officers to come on deputation to the Centre is fixed after mutual consultation, the Central Government should have overriding powers to get those officers."

But often between the precept and the practice there falls the shadow. There have been instances when orders were issued by the Central Government without consulting the State Governments. In June 2001, Tamil Nadu police raided former chief minister M Karunanidhi's home and arrested him along with his DMK colleagues, Murasoli Maran and T R Baalu, both then Ministers in NDA Government.

Piqued, the Central Government asked the State Government to send on central deputation the three IPS officers connected with the raids. Chief Minister Jayalalithaa not only refused but also wrote to other Chief Ministers canvassing support to protect the rights of the States.

In yet another case, a Tamil Nadu cadre IPS officer was deputed to the CBI in 2014. The State Government refused to release the officer, but the officer joined the CBI. The State Government suspended the officer for defying its order. Later, the officer was appointed Lokpal in 2019 by the Government of India.

DEVENDER SINGH ASWAL

The writer is ex Addl Secretary, Lok Sabha and a member of Delhi Bar Council. The views expressed are personal

The tenure of Alapan Bandyopadhyay, an 1987 batch IAS officer and Chief Secretary of West Bengal was extended by a period of three months with the approval of the Appointments Committee of the Union Cabinet four days prior to his date of superannuation.

But he was suddenly posted to Delhi on the day he would have normally superannuated. No consultation was done with the State Government, nor the willingness of the officer ascertained. There was nothing in the order to show why he was so urgently required in Delhi for a period of three months after his retirement.

Another case is of December 2020. The Centre asked that three IPS officers who were in charge of security when BJP president J P Nadda's motorcade was attacked outside Kolkata on 10 December 2021 allegedly by supporters of the Trinamool Congress, be sent on deputation to the Centre. The State Government refused, citing a shortage of IPS officers. The Centre did not invoke the disagreement clause and the matter stood closed.

The plea of the Central Government is that a mounting shortfall in civil servants deputed by State Governments to the Centre impelled the Centre to amend deputation rules to give itself powers to transfer officers without the consent of States. According to regulations, the States must earmark 40 per cent of senior posts in every cadre to meet central requirements, but there is a CDR shortfall across States ranging between 61 to 95 per cent.

There is, in particular, a shortage of joint secretaries, directors and deputy secretaries. Also, there is a shortage of IPS officers with the Central Government.

A year ago, the Union Home Secretary wrote to Chief Secretaries reminding them of insufficient nominations of IPS officers to fill up vacant central police posts. The Centre maintains that the actual number of officers to be deputed will be decided only after due consultation with the State Government, even after the amendment to the AIS rules.

Officers of AIS ~ an Act of Parliament enacted in 1952 ~ are recruited by the UPSC and placed in various State cadres. They are expected to serve both the Central and State Government (home cadre) in various stints being the 'shared asset' of the Union and the States.

However, if the officers are taken away on central deputation without prior consultation with the State Government and without ascertaining the willingness of the officer concerned, the Central Government may take away ~ or so the States fear ~ a star performer or a bold and upright officer from the State abruptly.

Arbitrary central deputation is bound to disturb the planning and developmental work of the States and affect the service morale. Upright officers too, as evident from some instances cited, could be subjected to punitive central posting if their actions ruffle political feathers.

On the other hand, it is also a fact that generally IAS and IPS officers do not prefer to go on central deputation to below Joint Secretary level posts as they do not get the coveted facilities which they get as DM or SP.

But certainly, there is an imperative need to bring middle level officers on Central deputation under a standing consultative machinery.

To quote Sardar Patel, an "all India service [....] must remain above party and we should ensure that political considerations either in its discipline or in its control are reduced to the minimum, if not eliminated altogether."

He had famously referred to civil servants as the 'steel frame of India'. Given the evolving nature of electoral politics which tend to turn arbitrary, and at a time vindictive, vile or petty, 'the steel frame' must be preserved in its pristine purity.

The agreed formula of CDS must be implemented with due consultation with the stakeholders so that AIS officers refrain from developing a provincial or feudal mindset and broaden their perspective by serving, in their different stints, both the Union and the States, being the shared assets of the nation. Consultation and consensus, and not unilateralism, must inform decision making, being the bedrock of our cooperative federalism.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

European inflation is not American inflation

Eurozone consumer prices increased by five per cent year on year in December, while the number of Google searches for "inflation" has recently risen threefold in Germany and tenfold in France. So, at first glance, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Europe ~ like the US, where annual price growth has hit seven per cent ~ will have a tough time taming the inflation dragon.

Having dismissed concerns about rising prices for too long on the grounds that the main risk was deflation, the European Central Bank, like the US Federal Reserve, is now on the defensive. Critics accuse the ECB of being dangerously behind the inflation curve, and of having neglected its overriding mandate: to ensure price stability. Some claim that, after years of adventurous quantitative easing, the day of reckoning has arrived.

Both the Fed and the ECB can certainly be blamed for not having spotted the current price surge early enough. But that is no reason to lump together the US and the eurozone. Contrary to the widespread belief that inflation is back for good on both sides of the Atlantic, the outlook for the US

The Phnom Penh Post

is fundamentally worse, for three reasons.

First, under former President Donald Trump and his successor, Joe Biden, the US tackled the fallout from the COVID-19 shock with a massive fiscal stimulus. From March 2020 to September 2021, money transferred to households and businesses in the US through exceptional tax cuts, top-ups to unemployment benefits, debt forgiveness, and other schemes amounted to a whopping $2.5 trillion, or more than 11 per cent of pre-crisis GDP.

Europe, meanwhile, was paradoxically more generous and thriftier at the same time. When French President Emmanuel Macron announced in March 2020 the launch of a massive furlough scheme whereby the government would pick up the wage bill of employees idled by the pandemic, he said loud and clear that the state would fulfil its responsibility to protect, "whatever the cost." Not everyone in Europe said the same, but virtually all governments adopted the same position. For a while, there was no budget constraint anymore, and the ECB stood by to help governments do their job.

Citizens were understandably stunned. But the French furlough scheme, despite having at one point covered 40 per cent of the workforce, eventually cost a mere 1.4 per cent of GDP. As public health improved and people returned to work, furloughs quickly dwindled.

All in all, the total fiscal cost of supporting households and firms remained around 3-4 per cent of GDP. Europe, unlike the US, did not throw money at pandemic-induced economic problems indiscriminately. Household income was maintained, not increased. As a result, there was no massive excess demand.

The second factor is that furloughed workers in Europe retained their labor contracts and the associated employment security.

True, temporary workers and those on fixed-term contracts paid a high price as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, and new entrants into the labor force also struggled.

But, on the whole, European states acted like insurers and protected workers and employers from a devastating shock.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

UK model won't work in UP

SIR, Please refer to 'Ungovernable Pradesh?' by Parimal Brahma (5 February). It must be recalled that the Congress was committed to the creation of linguistic States after Independence.

On this score nothing happened in the initial five years of independent India. A very vociferous demand was made by Potti Sriramulu for creating a Telugu-speaking state out of the Madras Province. To press his demand Sriramulu went on a fast unto death and died. This forced the creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953 and triggered the general demand in the country for the formation of linguistic states.

For this purpose, the States Reorganisation Commission was formed under the Chairmanship of Fazl Ali in 1953. This Commission examined, inter-alia, the idea of breaking UP on considerations of its size (and not language). However, there was no unanimity within the three-member Commission and this question was dropped.

Still, Uttaranchal (Uttarakhand) was carved out of UP, Jharkhand out of Bihar and Chhattisgarh out of Madhya Pradesh in 2002 by the Vajpayee government. These three states were not created on considerations of size but because of the aspirations of the hill people and tribals.

Now, it cannot be said for sure that the resultant six states are better administered. Similarly, the division of Andhra Pradesh into Telengana and Andhra in 2013 was not based on considerations of size.

The proposal of the Bahujan Samaj Party to split UP into four states was not based on strong logic or arguments, and, hence this idea did not gain any momentum or support. Moreover, the dialects of a language can never be logical grounds for the formation of a state (as seems to be the view of the writer).

To borrow the UK pattern or German pattern for the purpose of reorganisation of UP does not seem logical as the history of UK and Germany is different from that of UP.

The size of a state may be one of the considerations for efficient governance. But much depends on who is in charge of governance.

Yours, etc., RC Jain,
Kolkata, 5 February.

UNITED ENDEAVOUR

SIR, All political parties should shed their political differences and work together unitedly for one common cause i.e. 'humanity' especially now with the ongoing 'pandemic'.

They should open more Covid vaccination centres and take care of the ones who cannot afford the vaccine and let vote-bank politics be relegated for now for the sake of humanity.

Yours, etc., Rudolph Vance,
Kolkata, 2 February.

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Work sans safety or dignity

GUNJAN HANDA

In India, there have been numerous instances of human rights breaches. When it comes to the safety of sanitation workers, disregarding human rights has become the norm. Mitigating occupational health risks for sanitation workers remains a distant dream. The Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry has signaled sanitation workers' safety as part of Swachh Survekshan 2022 to prevent deaths due to the cleaning of sewers and septic tanks, but in vain. Urban sanitation workers are in a quandary and remain invisible.

Recently, four sanitation workers died in Solapur, Maharashtra, while cleaning a manhole without proper safety gear. One of them fainted within the manhole, and when another co-worker went in to take him out, he also died after inhaling the toxic fumes. Two others who followed, hoping to help them get out, also met the same fate the next day in the hospital.

The Prohibition of Employment of Manual Scavengers and Rehabilitation Act (2013) bans manual scavenging in the country. It also mandates punishment for those found to have employed and engaged people in cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Furthermore, the Supreme Court in 2014 also ordered all states and union territories to pay a sum of Rs. 10 lakh to families of those who lost their lives while cleaning sewers and septic tanks. However, stories from the field paint an entirely different picture.

Six months ago, one sanitation worker suffered convulsions after he was exposed to a drainage hole in Pune. Since inhaling the toxic substance can cause pulmonary edema, he was sent to the hospital. He had to go back to work the next day. Solid waste streams, especially those that contain organic matter, can produce toxic hydrogen sulphide that can be fatal to anyone who is exposed to it. Last year, three sanitation workers died of asphyxiation and inhaling poisonous gas after entering a sewer in Madhya Pradesh's Singrauli district. Two of the workers who entered the tank to carry out repair work immediately fainted. Following this, the third worker was forced to go down into the tank to investigate, subsequently fainting in the process. The three workers were rescued by the State Disaster Response Force and rushed to a hospital where they were declared dead.

Workers who have spent over three decades told us a completely different story than the officials. Numerous workers who spoke to us said they could not afford even the basic equipment needed to work safely. Sanitation workers often echo a common sentiment when they say that efficient machines were discontinued despite requests that they be brought back. The new machines allocated to replace the manual scavenging are proving to be inefficient.

Despite the government and the Supreme Court having taken steps to curb it, the employment, engagement and exploitation of sanitation workers for manual scavenging, endangering their lives in the process, continues to be a rampant practice across the country. It was revealed by the Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Ramdas Athawale, in a reply to a question raised in the Lok Sabha that 376 sanitation workers died between 2014 and 2019, with 2019 having accounted for 110 of them, a 60 per cent increase as compared to the previous year.

Sanitary workers also face social challenges. Low-grade, unskilled sanitation workers encounter social stigma and discrimination. They are also linked to a caste-based structure and the work is often allocated to castes perceived to be lower in the hierarchy. This humiliation compounds the social ostracizing and limitations on social mobility that workers face and often results in intergenerational discrimination.

Various measures such as vaccinations, health insurance, and regular health checks, are part of the standards and guidelines for sanitation workers. However, those are rarely provided to them. The right to live with human dignity, the right against hazardous industries, the right to a decent environment, to health, etc., all guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India, therefore, remain an unfulfilled dream for many.

The writer is from Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune.

Nepal's mountaineers deserve better

JINESH SINDURAKAR

Mountaineering is the backbone of Nepal's tourism industry, and the driving force of mountaineering is a mountaineer. The exact number of people actively involved in mountaineering is not available. However, the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) has listed more than 10,000 mountaineers as Sardar, support climber or senior support climber. The International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations has recognised 65 Nepali guides. The Department of Tourism issues climbing permits to expeditions with mountaineers registered with the NMA. It is ironic that despite Nepal being home to eight of the 14 mountains above 8,000 metres and more than 414 other peaks, an in-depth study of the health of mountaineers, causes of death and training still has not been done.

Whether in Nepal or abroad, the knowledge of mountaineers about altitude diet and their growing interest in developing their children's careers in other fields also remains unanswered. Ascents of mountains broken down by age group has not been recorded. Stakeholders make continuous remarks about the importance of mountaineers in mountain tourism, but lack of vital information about them creates an obstacle to formulating a strategy that will secure their profession and future.

Mountaineers remain on empty stomachs for long hours on the mountains. After climbing, foreign mountaineers consume a balanced diet to prevent vital mineral deficiency in their bodies. Nepal's mountaineers consume a traditional diet and don't feel it necessary to take diet supplements to deal with vitamin deficiency. We have no tradition of going for a check-up at the doctor after returning from a mountaineering expedition. I have seen that some mountaineers just returned from an expedition have hearing problems or suffer from gastritis or headache; but they do not try to seek treatment and continue with their lives as before.

Health problems that are only diagnosed late in life can end in untimely death, leaving family and children helpless. The mountaineering profession is bread and butter for most of Nepal's mountaineering community; they may not have a high income or are not well informed about going for necessary medical check-ups after their return. The Department of Tourism should establish a separate department for mountaineers at subsidised cost or no cost in selected hospitals to educate them about the food they should consume before, during and after mountaineering. Regular health assessments after mountaineering will help discover health issues for a timely cure.

Till about three decades ago, most people in Kathmandu followed their ancestral professions like goldsmith, merchant, carpenter or farmer. But now, the picture is different as most children are focused on getting a job in a national or international organisation for survival. This trend is seen in most traditional professions all over the country. For example, carpenters have not been able to progress into mass production of furniture for export. We can still find people producing traditional windows or doors by hand, which limits their production scale.

In comparison, we can find different sophisticated tools being used in crafting wood in foreign countries, increasing the number of products greatly. Lack of entrepreneurship is the result of the education system. The theory-based education system does not allow us to think about our profession practically and differently, but motivates us to lead our life by performing 10 to 5 duties. This is the social structure in which we live. Therefore, mountaineering professionals cannot remain indifferent to this. In addition, the risk factor involved in this profession is another reason why mountaineers do not want their children to follow in their footsteps.

During an informal chat with mountaineers at the NMA, it was revealed that most of their children pursue careers in medical science, engineering or service or live abroad. Mountaineering can be done until strength remains in our bodies. Surviving on royalties from biographies written after climbing Everest or income from talk shows on mountaineering has not been established in Nepali culture.

The government has not shown particular concern about life after mountaineering, and this has forced climbers to think about the future of this profession. Besides mountaineering being a risky and insecure profession, family pressure has become a significant reason for climbers to decide to settle abroad after passing climbing age. Just as we do not find the present generation engaged in ancestral professions like carpenter, goldsmith and so forth, it will not be a big surprise if we do not see Nepali mountaineers in the coming two or three decades.

The statistics published by the Department of Tourism in 2020 show that 171,937 people among the total number of tourists who visited Nepal came for mountaineering and trekking purposes. Even though the number of mountaineers and trekkers is on the rise, no study has been done to determine whether the current number of mountaineering staff is sufficient to handle the growing number of mountaineers.

The number of mountaineers currently in Nepal or actively involved awaits study. With such a large number of mountains in the country, Nepal should be in a position to lead on the global mountaineering stage. Not paying attention to the actual problems of mountain tourism but only talking about its importance is paying lip service. With the increasing number of tourists visiting Nepal for mountaineering purposes, adequate skilled human resources for mountaineering have become essential. Minimising the risk factor and developing professionalism in mountaineering, and securing the future of mountaineers and their families are some of the steps we must take for mountain tourism to remain an integral part of our national economy.

An acceleration in economic growth in India and China results in more tourists from these countries. Nepal's incapability to capitalise on their economic growth makes millions of youths leave to work in the Middle East to survive in Nepal. Identifying tourism products and managing skilled human resources to cater to tourists will activate the tourism economy, which will ultimately expand our national economy by generating employment. And it is the only solution to prevent our youths from leaving for a better future in other countries.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

CROSSWORD

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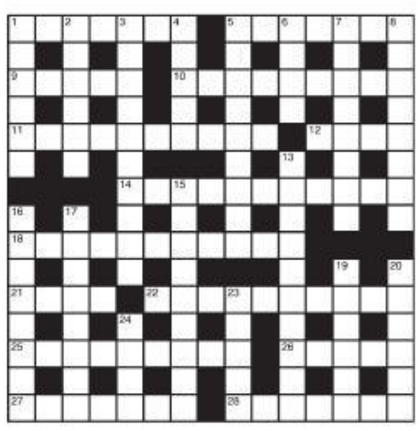
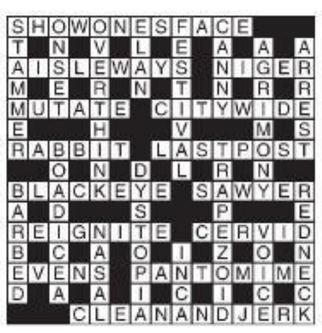


YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



ACROSS

1 See 23 Down
5 Induce intoxication long after beer has run out? (7)
9 Treacherous Greek character retreats, shot outside (5)
10 Hedonist tense following exam in German city (3,6)
11 Trained bear helping to show eccentricity (10)
12 Olympian queen and husband are returning (4)
14 Book at that time peaked — a novel (3,5,3)
18 Complex play on Rome lost in the battle (11)
21 Find sea eagle in another nest (4)
22 Fail to observe pet Dickens kept in foreign tale (10)
25 Cool couple needs some in 2 to dress down (2,7)
26 Region round Colchester sees desperate times (5)
27 Saints at last to probe lacking heart for nil-nil? (2,5)
28 English indeed catching the French unsighted (7)

DOWN

1 G7 perhaps needs intelligence to grasp point (6)
2 Port`s name engraved in seat (6)
3 Put down to the occasion, can it ever be bettered? (6,4)
4 Start university getting into arrears (5)
5 Swine upset everyone after scrap where house calls made (5,4)
6 Scent carried almost overcomes one abandoned child (4)
7 Call for missile to tip unfavourable balance (5,3)
8 Alter ego Tees announces setting 23 1 Across — for starters — in 18 (3,5)
13 One from Dakar seen buffeted by winds close to village (10)
15 Eastern guru coming round very good on secret assignments? (9)
16 23 articles about six counties — in Greek! (8)
17 King at 18 25 one Christmas needing boost (8)
19 Lower entrance on the outside for tenant (6)
20 King at 18 the other king sent north (6)
23/1A Article to include on barbarian terror wasting a number under 17 at 18 (5,7)
24 Nothing to check wife leaving European city (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

India has long since ceased to expect too literal an accuracy from Mr. Gandhi. It is, however, desirable to draw attention once more to the Mahatma's constitutional incapacity to face facts as they really are. In his latest manifesto he alleges that the "reins are being tightened in the jails, the crime of prisoners being that they constitute themselves trustees of national honour and dignity." The prisons of India, according to the same authority, "hold some of the most inoffensive of men, and hardly any who had either resorted to violence or intimidation." According to Sir Abdur Rahman in the Bengal Legislative Council on Tuesday last, "the mill-hands arrested during the past few weeks could by no stretch of the imagination be called political prisoners. Many of them, indeed, disliked leaving jail, and had even refused to give their names when offered release." That Mr. Gandhi's "trustees of national honour and dignity" have for long been derived from the off-scouring of the large towns is clear from the consensus of opinion to that effect as expressed by Sir Harcourt Butler and Sir Ludovic Porter in the United Provinces, by Mr. Macpherson and Mr. Hammond in Bihar and Orissa, and by Sir Henry Wheeler and Sir Abdur Rahman in Bengal. It is asking too much, however, even of the Government of India, to expect it to provide private parlours for such gentry during the period of their detention in jail.

NEWS ITEMS

SCHOOL OF TROPICAL MEDICINE & HYGIENE

At the opening of the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine by his Excellency the Governor of Bengal on Saturday last, Sir Kailas Chandra Bose, who took a prominent part in the establishment of both the School of Tropical Medicine and the Carmichael Hospital for Tropical Diseases, and by his own efforts collected no less than Rs 80,628 almost entirely from the Marwari community, in seconding the resolution moved by Sir Surendranath Banerjea, referred to the valuable assistance rendered by Lord Ronaldshay in connection with the campaign against malaria and also measures to be taken in arresting the hookworm disease. He had also considered the various sources of the spread of tuberculosis, and how best to arrest its progress.

ENERGETIC MEASURES IN GUNTUR

MADRAS, FEB 9

Reports from Guntur indicate that the energetic measures adopted by the District Officers are having a good effect, that some of the ryots in the areas affected by the non-cooperation movement are returning to a more sensible frame of mind and beginning to pay overdue instalments of land-tax and that many of the village officers who had resigned their posts have asked to be allowed to withdraw their resignations, or have been replaced. The collection of revenue is still a matter of difficulty and the staff is subjected to threats of violence, but its work is progressing. On February 5, Rs 500 was collected by the distraint of property of persons convicted and the property has been attached for further sums.

BOMBAY MUNICIPALITIES' ABUSE OF POWER

The Bombay Government have decided to supersede the municipalities of Ahmedabad and Surat for two years and three years respectively, under Section 179 of the Bombay District Municipal Act. After explaining the events which led up to this decision, a Government Press Note says that Ahmedabad Municipality has made persistent default in the performance of its duty of maintaining primary schools and abused its powers by disobeying the statutory orders of the Government. The municipality of Surat has not only failed in maintaining primary schools, subject to the provisions of the Municipal Act, but has exceeded and abused its powers by handing over the management of primary schools to an unauthorised body and making payment of Rs 40,000 in disobedience of the Government's statutory orders.

TECHNICAL RESEARCH IN BENGAL

Work was seriously hampered by the absence of an expert staff, states the Government resolution on the report of the Department of Industries, Bengal, for the year ending December 31, 1920. The Calcutta Research Tannery, however, made considerable progress in its work. It carried on investigations both into raw materials and into tanning methods. A systematic analysis of leathers tanned at the Research Tannery was made with a view to improving its quality. An analytical survey of the water used in various tanneries throughout India was also carried out in order to compare their technical properties. Investigations into the manufacture of sole leather of superior quality from local buffalo hides and tan stuffs were carried on and definite results have been obtained.

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THE HINDU BusinessLine
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Digital drive

Budget 2022 is notable for its strong accent on leveraging technology for governance

The recently presented Union Budget takes forward the concerted push by the government to harness technology to deliver better governance through digital initiatives in delivery of services to citizens, use of portals and, lately, drones as well.

Having successfully used the JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) trinity to make leakage-free benefit transfers to farmers and low-income earners during economic crises, the Centre is now hoping to replicate this in other spheres. Initiatives to get all migrant workers to register on the e-Shram portal, and getting MSMEs to onboard the Udyam portal are attempts to identify target beneficiaries for welfare payments without the intervention of rent-seeking intermediaries. The National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) and e-Vidya initiative have slightly different welfare objectives. By creating a common digital registry of healthcare providers, enabling an online consent mechanism for patients and equipping each citizen with a unique health identity, NDHM aims to dentify beneficiaries for Ayushman Bharat. It also gives patients seamless access to their historical health records without having to rely on hospitals as gatekeepers. Developing Indian language e-learning content can help students in the hinterland make up for pandemic-related learning setbacks, without physical infrastructure. Having already achieved significant bank account penetration, the government is hoping to drive the next leg of financial inclusion by pushing India Post to adopt core banking across its 1.5 lakh branches. Two, it is also hoping to deploy technology, particularly apps and portals, to improve ease of living and doing business. The proposed Unified Logistics Interface Platform under Gati Shakti, a registry for transport operators and logistics providers, is expected to help in real-time information exchange between players, to enable just-in-time operations. The GeM portal has already ushered in never-before-seen transparency into government procurement allowing agencies to source supplies at prices comparable to private e-commerce players. The pan-India National Generic Document Registration System (NGDRS) for land parcels can vastly reduce title disputes and rent-seeking in property transactions.

Scan & Share

While the vision behind these digital initiatives is laudable, a few enablers are necessary to make them work. The first is good last-mile internet connectivity in the hinterland. While the ten-year old BharatNet project was supposed to deliver internet connectivity to 2.5 lakh gram panchayats, the pace of rollout has been sluggish, with users complaining of poor maintenance that has rendered even completed internet centres unusable. Hopefully, the move to induct private contractors into this project hitherto executed only by public sector entities will yield better results. With so many government agencies now set to tap into citizen data, there is also a need to expedite implementation of the Data Protection Bill 2021, with more provisions in it to make State agencies accountable on their recording, storage and sharing of personal data. A digital push without these safeguards will make citizens wary of adopting technology even if it promises better governance.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

Green bonds are something of an enigma

There are a host of imponderables, the key ones being compliance by recipients of green funds, pricing and mode of issuance

MADAN SABNAVIS

The Budget has an interesting announcement in the area of sovereign green bonds. A green bond, simply put, is like any other debt instrument, except that the proceeds are used to fund projects which are environmentally compliant. There have been some, though limited, issuances in the private sector.

A government coming up with such a bond in India will be novel given that 'environment' and 'greening are catch phrases today. In fact, if successful, States too will be able to do the same, as the goal is common.

As a corollary, as the market evolves, the corporate 'green bond' market will also develop as there are several investors who take decisions based on fulfilment of this objective. The details will be spelled out in course of time, but it would be interesting to conjecture on the form it will take.

Borrowing programme

The government has a gross borrowing programme of around ₹14.95-lakh crore. It seems that, to begin with, around 5 per cent could be targeted as sovereign green bonds. These bonds when raised will be used exclusively to fund projects which have something green about them.

If one looks at the capex of ₹7.5-lakh crore, around 65 per cent is devoted to roads, railways and defence. Essentially, the government either buys machinery from private players or gives contracts to private or public companies if they are in projects like roads. Normally, funds are fungible and it may be hard to determine how they are utilised.

But in this case there will be earmarking of the amount raised to specific targeted projects. Therefore, the crux is that the recipients of such funds should be complaint. This is where certification is required, and the onus will be on the company to prove that the norms have been followed. How this certification can be obtained has not been formalised so far; hence, there could be some ambiguity here.

Monitoring challenge

Being green is a fuzzy concept and it ends up with companies trying to tick several boxes to show they are compliant. Besides, monitoring can also be an issue as companies could be compliant at the time of such certification, but less so subsequently. There would be a challenge with respect to monitoring how this green grading performs.

A power or road project that is declared green should ideally not be flouting the norms, but the larger question is who will monitor the same. This will be a challenge until such time the system of evaluation is streamlined as deviations from the norm are hard to capture.

Scan & Share

Next would be the pricing of these bonds. Should they be lower than the regular bond or higher? There has to be a difference. Otherwise the idea would be vitiated. Ideally, it needs to be higher; this is because investors need to be rewarded for choosing to promote ESG goals. Therefore it can be, say, 10-25 basis points (bps) higher than the normal yield on a bond. On the other side it can be argued that the rates can be lower than normal because investors like to reward green projects, anyway.

Green bonds are used to fund environmentally compliant projects ISTOCK

Besides, lower rates would make green bonds viable for corporates and project developers. Hence, it needs to be seen as to how the pricing system evolves amidst these forces.

On the demand side, who would typically buy these bonds? If the rates are higher, it would be universally attractive. Else, there may not be much interest among investors, unless banks, mutual funds and pension funds have back-end commitments for lending or investing in green-friendly bonds. Or, as mentioned earlier, there could a group of environment-oriented investors (not too many in India today).

The regulators would have to discuss among themselves whether there should be a special dispensation for green bonds to make them attractive. A way out would be to launch them as tax-free bonds with a yield of, say, 7 per cent for 10 years as this appears to be the likely rate for government bonds of similar maturity.

This will evince a lot of interest especially at the retail end. Funds can be locked in for a long tenure and the government can procure the same without putting pressure on the bond market.

This will be a win-win situation for all parties concerned. The option of launching them overseas is tempting. Here there can be a choice between masala bonds where they are issued in rupees.

The Indian community may be interested if the returns are good and would be constantly weighing them relative to the interest on NRI deposits. But here the government will have to bear the forex risk which may not be acceptable. Masala bonds are attractive for investors because they are free of forex risk.

If the bonds are issued in foreign currency, foreign funds could evince interest. ESG is a big theme globally; there are several funds which invest in ESG compliant stocks or bonds. Coming from a sovereign, such bonds will carry credibility. The downside is that once the government goes global, then credit rating will matter a lot as all bonds issued globally need to be rated by the Big Three.

Are we prepared for this? The downside is that once one is rated by them, there is constant scrutiny on domestic policies. Presently, this does not matter because the government of India does not borrow from the overseas market. The rating given of BBB- is clearly out of sync with the strengths of the economy and this is an argument that has been reiterated by several analysts and economists.

Under these circumstances, it is reasonable to expect that these bonds will be issued only within the country. The overseas option would not be on until we are at ease with the idea at a policy and ideological level.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Hits & Misses: The Indian Banking Story'. Views are personal

SEBI must revoke ban on 7 commodity futures

It's imprudent to blame derivatives trading for commodity price increases. A vibrant futures market is essential for price discovery

PRABINA RAJIB

On December 20, 2021, SEBI banned futures trading in seven agri-commodities for a year. In the past, SEBI had banned futures trade in a single commodity on a few occasions, but banning seven commodity futures at one go is unprecedented and unfortunate as well. Though the regulator's press release did not mention, increase in prices of agri-commodities and food products are assumed to be the reasons behind the ban.

By and large, commodity prices are predominantly governed by supply and demand factors. Considering the fact that countries are increasingly getting integrated globally through export/import, compared to domestic supply-demand conditions, global supply-demand conditions are becoming the dominant force affecting domestic commodity prices. Hence, price increase for a commodity should be analysed in the proper context and making commodity derivatives trading a scapegoat for price rise appears to be rather imprudent.

Gyrations in agri-commodity prices burn holes in consumers' pockets in some years, while forcing farmers to commit suicide in some other years due to plummeting prices has been a recurrent phenomenon in India.

In December 2019, onion price reached ₹200 a kg in Delhi, tomato price skyrocketed to ₹120/kg from ₹45 within a span of three weeks in Kochi during November 2021. In October 2020, potato was ruling at ₹43/ kg while the same was ₹22 during October 2019, almost a 100 per cent increase year-on-year (y-o-y). In August 2021, Nashik farmers dumped tomatoes on the road as the wholesale price crashed to ₹2 a kg.

A pertinent point to be noted here is that none of these agri-commodities have been traded in derivatives exchanges. Hence, even before considering a ban on commodity derivatives, SEBI and the Government should have exercised other easily reversible options such as increasing margin and lowering open interest limits for commodity derivatives contracts, reduction of import duty, easing import quantity restriction, imposition of stock limit to increase supply.

If a ban is effected at all, it should be like a black swan event because such bans are detrimental to the Indian commodity market ecosystem in innumerable ways. India is the largest producer and consumer of many commodities in the world. Yet India is not a price setter for these, as it lacks a vibrant commodity futures market which is essential for price discovery.

Base metal prices on the London Metals Exchange (LME) are used as the reference price by miners, smelters, refiners and consumers from all over the world. Not only do they use LME platform to hedge, but also use LME prices for negotiating physical deals. In its 135 years of history, even after witnessing two world wars, LME has banned commodity trading contracts only once — tin in 1985.

The ban is a retrograde step ISTOCK

Frequent bans on commodity derivatives contracts also hinder effort by exchanges to develop the market ecosystem i.e, spot market trading infrastructure, warehousing, quality assessment, spot and futures price dissemination to market participants in general and value chain participants in particular.

With widely available technology, even farmers from remote parts of India are able to access futures prices twice or thrice a day. With a ban, the farmers lose an important piece of price information. It can be said that the most ruinous impact of a ban is on the Indian farmers, the most vulnerable section of Indian economic value chain.

On-boarding FPOs

Indian commodity exchanges have made considerable efforts to onboard farmer producers' organisations (FPOs). The significant growth in the market linkage of FPOs can be judged from the following figures. The number of FPOs using commodity exchange platform has risen from 64 to 399 during 2016-2021. These 399 FPOS come from 18 States. The number of participating farmers has increased from 1.2 lakh to 10 lakh, total traded quantity has increased from 11,000 MT to 1 lakh MT during the same period.

When commodity derivatives are banned, not only these groups lose hedging opportunity, they also lose the skill-set to hedge. It leaves one wondering whether SEBI or government ever bothered to quantify these losses before notifying a ban?

Another insidious impact of a ban is that once few commodities are banned, there is clamour from various groups to ban other commodities. These groups get emboldened by the ban and create various pressure tactics and vigorously put forward many half-baked and specious narratives.

For some major players in India, hedging commodity price risk has become an integral part of normal business. These players are not going to wait in bated breath for the ban to be rescinded so that they can resume their hedging activities in domestic exchanges. They have the means and wherewithal to go to any international exchange to hedge.

Once they start hedging in international exchanges, it becomes a point of no return. As it is, fledgling domestic exchanges suffer from poor liquidity, and as and when the ban is revoked, these exchanges will start from a much more handicapped position on many counts including liquidity.

In addition to these, on a larger context, such ban severely dents the perception regarding India's ease of doing business environment

Finally, this ban does not serve any real purpose. Rather, the inimical impact of this ban on Indian commodity spot and derivatives market is written all over it. It is obvious, the genesis of this ban is a regulatory overreach to pander to populism keeping in mind the impending assembly elections. SEBI must revoke the ban. As a regulator, SEBI must create an enabling and nurturing environment for a free and fair market.

The writer is Professor (Finance & Accounting), VGSoM, IIT Kharagpur. Views are personal

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.

Economy needs support

Apropos 'Pump priming the economy with credit' (February 9), the economy definitely needs further financial support, especially MSMEs and the retail sector. The restructuring of big loans is the main reason for the reduction in gross non-performing assets and the lowering of provisions.

Recovery in stressed assets is still some way off. The suggestion to link loan repayments schedule to peak/non-peak business levels of the borrowing units has to be given serious thought by the RBI, especially in the case of MSME accounts.

The Covid pandemic has literally ruined the financial discipline of most borrowers, including those in the personal loan category and senior citizens. It is time the RBI once again rescheduled these loans, especially in cases where salaries/pensions of the borrowers get credited to the bank accounts promptly. The huge NPAs are due mostly to wilful defaults in the corporate sector.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

Failure of SEZs

This refers to 'SEZ 2.0' (February 9). In India, special economic zones (SEZs) were set up to provide a hassle-free environment for exporters and to replicate China's success in using SEZs to boost manufacturing and employment. But the policy has backfired. While the SEZ policy turned China into a manufacturing powerhouse, India's failure has been led by its politicians.

Site selection is critical for the success of SEZs, but it has been guided by self-serving agendas rather than considerations of growth and development. Local politicians often influence bureaucrats at state-owned industrial development corporations to secure land for personal gains. As such, sites for SEZs are selected based on real estate speculation rather than the economic potential of a region. If not for profit through land deals, local politicians also use site selection to target specific ethnic and caste groups to create vote banks.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Recast the model

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were mooted in the year 2000 with a view to creating necessary infrastructure for manufacturing units with a special focus on promoting export-oriented activities and attracting FDI.

The Centre is currently harping on 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and maximising the usage of indigenously manufactured products in every sector and make them compete globally. It is, therefore, time to revisit the concept of SEZ, evaluate the performance of SEZs and realign their assets towards *atmanirbhar*, which will help save sizeable forex used for imports.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Stick to business

It refers to 'Korea's foreign minister expresses regret over Hyundai Pakistan's tweet on Kashmir' (February 9). What we have witnessed in the last few days from Pakistani franchises of Hyundai, KFC, Kia and Pizza Hut was unfortunate to say the least. These MNCs must not try to interfere in political or sensitive matters. They should just be focussed on their business growth.

They should be aware about India-Pakistan relationship and how Kashmir is an integral part of India. Moreover, India is a much bigger market than Pakistan for each one of them, hence they should have thought well before putting any such comments on social media.

Bal Govind
Noida

Focus of PSBs

Since public sector banks (PSBs) are being either merged or sold off on the basis of not being profitable enough, why should they exhibit largesse towards MSMEs if they believe there is a risk in doing so. The fate of the Mudra loans disbursed some years ago were supposed to generate employment. Whatever is the fate of those loans and how many gained employment are unknown.

If the banks are to survive they need to forget about everything else but making profits. The government must decide on what they expect from PSBs. Banks cannot be expected to ride on two horses simultaneously.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

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Let shareholders decide

Splitting Chairman, MD posts will hit family-run firms

ARUN CHAWLA

During the annual post-Budget interaction with FICCI, the Finance Minister's response to concerns about mandatory split in the role of Chairman and MD re-affirmed the government's commitment to consultation.

And true to the spirit, the Finance Minister has advised SEBI to give a hearing to industry on this requirement.

Strong governance practices have held Indian companies in good stead, helping them attract foreign investment. The Indian Companies Act, 2013 and SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations have continuously evolved over the past years and kept pace with global practices.

India's corporate governance landscape is slated to undergo a paradigm shift at the onset of the next financial year when the requirement to separate the offices of Chairman and CEO becomes mandatory for top 500 listed companies. SEBI's directive that chairman of the board shall be a non-executive director, who shall not be related to the Managing Director or CEO, was to become operational from April 2020. However, its applicability was deferred for two years.

The pandemic made it difficult for companies to ensure timely compliance with many regulatory requirements. However, as the cut-off date draws near, Corporate India is once again confronted with the unacceptable proposition.

While the stated objective behind this provision is to offset concentration of authority in any one individual on the board of directors; its implementation may cause disruption in the manner companies are governed.

There does not seem to be any conclusive evidence to suggest that separation of roles would lead to effective board leadership, improve governance or benefit the shareholders. On the other hand, it would tantamount to abrogation of shareholders' democracy and over-riding of their authority to determine how their company's leadership should be structured. In fact, imposing this artificial separation hinders ease of doing business by interfering in company's internal processes.

Given existing management and governance structures of some companies, separation of office of Chairman and MD/CEO may not be conducive for ensuring efficiency in decision-making. The leadership arrangements are best left to the judgement of the shareholders. In case, shareholders determine that the Chairman should occupy an executive position to be fully able to appreciate and understand company's business processes and its nuances, there can be no justification for prescribing a non-executive chairman.

In recognition of this principle, the Companies Act 2013 also defers to the will of the shareholders and permits Chairman to hold MD/CEO's position too, in case the Articles of the Company so provide.

This provision would also adversely impact homegrown, family-run businesses which constitute 300 of the top 500 listed companies.

The family patriarch, along with other members of the family, have nurtured businesses into resilient, growth-generating entities. Imposing restrictive clause which mandates that non-executive chairman of the company cannot be related to the Company's MD/CEO, would deprive the company of the visionary leadership.

The regulatory environment should continue to support entrepreneurial ventures and remove all hindrances to growth. Adequate, well-performing checks and balances already exist under the Companies Act and SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations for driving independent decision making by corporate boards and establishing balance of power. These safeguards omit the need to impose separation of Chairman and MD/CEO. The focus should be on selecting effective board leaders and the one-size-fits-all approach should be replaced with voluntary, contextual and case-by-case affirmative action of the shareholders.

The writer is Director General, FICCI

Vande Bharat: A challenge, an opportunity

These trains can be deployed in the next 5-6 years. But passenger comfort must be of the highest standards

SUDHANSHU MANI

All the announcements related to Indian Railways (IR) in the Finance Minister's Budget speech were over in a minute, covering IR's role in GatiShakti, 100 Cargo Terminals for multimodal logistics facilities, logistics services for small farmers and enterprises, integration of Postal and Railways networks, 'One Station-One Product' concept and 2,000 km of Kavach, the indigenous technology for safety.

But what evoked excitement was that 400 new-generation Vande Bharat trains would be built in the next three years. The immediate reaction in the media was that, while it was a vindication of the team which built the prototypes, the announcement had overreached to an impossibility.

The question many ask is: can this many number of trains be built in three years? Since the announcement in the Budget speech shows the intent of the government and the question should be how, and not whether, this can be achieved.

New age trains Vande Bharat trains must be made at the Integral Coach Factory RV MOORTHY

ICF's wherewithal

Let us check out a formula for realising this dream-like announcement. Integral Coach Factory, Chennai is in the process of building, or ordering the equipment, for 102 trains. Assuming that this order can be enhanced by 30 per cent as per IR's procurement regime, ICF can secure orders of equipment for 132 trains. The current version of the train is good to replace Shatabdi type trains but there is no scope to deploy 132 such trains yet.

Replacement of Rajdhani type trains, including some faster overnight trains, by a sleeper version of Vande Bharat is, therefore, inevitable. The sleeper version, if designed in time, will take around six months to get into the manufacturing stage and so a tested prototype can be put in service by early 2023, followed by start of series manufacture later that year. All these trains will save big on travel time while earning huge revenue.

Opinions differ on how much time it would take to build these. All these, barring a few, should be series-built in ICF alone after the go ahead is obtained in September 2022. Proliferation of manufacture at this nascent stage of the project in other factories, which have practically no experience of manufacture of 3-phase self-propelled trains, may cause deterioration in quality. At a feasible rate of 40 per year at ICF and the balance 12 at the two other factories, all these trains can be put on line by fiscal 2025-26.

That leaves a gap of 270 odd trains. These trains can be divided in two parts, one to be built in IR factories on the lines of the Train 20 project, a project which is lying moribund since 2018. The other should be deployed by reviving the private trains project kept in limbo since July 2021.

What is Train 20? Train 20 was envisaged as an upgraded train set design, incorporating aluminium body, which reduces the weight of the train and makes it more energy-efficient. These trains should be so designed to run at the 160-200 km/h speed range and therefore future-ready for the track being upgraded on select routes. Incorporation of tilting mechanism may be considered to improve the speed on curves and shorter travel time.

The technology for aluminium body and tilting cannot be developed in the country in an early time frame so IR will have to engage an established manufacturer from abroad. The mode of contracting, however, should make a departure from what IR has been doing in Transfer of Technology projects; these contracts have not served their purpose fully as any technology is not amenable to an empowering level of transfer as the creator may part with know-how but never the know-why.

The proposed contract should call for design as well as manufacture in association with ICF engineers in hands-on mode. In addition, space should be provided within ICF to build the trains, barring the prototypes, employing IR staff supervised by contractors' experts.

This will empower IR to develop future versions of the trains on their own. It is feasible to see the prototypes of such trains sometime in fiscal 2025-26 and after that a large number can be deployed in the next couple of years.

Reviving private trains

For balance deployment of Vande Bharat clones, the project for private trains should be revived post haste. The project did not elicit interest from the prospective bidders as IR's babudom cussedly failed to address the concerns of the bidders in respect of an independent regulator, freedom to choose train timings, a comforting exit clause and one-sided revenue share regime. The contract can be refloated with a win-win attitude. This will help utilise the spare capacity of train manufacture in private sector of the country apart from affording world-class rail travel.

Another issue here is Rapid Rail Transit (RRT) projects being mooted on the lines of the under-construction Delhi-Meerut RRT. While the Railway Ministry promotes Vande Bharat trains as a symbol of aspirational India, the eligibility criteria of the Ministry of Urban Development debars IR's factories, negating India's own technological capability of designing and manufacturing these trains. RRTs should be made a part of this thrust for Vande Bharat trains.

What about financing of and revenue from such trains? The financial health of IR is not good, its operating ratio is more than 100, Capex by the government, and, interest burden are mounting. But while revenues show a good jump this year, sustained improvement is a must to reach anywhere near self-sustenance.

While the government firmly believes that investment in rail sector would drive the growth of the economy, as reflected in the record ₹2.45 lakh crore investment proposed this year, the basics cannot be lost sight of. The good revenue earning that the two Vande Bharat trains have shown must be replicated, totally uninfluenced by any extraneous factors.

There is a class of travelling public which would patronise these trains, in preference to air travel, if the punctuality and level of comfort are maintained to a high standard; the train would provide the platform but the services must match the expectations of travellers.

As for financing, private trains would help reduce the Capex requirement. The key lies in gradual make-over of premier services as well introduction of imaginative customer-friendly services. To that extent gradual induction of 400 trains over the next six years would be a boon as the travel environment in India would not support 400 premier trains in a short period of three years.

It is feasible to deploy 400 Vande Bharat trains or its clones. It may take five to six years instead of three but the government's intent can certainly become a reality.

The writer is a former General Manager, India Railways

SHORT TAKE

Paying for the electric car you didn't buy

CONOR SEN

Cars have been a big part of the US inflation picture over the past year. Since a computer chip shortage slowed production and drove up prices for new and used vehicles, fixing those supply chain problems in 2022 was supposed to normalise the market again, helping cool inflation more broadly.

Sorry, but no. That's not how automakers see it, nor is it what they want. They need to invest billions of dollars into new production facilities for electric vehicles, and that money has to come from somewhere. For companies like Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Co., it's going to be from their line of traditional gasoline-powered vehicles.

What automakers are now banking on is that high car prices will mean more profits, and they're making production plans geared toward keeping prices high. For consumers, this might be the short-term cost of leaping into an electric future — but it also means inflation could stay elevated for longer than currently appreciated.

Investors heard this from themselves in the latest round of industry conference calls for fourth quarter earnings results. Tesla Chief Executive Officer Elon Musk said that the company is not currently working on the $25,000 car that it had previously discussed, saying that it has too much on its plate.

Given the cost environment and the shortage of key components such as semiconductors, there's no reason for an automaker to go out of its way to make lower-priced, less-profitable vehicles right now.

Ford went into the most depth about its thinking as it balances production of gasoline-powered and electric vehicles.

It gave expectations for its adjusted EBIT margin — earnings before interest and tax — of 8 per cent, a higher level than the company projected last year.

GM is projecting more volume growth than Ford but made similar comments about inventories and pricing. BLOOMBERG OPINION

The curious case of family pension

SRIVATSAN RANGANATHAN

Pension arising to an employee out of his/her past or present employment is taxed as Salary under Section 17 of the Income Tax Act, 1961 with a standard deduction of ₹50,000 or the salary amount whichever is lower (the cap of ₹50,000 was ₹40,000 until March 31, 2020). Any pension taxed under salary is subject to TDS under Sec. 192 as applicable for salaries.

Pension payable to one's family (family pension) upon his/her death is taxed under the residuary head "income from other sources", in vogue since April 1, 1990.

People receiving pension from LIC or from other insurers post their employment is also taxable as salaries, thus eligible for standard deduction of ₹50,000 and it is only if the same pension is received in the hands of the legal heirs or their families it gets taxed as income from other sources under family pension. TDS on family pension is not covered under Sec. 192 of the Act.

Standard deduction wrangle

There is a standard deduction available on this family pension at one-third of the pension or ₹15,000 whichever is less. The cap of ₹15,000 was earlier ₹12,000 until March 31, 1998. People who receive family pension deserve to be granted a higher/fairer amount as standard deduction as a lot of them might be at marginal income levels. Fortunately, family pension received by members of armed forces is exempt from tax.

Finance Bill 2022 proposes a change in Sec. 80DD with effect from April1, 2023 for receipt of disability dependent pension plan in the hands of the contributory during the life time of the disabled dependent beneficiary. This is based on a writ petition before the Supreme Court wherein it was remarked that parents/guardians of disabled dependents might also deserve payment annuity/lump sum payment, which needs consideration by the Centre on compassionate grounds.

A similar thought process has not come up for upping standard deduction on family pension. It is better if the case of family pensioners is considered before the Bill becomes an Act to reinforce credibility of policy making besides comforting family pensioners.

One fails to understand the wisdom of the legislature to raise only the standard deduction on salaried pension periodically but not on family pension. Even salary standard deduction which remained at once upon a time at ₹12,000 has risen to ₹50,000 as of now. Every pre-Budget proposal has one way or other carried a request for review of standard deduction on family pension as well ending with little success.

It is unknown whether family pension has remained at dismal levels not warranting any increase in standard deduction. The debate here is not about the sufficiency or insufficiency of the standard deduction; under salary or under family pension but the unfair treatment meted to standard deduction on family pension vis-a-vis pension taxable under salary.

There are a number of provisions in the statute which remain removed from reality be it on issue of real income taxation going amiss or trite provisions remaining far-fetched from contextual cost of living. The curious case of standard deduction on family pension also remains one belonging to this tribe.

As a special case family pension may also get clubbed under salary head of taxation thereby aligning it to standard deduction on salary. Winds of change are necessary in taxation but it should not come at the expense of fresh air to those in need.

The writer is a chartered accountant

BusinessLine TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY

FEBRUARY 10, 2002

SEBI to move against cos delaying demat

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) working group on dematerialisation has decided to launch prosecution against companies delaying demat requests by investors. The move is aimed at ensuring speedy dematerialisation of the securities. The group has also decided that both the depositories — CDSL and NSDL — must come out with the details of those companies delaying the demat requests.

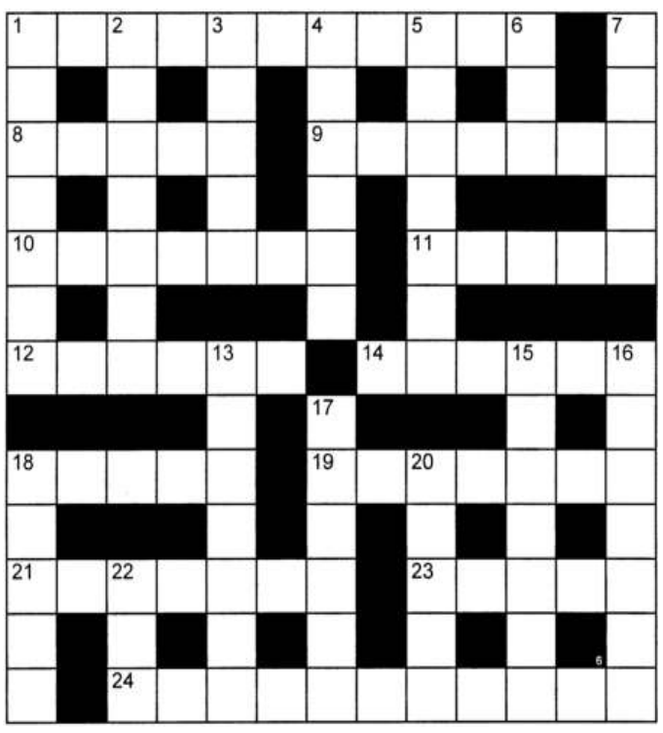
'IOC has no case against Reliance'

The Ministry of Disinvestment on Saturday made it clear that IOC had no case in seeking a review of the Government's decision to allow Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) to participate in the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd (IPCL) bids, citing the monopoly issue. "The issue of monopoly in the proposed divestment of does not arise as it is in the manufacturing sector where the products are on Open General Licence," the Disinvestment Ministry Secretary, Mr Pradip Baijal, said. RIL's possible take over, according to officials, cannot be compared with permitting IOC to acquire Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) or Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), given that these two companies are in the services sector.

After Enron, tech sector accounting comes under lens

While the Enron debacle puts the spotlight on accounting practices at other companies, a technology industry notorious for tweaked profit reports still has a few tricks up its sleeve. Pricey payments for stock options that show up nowhere on income statements. Massive asset write-downs that help inflate future earnings. Specially designed profit reports that mask the ugly details.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2061



EASY

ACROSS

01. Aval female (11)
08. Scope (5)
09. Motors (7)
10. Repaired (7)
11. Time of verb in grammar (5)
12. Idly plays stringed instrument (6)
14. An easy gallop (6)
18. Distend, enlarge (5)
19. Dreams (7)
21. Concerning doctoring (7)
23. Daughter of Lear (5)
24. Renders more severe, provokes (11)

DOWN

01. One who puffs; Risso's dolphin (7)
02. Judge (7)
03. Trench for drainage (5)
04. Overact; exaggerate (6)
05. Evening meal (4,3)
06. A ladder in stocking (3)
07. Put in tacking stitches (5)
13. Rattan walking-stick (7)
15. Notion (7)
16. Takes as an affront (7)
17. Develop, unroll (6)
18. 'Pure' boy (5)
20. Low, woody plant (5)
22. Proper, appointed (3)

SOLUTION: BL Two-way Crossword 2060

ACROSS 1. Fable 4. Distaff 8. Lexicographer 10. Roses 11. Fast 12. Once 16. Route 17. Impressionist 19. Gardens 20. Minor
DOWN 1. Fellow-feeling 2. Box 3. Encore 4. Digest 5. Sparse 6. Adherents 7. Fortune-hunter 9. Distemper 13. Grieve 14. Curses 15. Reform 18. Inn

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. A thousand pounds given to Ma for Nana (11)
08. Before midday, a little scope can be found (5)
09. Motors seen somehow to consume spirit (7)
10. Church adept at getting things mended thus (7)
11. In a rotten sense, it gets strung-up (5)
12. Plays idly with liquor when in the streets (6)
14. Gait one is able to make half faster (6)
18. Toff : finally he dresses suitably (5)
19. Dreams of half-a-dozen offences with nothing in them (7)
21. A different form claimed for examination by doctor (7)
23. Lear's daughter caused former President a loss (5)
24. In expenses, beat car for a change: it makes it worse (11)

DOWN

01. One puffing politician argues East was lost in uproar (7)
02. Judge a tribe to be wrong, but it's right in the end (7)
03. It is cut along the way, so one should get rid of it (5)
04. It will be too lavish to be finished by the party (6)
05. Meal makes one inebriated, having the cup that doesn't (4,3)
06. The number of copies printed will quickly disappear (3)
07. Beats it out, only to pour hot fat over it (5)
13. Cane can bring about a calm, roughly (7)
15. Pondered on it, in spite of being on the table-top (7)
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{ OUR TAKE }

What March 10 will reveal

These polls will help understand the mood on agriculture, caste politics, and Covid response

Beginning Thursday, a fifth of India's population will begin choosing its political representatives. Billed as a virtual semi-final to the 2024 general election, the assembly polls will span five states, 690 constituencies and 183 million voters. It will showcase the extraordinary capability of the world's largest democracy in holding free and fair elections at regular intervals. Attention will be on Uttar Pradesh (UP) — India's most populous province which is also the nerve centre of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s Hindutva politics. If the BJP becomes the first party to retain power in the state in two decades, it will propel Yogi Adityanath into the top echelons of the party, and be seen as an endorsement of his conservative Hindu, tough-on-crime, agenda, and of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's continuing popularity. Conversely, a good showing by the Opposition – even if it doesn't win – will buoy regional parties to claim the mantle of the BJP's chief adversary from the Congress.

But beyond this, the results of the election, when they are announced on March 10, will answer three questions. One, can the distress in the farm sector bring back agriculture as a national issue in the 2024 election? With the three central farm laws, which galvanised protests last year, now repealed, it is yet unclear whether cultivators — who also identify by their faith, caste, and region — will remain united under an issue-based umbrella, the kind which forced previous governments to give major concessions. And, if they do, will the government's response mirror the 2009 or 2017 style loan waiver, or the 2019 style cash transfers under PM-Kisan?

Two, was the end of the Mandal moment predicted too soon? In the campaign, both the government and Opposition have tried to corral communities based on caste. Yes, the mode of mobilisation differs — the BJP focuses on Hindutva, law and order and targeted delivery of welfare while the Opposition banks on issues of livelihood, anti-incumbency and perceived caste bias of the administration — but it's clear that caste continues to be a major pole of the polity and is used for electoral and transactional benefits. And three, it will tell us how the Covid-19 second wave affected people's relationship with the government. Is administrative failure during the pandemic not a factor, or is it playing out in subtle ways such as resentment against local lawmakers for not being present at times of distress? When faced with a once-in-a-generation pandemic, do Indians blame God or the government? March 10 will reveal the answer.

Protecting the right to voice one's views

The Supreme Court (SC) pulled up the Tripura Police on Monday for notices sent to people for social media posts about alleged communal violence, despite its interim restraining order on January 10. The SC bench was hearing a plea filed by journalist Samiullah Shabbir Khan against a notice issued by Tripura Police for posts made after vandalism incidents were reported in October-November 2021. In his tweets, Mr Khan stated that 12 mosques were vandalised in acts of anti-Muslim violence. Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta assured the SC that Tripura will comply with the court order.

The SC bench made three critical observations: First, the state government's disinclination to comply with the court's interim order; second, that the state police is "harassing people" with such notices; and third, people have to knock on the SC's doors to defend their basic rights. Mr Khan is the fourth litigant before the SC who faced a probe for posts on the same issue. And this is also not the first time the SC has asked states not to act against people airing their grievances. In May 2021, it warned states against booking people for posts on the scarcity of oxygen and hospital beds for Covid-19 patients.

Tripura and other state governments must understand the import of the SC's observations and desist from taking unlawful action against citizens. As justice Chandrachud said last year, a "blanket labelling" of dissent as anti-national strikes at the heart of the country's commitment to protect constitutional values and promote deliberative democracy. Any call to violence must be strongly dealt with, but State machinery must desist from charging people for simply sharing their views.

How elections are won and lost in India

From the electoral mood and political narrative to organisational strength and social coalitions, various factors can sway elections. This round of polls is no exception

Rahul Verma

There is a cliché that elections are won and lost during campaigns. This has given rise to many myths about Indian politics. The voter has been portrayed as fickle, someone who can be swayed in a matter of weeks through a high-blitz campaign. It has also created the myth that each assembly election is not just a referendum on the state government, but also the Centre. This election season is no exception.

Many of these assertions, often leading to contradictory predictions, are stacked by believers to produce a narrative they'd like to come true. The restrictions on large rallies in Uttar Pradesh (UP) has led many to argue that political parties with strong online infrastructure to disseminate information — read, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — will have an advantage over their competitors. These restrictions have limited the Samajwadi Party (SP)'s efforts to mount an effective campaign against the incumbent. At the same time, you also hear analysts arguing that the defections of many legislators from the BJP to the SP indicate that the BJP is likely to lose. For them, many of these defectors are seasoned politicians and they have a good sense of *hawa* (mood). Both these assertions fly in the face of the results in the 2021 West Bengal assembly election. The BJP had a stronger social media presence and succeeded in attracting many top leaders from the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in the run-up to the polls. Yet, the TMC won for the third consecutive time and even increased its vote and seat tally. To be sure, there were no restrictions on rallies through most of the campaign season in West Bengal.

While the role of campaigns in shaping the outcome may be true in American politics, as the campaign to elect the president runs for more than a year-and-a-half, in India, where a large number of voters depend on the State for their well-being, campaigns alone do not make or break elections. Campaigns can shift the momentum in favour of a party, but it is difficult for even well run campaigns to overturn historical factors operating in the electoral arena. No matter how well coordinated a campaign the BJP mounts in Punjab, it cannot suddenly become a major party there. The same is true for the Congress in UP.

Elections are won over accumulated factors — the sentiment in favour (or against) the incumbent, credibility of leadership, the political narrative, organisational resources of parties, and social coalition on the ground, among others. It is thus important to understand when campaigns can alter the nature of structural constraints and create opportunities for political parties to effectively stack these factors in their favour.

First, public opinion surveys have consistently pointed out that there are a significant number of voters who decide whom to vote for during the campaign and the last two days before polling. While a larger proportion of them swing to perceived winners, there is no reason why prior beliefs about the incumbent's performance should be different among such voters in comparison to those who made up their minds before the election. Also, organisational resources and social coalitions of parties are not created out of thin air. Nor can this advantage be undone in a matter of weeks.

Second, there are several examples to support the claim that it is difficult for even efficiently managed campaigns to overturn the structural constraints. For example, the Congress's campaign in the 2017 Gujarat assembly elections came with a strong narrative, filled with energy and enthusiasm, and yet, it failed to trump the BJP. Similarly, despite agrarian distress and a strong anti-incumbency sentiment during the 2018 Madhya Pradesh assembly elections, the polls did not result in an outright victory for the Congress. It is not that only the Congress fails to capitalise on campaigns. The BJP too, ran a spirited campaign in the 2018 Rajasthan assembly election, with Narendra Modi leading the charge, but couldn't overturn the sentiment against its incumbent Vasundhara Raje Scindia government.

Each state election is independent of the other. A victory boosts the morale of the party. But even the elections that get labelled as a semi-final, such as UP in 2022, are unlikely to shape the verdict in 2024 AP

Third, our information-gathering exercise is based on limited data, and conclusions are often clouded by preconceived notions — especially when all the factors do not point in one direction. Even the best politicians rarely know the direction of *hawa*, leave alone the magnitude of it. If they did, turncoats would have been winning elections with greater odds and we would have been witnessing higher than usual rates of defections.

Fourth, what campaigns can do is to energise the base and increase the turnout. And, for this reason alone, political parties spend energy and resources to mount an effective campaign. Leaders' roles become important and campaigns become crucial during multi-phased elections. They offer parties a chance to course-correct. For example, the BJP-Janata Dal (United) alliance was trailing in the first-phase in the 2020 Bihar assembly elections. It then made an extra effort to clear the confusion caused by the Lok Janshakti Party's exit and made assurances that Nitish Kumar would be the chief minister even if the BJP won a larger number of seats. The National Democratic Alliance levelled the competition in the second phase and took a narrow lead in the third.

Finally, each state election, or for that matter round of elections, is independent of the other. Of course, a victory boosts the morale of the party and gives it greater confidence. But even the elections that get labelled as a semi-final, such as UP in 2022, are unlikely to shape the verdict in 2024. Even if the BJP manages to retain some of the states, including UP, it doesn't guarantee it a smooth passage in 2024. And, a defeat will not seal its fate, as the semi-final only gives the winner a chance to play the final.

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The views expressed are personal

Iran nuclear talks: The stakes are high in Vienna

Even as the world is fixated on the Russia-Ukraine crisis, one should not lose sight of the ongoing talks in Vienna to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iranian nuclear deal. As of now, Iran is only talking to P4+1 (the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany). However, as the talks reach a critical phase, direct contact between the United States (US) and Iran is likely. Given the stakes involved and the distrust built up over the years, the talks can break down at any moment. A peaceful resolution would indeed be welcome but the question remains: Would either the US or Israel be attempting a preventive strike to stop Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons if talks don't succeed?

There are two factors in determining the probability of a preventive strike: Motivation and opportunity. First, a State might be driven to use physical force if the bomb in the hands of a new proliferator poses an existential threat to it. The US, a distant superpower, is better placed on this count. Israel, located in the near-neighbourhood, is at a greater threat from a nuclear Iran. Moreover, it can be argued that Israel cannot live in a state of mutually assured destruction vis-à-vis any of its main rivals. The reason is its size: At just above 20,000 sq km, Israel is the smallest among the nuclear powers — the next (North Korea) is six times bigger. This lack of "strategic depth" means that Israel is the most vulnerable among the nuclear powers in the case of a first strike. This explains Israel's aggressive response to the weapons' pursuit of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

Kunal Singh

Second, nuclear weapons might embolden a new proliferator to initiate wars and acquire territory. Fortunately, nuclear weapons are not good at acquiring territory. However, if States can use surprise and offensive advantages to acquire territory through conventional means, they can use their nuclear weapons to preserve their gains. Former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had contemplated how a nuclear-capable Baghdad could make Israel more vulnerable to conventional onslaughts. Pakistan tried the same in Kargil in 1999. Again, Israel is more vulnerable than the US on this count, and hence more motivated to stop Iran.

Irrespective of whether the US or Israel or both decide to use the military option, it may not stop Iranian proliferation while also possibly resulting in a war REUTERS

Third, nuclear weapons can enable a new proliferator to exercise greater control in its region. It can, with greater abandon, coerce its rivals, reduce the ability of rivals to project power in the region, use irregular means of warfare like terrorism (like Pakistan) and enforce trade blockades. This will have an impact on both Israel and the US. For example, in a 2008 paper, Caitlin Talmadge concluded that any US operation in response to Iran blockading the Strait of Hormuz will not be short and simple. One can imagine that the complexities of such an operation will only further increase with Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Fourth, the addition of another nuclear weapons' State might create a domino effect, which results in several more nuclear powers. A domino might come into existence, as Nicholas L Miller has outlined, because the emergence of a new proliferator might a) threaten the security of others, which will then seek the bomb (think Saudi Arabia in response to Iran), b) add another potential supplier of sensitive nuclear material, c) demonstrate that building the bomb is feasible (both politically and technically), d) strengthen the pro-bomb lobby in non-nuclear weapon states, and e) put sensitive nuclear material in the hands of non-state actors. As a superpower committed to non-proliferation, the US would have a greater motivation than Israel to stop this eventuality.

Now, let's get to the other side of the ledger: Opportunities. Just on account of its greater capability — including the key ability to drop bunker-buster bombs on Iranian nuclear facilities — the US has a greater opportunity to strike than Israel. The latter, though, has greater motivation on account of the above factors. This mismatch between motivation and opportunity explains why Iran has come this close to developing the bomb and Israel has not been able to inflict much damage on it. In fact, the Obama administration had, reportedly, stopped Israel from striking Iranian nuclear facilities and opted for a diplomatic path with Tehran instead.

Irrespective of whether the US or Israel or both together decide to use the military option, it may not stop Iranian proliferation while also possibly resulting in a full-scale war. At best, the military option will set the Iranian weapons programme back by a few years, but leave its leadership more motivated to get the bomb. At worst, it might not alter Iran's ability to go nuclear and even convince its leadership to break out sooner than it planned. If at the end of it, the US finds itself mired in another war, many of the reasons offered to exit Afghanistan or stay away from Ukraine will be exposed as dubious.

The decision to use the military option will be tough. One hopes that diplomacy will succeed and tough decisions will not have to be taken. The stakes are indeed high in Vienna but, equally important, they are different for the two partners: The US and Israel.

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The views expressed are personal

{ ANTONY BLINKEN } US SECRETARY OF STATE

The Quad is becoming a powerful mechanism for delivering, helping to vaccinate a big part of the world... strengthening maritime security to push back against... coercion in the Indo-Pacific region, working... on emerging technologies.

How a digital university can transform India's education system

The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected the education sector. But even before the pandemic, building new brick-and-mortar universities was an expensive proposition. The lack of an adequate number of universities meant limited options for aspiring students. These challenges and the need to integrate higher education with the knowledge economy motivated universities to pay attention to the reforms required in the way we impart higher education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 laid the path to address these challenges.

The surge of digital technologies has inspired us to reimagine teaching-learning methods, university governance systems, higher education goals, and how future universities are perceived by employers.

M Jagadesh Kumar

There is an increasing recognition that the current university model is rigid and that traditional universities have failed to customise education to take care of needs, interests, financial capabilities, and diverse cognitive abilities of students. Therefore, educators and policymakers feel that we must create flexible educational systems to provide customised high-quality "anytime/anywhere" education. Such pre-packaged education by academics would help us achieve the economies of scale required in India.

With emerging technologies driving information economies, it also becomes necessary for those employed to acquire new skills relevant to their changing roles. Unfortunately, the current model is of little help.

If universities have to remain relevant for students, they need to recalibrate their functioning to resonate with the priorities of their non-working and working students. Thanks to the steps taken by the Union ministry of education during the pandemic, we are addressing the challenges faced by students through a fusion of digital media and information technology for online education.

With the launch of Digital India by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on July 2, 2015, India has become a global pioneer in deploying national-scale public digital infrastructure and services in welfare, health care, education, and finance. This has brought a transformative change in governance and delivery for realising "*antyodaya*" (last in line) by ensuring social justice, equity, respect, and equal opportunities for all, particularly the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, the poor, the disadvantaged and rural populations. In addition, these technology-enabled schemes have enhanced the "ease of living" for all Indians.

In Budget 2022-23, finance minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman announced the establishment of a digital university. This is a decision of great significance. A digital university will provide better access to high-quality higher education in multiple languages. This aligns with the vision laid out in the NEP of accessible, affordable, and equitable higher education.

The digital university can integrate all the components of the learning value chain, from the admission process to providing learning material in the digital format, online interactions, continuous evaluations, and awarding of degrees. Since the digital university will be built on a networked hub-spoke model, it has several advantages. First, it can develop cutting-edge information and communications technology platforms and digital content, using emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, virtual reality, augmented reality, and blockchain.

Second, the digital university can also integrate existing capabilities such as SWAYAM, SWAYAM-Prabha, ePG-Paathshaala, eGyanKosh, National Digital Library, and Virtual Labs into one organic entity.

Third, this hub will, in turn, collaborate with the best public higher educational institutes, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and central universities to provide an affordable world-class teaching-learning ecosystem.

As India observes the occasion of " Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav", the establishment of the digital university has the potential to place India as an important provider of higher education to students in India and the world.

If there ever was a time to establish a digital university in India, it is now.

M Jagadesh Kumar is chairperson, University Grants Commission
The views expressed are personal

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OUR VIEW

MINT

Income tax on our rich should've been rejigged

Former RBI governor C. Rangarajan has pointed out how this levy could have been revised for simplicity and efficacy. The peak effective rate paid by top earners must stay under 40%

It was a relief to most payers of income tax that the Union budget for 2022-23 left this burden broadly unchanged. The covid enlargement of state spending has totted up a bill that must be picked up at some point, sooner or later, and many had feared a tax squeeze. A clamour had arisen for raising taxes on the country's rich, especially, in a situation that lent urgency to relying more on direct than indirect taxes. To the extent that taxpayers in all income brackets were spared rate hikes, the government pulled off something of a crowd-pleaser. Yet, it did not do what it could have done with minimal fiscal damage to simplify this tax and keep it range-bound. In the context of this missed opportunity, the views of former Reserve Bank of India governor C. Rangarajan call for consideration. The multiple cesses and surcharges that we levy, he argued, could have been done away with and a clean new slab created instead at the top of our marginal tax structure with a rate of over 35% but under 40%. This would offer clarity on what top earners must pay and also help out cash-strapped states, which get a slice of a tax collection pie that leaves out extra impositions that go by various names.

In her mid-2019 budget, soon after the Narendra Modi government won re-election, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had declared a surcharge on the tax liability of individuals earning over ₹5 crore a year. At 37.5% on tax dues assessed in the top bracket, which bears a 30% marginal tax on income, that imposition—with small cesses slapped on—resulted in a peak effective rate of almost 43%. Apart from the complexity of such taxes on taxes, a practice that openly flouts the canon of taxation simplicity, that rate presents the country with a particular problem. Any tax claim that nears the halfway mark of what one earns is observed to stir dissonance among taxpayers. While there are exceptions, no doubt, a burden level above 40% tends to be perceived as punitive, by and large, particularly so by a globally-mobile elite that's aware of peak rates elsewhere. As it happens, cross-country comparisons hold greater relevance than our tax authorities may like to admit. One of the quiet shifts that was both interrupted and enabled by the outbreak of covid was of folks with high incomes leaving Indian shores for friendlier tax regimes overseas. An anecdotal sample of movers would suggest the assistance in some cases of multinational employers willing to relocate executive talent abroad as a retention ploy. Work-from-anywhere, that great gift of this pandemic, has apparently been interpreted by some to mean 'any tax jurisdiction'. By the same logic of dropping corporate tax rates for India to attract investment, we should have got our peak rate on top earners under 40%. If capital is mobile, so are the rich.

While a clean 35% slab free of slap-ons for multi-crore incomes would have been welcome, we must also phase out our dual-rate system that goes by whether or not taxpayers forgo a panoply of deductions and exemptions. The intricacies of this also go against the basic principle of keeping taxes simple. Even those who opt for the clarity of a no-tax-off liability calculation must contend with cesses. As these were meant to be temporary, they should also have been axed. In general, there are enough studies that show easier rules of taxation result in better tax collections overall. Tax relief was not all that we needed from the 2022-23 budget. We needed direct tax reforms.

MY VIEW | HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

Boris Johnson's current crisis of leadership is of his own making

The UK's Tory MPs may retain him as prime minister but this is only likely to invite more ridicule

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There he goes again, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is described by his newly-appointed communications director as "not a complete clown". But like with the Joker in the comic series *Batman*, there often seems a sinister aspect to Johnson's cynical manipulation of rumours that reaches almost Trumpian sophistication of innuendo. In apparent desperation to deflect blame over his administration's callous handling of the pandemic and his bacchanalian parties at 10 Downing Street, Johnson can be seen trying to pin false blame on opposition leader Keir Starmer for not prosecuting the case of a paedophile. Johnson was being parsimonious with truth then, as he has been in his explanations about whether he attended parties, or whether he was 'ambushed' by a birthday cake, as one of his parliamentarians put it.

Johnson's dream as a schoolboy was to be the king of the world, as reported, but he had to settle for a country that was no longer an empire with a much diminished global presence or influence, a kingdom more disunited than what its name implied. Anger against him has grown because it was he who had set strict rules to fight the pandemic, and it was he and his colleagues who were found to have broken them, and then he made misleading statements in Parliament. Some of his MPs want him out. He appears to think he can brazen it out. He has survived over a week since a senior bureaucrat published a damning but redacted report and the Metropolitan Police instituted its own inquiry to investigate if laws were broken. A week is a long time in politics, Harold Wilson, a former occupant at Downing Street had said; Johnson is counting on that.

If past form is any indicator, he just may be right. Here is a former journalist who became popular by marketing his cultivated disorderly charm in a topical news-themed quiz-cum-comedy show, *Have I Got News For You*; who was sacked as a correspondent for making up 'facts'; who was sacked again as a front-bencher for allegedly lying to his party leader; who insulted all and sundry, from a city to the US president and African diplomats, and treated it lightly; and whose actions suggest he weighed the decision of whether Britain should stay in or leave the EU with only one criterion in mind—how that might help his career.

With exceptional tolerance, despite knowing Johnson's past, the British public voted for him, handing his party a remarkable majority. If he survives, it is not because the public continues to like him, but because his own Tory party's parliamentarians can't agree on who should lead them next.

When the pandemic spread across the world, the UK was in a precarious position. Years of under-investment in its National Health Service showed signs of strain. Doctors and nurses knew that they'd have to make heart-wrenching decisions about who should get the bed at an intensive care unit and who must be denied. Some of the UK's early bureaucratic decisions—lockdown, weirdly complicated rules about who could meet whom, when and for how long, and who should be vaccinated first and who must wait—were agonizing. But the nation that had endured the Blitz obeyed: 'mustn't grumble' is like the nation's motto; keep calm and carry on, as the people are constantly urged.

The covid death toll mounted. Grandchildren bid tearful farewells on their tablets to their grandparents who they could not visit in hospitals; weddings got postponed and people could not attend the funerals of their loved ones. The poignant image of Queen Elizabeth II sitting alone, keeping vigil by the casket carrying the body of her husband of more than seven decades, Prince Philip, touched the nation's conscience.

But while the queen mourned her husband, Johnson and his colleagues were at a farewell event—a work event, mind you—strictly official, for a departing colleague. Celebrations became the norm. There were more than a dozen such instances, and liquor flowed liberally. If this is how senior civil servants and politicians in Britain work, it is no wonder they lost the empire and messed up Brexit. The callous attitude showed shamelessness—the country mourned quietly as privileged elite celebrated, contemptuous of the compliant citizenry, as if mocking their misery.

If Johnson survives, it is not because Britain is indulgent, but because the decision rests with Conservative MPs. The party's parliamentarians ruthlessly dumped Margaret Thatcher in the past and have back-stabbed rivals (think of Johnson and Michael Gove). But with fewer constituents complaining about prime ministerial shenanigans and lack of clarity over who should replace Johnson, Tory parliamentarians just might think that kicking the ball further in the grass may do for now.

There is Rishi Sunak, who'd be the first prime minister from an ethnic minority if MPs elect him, but so far he has been loyal to Johnson. Liz Truss may also be interested, but she doesn't have broad support. Priti Patel's chances are low. Now-backbencher Jeremy Hunt was Johnson's rival the last time, but he has lost the race once, although he is what Britons would call "a safe pair of hands". The majority of 359 Tory MPs may believe that this too shall pass, but as they cling to the coat-tails of a disgraced leader, they only invite ridicule.

10 YEARS AGO

mint
Factory output slumps in Dec
Army chief withdraws case, govt says his integrity not questioned

JUST A THOUGHT

Education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform.

DERRICK A. BELL

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

The moral case for moving to a higher share of direct taxes

AJIT RANADE

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The commentary on the Union budget proposals for 2022-23 has been mostly around the theme that it is a bold and aggressive "gamble on growth". A high tide raises all boats. If economic growth is above 8% in real terms, and above 14% in nominal terms, it would spell good news for job creation (from real expansion) and also tax collection (from nominal expansion which benefits from somewhat higher inflation). The latter would be good for some fiscal correction. As for inducing growth, the finance minister has done her bit, by ensuring that all the incremental growth in government expenditure next year is on capital items, which promote long-term growth. But the bulk of the growth-inducing investment spending beyond infrastructure will have to come from the private sector, including foreign investors. It is on this that the "gamble" aspect of this budget will be most watched. Are animal spirits going to be sufficiently unleashed, so that we have a multi-year private sector capex rally? The pre-conditions do exist. Banks have healthier balance sheets, and corporates are now sufficiently de-leveraged. Foreign inflows have been very strong, albeit focused on unicorn sectors. But business confidence for investment expansion will need a boost from consumer sentiment too. That, in turn, will depend on job creation and the employment outlook, which in turn depends on business expansion, completing this self-fulfilling loop. This could be either an optimism- or a pessimism-reinforcing loop. It is difficult to tell which way next year will turn out, although the weight of probability favours optimism.

In the meantime, the bigger challenge is one of fiscal consolidation. At a time when fancily-called Modern Monetary Theory has gained currency (pun intended), and unlimited deficit financing is becoming respectable, it seems terribly old fashioned to talk about fiscal responsibility. But just like the law of gravity, the law of unsustainable debt cannot be defied. If the government-debt-to GDP ratio (India's is at 90% of gross domestic product, including state governments) rises too fast, there is no way out except to repudiate it, default on repayments, or cause high inflation (by printing lots of currency, MMT style). High deficits not only cause eventual debt-management problems, but are also a burden on unborn generations. For, today's deficit, paid for by borrowing from the public, will be repaid in the future by the government by taxes on future generations. The unborn cannot even vote, but have a tax burden imposed on them. What happened to "no taxation without representation"? The issue of low deficits therefore becomes a moral issue, or an issue of fairness, of inter-generational justice.

State coffers must ideally and increasingly be filled by taxing those who can best bear the tax burden

If you agree with this proposition, then the natural next step is to either cut spending or raise taxes. In a complex, diverse democracy with special interest groups, spending cuts are not so easy. Besides, India has to catch up on its backlog in health and education spending, so reducing the size of the government is almost impossible. Which means we have to find a way to raise revenue, not by taxing unborn future citizens (i.e. running deficits), but from the present generation. Here, we have two choices, direct and indirect taxes. Monthly goods and services tax (GST) collections touched a record high of ₹1.4 trillion in January, prompting the finance minister to deviate from her prepared speech to mention this joyful buoyancy. But high GST, to the extent it comes from high tax rates, is no cause for cheer. It is an indirect and regressive tax, even though as a transaction tax, it is easier to collect and administer. For the past three or four years, the share of indirect taxes in total tax collections has been rising, and has reached 55%. Our median GST rate is stuck around 18%, which is punitive for low-income households. Imagine paying 18% on your health insurance premium during pandemic times. But that does not mean we tinker around with rates, giving relief to food and medicines.

The multiplicity of GST rates means having to decide what goes into the 5% slab and what in the 12% and 18% brackets. Plain biscuits in 5 and cream biscuits in 12? That is just invitation to disputes and litigation, if not harassment and corruption. We need a low and stable indirect tax system with wide coverage and preferably a single slab (a flat sales tax, also called transaction tax). Crucially, what we need is a higher share of direct taxes in overall collections, imposed on incomes of individuals, whatever the source of their income (be it a salary, capital gains, inheritance or a lottery). India has only seven direct taxpayers for every 100 voters, one of world's lowest ratios. There was a time when dividend income was tax free, and it took 20 years to undo that misadventure. Thanks to e-triangulation and digital payments, it is possible to deduct tax at source for dividends. This is not quite a presumptive tax, as done with salaries, but is effective. A similar approach should be applied to all realized capital gains. We are getting there, but not fast enough. The principle of income tax should be based on being agnostic to the source of income. This is the notion of horizontal equity. Two people earning similar incomes should have similar tax burdens. We also need progressivity in direct taxes: i.e., higher income earners need to pay more taxes (a natural corollary) and also at higher marginal rates. This is the notion of vertical equity. India's tax-to-GDP ratio is among the world's lowest. We have room to raise it. But that must be in a fair way, increasing the share of direct taxes like capital gains and reducing the share of indirect taxes like GST.

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THEIR VIEW

India must reform the very way that reforms are brought about

It's a process of learning and we must build institutional abilities for democratic deliberations on our path of development

ARUN MAIRA
is former member, Planning Commission, and author of 'Redesiging the Aeroplane While Flying: Reforming Institutions'

PTI

Reforms are required, everyone agrees. Incomes for most Indians are insecure and low. Inequalities are growing; economic growth has become sluggish. Labour unions have been saying for many years that labour laws must be reformed; industry leaders too. The government is struggling to make "doing business" easier for small enterprises and self-employed earners. Farmers want reforms to make their livelihoods more secure and remunerative; the government has promised reforms to double their incomes. Everyone wants reforms. Who then are the "anti-reformers" that some self-anointed champions of economic reforms rail against?

The list of what must be reformed includes economic matters as well as governance matters. Federal governance is being distorted by a centre in haste to make bold reforms to attract large investments. Democratic processes for consultation with stakeholders are being paid lip-service to, even short-circuited, in a haste to implement change. In its apparent anxiety to prove it is 'strong', the government is rushing to make big announcements. It is unable to identify the right reforms the country needs because it is not consulting states and stakeholders sufficiently.

The *process* of making reforms needs fixing to develop and implement the *right* reforms. Who will benefit from the reforms? And who will be affected by them? Will the reforms be supported by those most affected? Will they be implementable? Have all stakeholders been consulted honestly? What could be the unintended consequences of good reforms in one part of a complex system on its other parts? Have the views of all stakeholders been considered honestly? Will the benefits of reforms be sustainable? These are fundamental questions that any sound process of reforms must systematically address. The government's difficulties in making bold reforms have arisen because it is using the wrong process.

The methods used for bold reforms in 1991 were appropriate for the type of reforms made then. They will not work for the reforms needed now. The 1991 reforms unleashed industry from licensing and made imports much easier. The reforms' principal beneficiaries were consumers who could buy imported goods they could not before, and also traders and assemblers of products with imported components. Consumer aspirations were fulfilled. Reform resistance came from some large industries exposed to new international competition. Costs versus benefits were clear. The masses of India benefited, while crony capitalists lost.

Since then, economists and policymakers have been struggling to implement 'factor market' reforms for land, labour and natural resources. These affect the livelihoods of the masses. The Bharatiya Janata Party government had to withdraw its proposed reforms in land acquisition. Bold reforms of labour laws formulated by the Centre are stalled at the level of states and continue to be opposed by unions. Reforms of environmental regulations to enable large industrial projects are resisted by organizations representing concerns of local communities. Reforms of agricultural institutions to double farmers' incomes have been stalled by a stalwart movement of protest by millions of farmers who are the intended beneficiaries of these reforms. The proposed farm-sector reforms are seen to have reversed the equation of the 1991 reforms. This time the beneficiaries will be crony capitalists, farmers say, and they, the masses, will be the sufferers.

India must reform its processes of democratic governance. It must reform economic institutions at the same time to enable incomes and wealth to increase much faster and more widely within its economic pyramid, and not only for the 1% at the top. Economic reforms that affect the masses directly must be developed with the people for the people. They cannot be developed by experts above for people below. Not only is that undemocratic, experts in academic and policy silos can't comprehend social and political forces within a complex system in which the needs of many stakeholders must be reconciled, unless they listen to them.

Consultation with diverse stakeholders can be messy. But it is unavoidable for finding sound systemic solutions. Any government that pays only lip-service to the slogan "*Sab ka saath, Sab ka vikaas*", and even short-circuits deliberations in Parliament before announcing bold reforms, can neither make reforms rightly nor conceive the right reforms.

It is time for India's bold reformers to go back to the drawing board. They must first get the process of systems reform right.

The first step in the process is to be clear about the ultimate purpose of reforms. Are agriculture reforms, for example, aimed at increasing incomes of farmers around the country, or for attracting more corporate investments to build supply chains? Therefore, clarity is needed over who must be consulted the most and whose views on the best way to go about these reforms must prevail.

The second step would be to list the diverse stakeholders who will be most affected by the reforms under consideration—both favourably as well as unfavourably. All of them must be listened to very well, and they must listen to each other too for a consensus on the best and most fair solution.

The process of consultation must be designed and conducted well. When badly designed and poorly conducted, it will not produce good insights and well-rounded solutions, nor any consensus. Therefore, the reforms announced would end up as unimplementable—which has been the fate of most bold reforms the government has tried to make.

Reforms of complex systems, such as India's industrial-employment ecosystem and the agriculture-livelihoods-ecological system, are difficult. They are like redesigning an aeroplane while it is in flight with everyone aboard. Any bold change to one part of the system when other parts remain unaltered can create an imbalance and bring everyone down.

Reform is an ongoing process of learning, and acting, and learning further together. India needs to build institutional abilities for democratic deliberations and democratic development. This was the principal insight from a pre-2014 review of the failures of 'planning' to create more inclusive and sustainable economic growth. This was also expressed in the charter of the Niti Aayog which replaced the Planning Commission. Sadly, Niti Aayog has also been sucked into a top-down process of development and reform which cannot work.

MINT CURATOR

Amazon cannot keep thriving without fixing its work culture

It needs to be more competitive as a firm people want to work for

SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL
is an editor with Bloomberg Opinion

Amazon is seen as a stickler for 'come to office' in a work-from-anywhere industry AP

Just because the Great Resignation may be greatly exaggerated doesn't mean managers can breathe a sigh of relief. Yes, it's mostly front-line and blue-collar workers—not office workers—who have been leaving their jobs at historically high rates. And even so, the quit rate is still only about 3%. And this is a metric we have only tracked [in the US] for about 20 years. But managers still need to remember: Talented people always have options.

I've come to think of this as the first law of firm-o-dynamics. It's true in good economies, it's true in bad economies, and it is especially true now, as it's a great time to be looking for a job. Especially if you're someone who can do your job from anywhere in an industry that has embraced remote work.

Which means that bosses still have to worry about retaining people. Consider the case of Amazon, the unique mash-up of online retail, cloud computing, groceries, streaming media, shipping and smart-home products that has come to seem as necessary to modern life as electrical wiring and indoor plumbing. Even consumers who eschew ordering products from Amazon on ethical grounds (whether to protect their local Main Street or because of concerns about its treatment of warehouse workers) likely shop at Whole Foods or use websites that run on Amazon Web Services' cloud platform. The company's ubiquity is how former CEO and current chair Jeff Bezos has ended up with a yacht that has its own yacht, a boat so big that a Rotterdam bridge will be (temporarily) disassembled to make room for it. It's how Bezos's ex-wife automatically became, by some estimates, the fourth-richest woman in the world. It's why, as I type these words, I see one Prime van after another driving past my office window.

Yet, despite all this success, Amazon has more recently suffered a string of negative headlines for its brain-drain problem. My *Bloomberg* colleague Brad Stone reports that turnover in some engineering units is over 50% (a figure the company disputed). *Business Insider* has cataloged a litany of complaints about below-market pay, unreasonable hours and a toxic culture.

Certainly, it doesn't help that Amazon, even more than other tech firms, relies on access to its stock to compensate workers, and that the stock has lost nearly $1,000 per share since summer. Of course, it's still a very valuable stock, and investors took heart from its recent better-than-expected earnings report. But there are still plenty of reasons for the company to turn the talent management problems around before they get worse.

So what's a wildly successful business to do? CEO Andy Jassy is reportedly already trying to fix Amazon's culture problems, which is the right place to start. A Glassdoor analysis last month said culture was more than 12 times as important as compensation in predicting whether employees would leave. What keeps people from leaving? As my *Bloomberg* colleague Ella Ceron writes, "Predictable job schedules, job growth and recognition."

Let's focus on the first one. Predictable schedules have been hard to come by over the past two years, with kids in and out of school and work-from-home arrangements feeling more like 'living at work' arrangements. But horror stories out of Amazon seem especially pervasive. One engineer, Patrick McGah, told *Business Insider* that his manager suggested he take a "power nap" from 9 to 10pm, then keep working until perhaps 2am. (Confession time: I also take a 'power nap' at 9pm, though it lasts until about 5 am.) Other employees who've left have shared similar stories of late-night work-a-thons. Curtailing such expectations should be a priority.

People also like to feel the work they've done has been noticed. These efforts don't have to be elaborate or complicated—a simple "nice one" goes a long way. But not all forms of recognition are free: Amazon needs to review its compensation strategy for key roles, and there are signs it is doing so. While it has long said it wants to hire "missionaries, not mercenaries", that is harder to say with a straight face when global headlines focus on the founder's boat. And it's a problem any time employees feel that in order to get a raise, they need to get an outside offer—or quit and get rehired.

It's tough to change a culture that's soured, but it isn't impossible. Part of the problem for Amazon is that these problems have become so well publicized that it may have trouble replacing the people it's losing. Who wants to work for lower pay with longer hours? Especially if that company is known for being the come-into-the-office stickler in an industry that has embraced work-from-anywhere?

Some degree of turnover is refreshing. But good new employees can take a long time to find, as bosses can attest. Maybe for Amazon's next trick, it could figure out one-click hiring.

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MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

Clues to crack an epidemiological puzzle called covid

BIJU DOMINIC

is the chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics and chairman, FinalMile Consulting

While the world remains in the grip of covid, crucial efforts are already underway to unravel this "epidemiological mystery". This pandemic has not followed the pattern of many other communicable diseases. Low-income countries with fewer healthcare resources were expected to have a higher burden of covid. Instead, it was the wealthier countries with better healthcare resources that got most affected. The countries that experts believed to be best prepared to mitigate the effects of a pandemic were not the most successful at doing so. In this context, two studies provide some surprising insights.

Lockdowns were the most widely used non-pharmaceutical intervention to minimize the spread of coronavirus. The decision of governments and health authorities to impose shutdowns as a way to arrest the pandemic was based on forecasts made by epidemiological studies, such as a famous one by the Imperial College London. Lockdowns contributed to reducing economic activity, worsening unemployment, disrupting children's schooling, increasing domestic violence and causing political unrest. But how much did they contribute to curbing covid mortality, their main goal?

'A literature review and meta-analysis of the effects of lockdowns on covid-19 mortality' done by Jonas Herby, Lars Jonung, and Steve H. Hanke and submitted to the Studies in Applied Economics series of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health and the Study of Business Enterprise offers a surprising finding. The meta-analysis fails to confirm that lockdowns have had a significant effect on mortality rates. Lockdowns in Europe and the US reduced covid mortality by only 0.2% on average. Shelter-in-place orders (SIPOs) were also ineffective. They only reduced mortality by 2.9% on average. So the net conclusion of this study is that lockdown policies were ill-founded and should be rejected as a pandemic policy instrument.

This analysis already has its critics. It is seen as having cherry-picked studies to fit a particular point of view, while rejecting others. Since a large number of people were adversely affected by lockdowns, this debate could gain intensity. But in the midst of all these debates, an obvious question is bound to come up: If lockdowns were not effective in preventing the spread of the pandemic, what else mattered in its management? A paper published few days ago in *The Lancet* could provide the answer.

'Pandemic Preparedness and Covid-19: An Exploratory Analysis of Infection and Fatality Rates, and Contextual Factors Associated with Preparedness in 177 Countries, from Jan 1, 2020, to Sept 30, 2021' offers some interesting insights. The researchers considered various factors that could predict the pandemic's spread. These included environmental seasonality, population density, gross domestic product (GDP), age distribution of the population, mean body-mass index (BMI), exposure to air pollution, smoking rates, prevalence of pulmonary disease and cancer, changes in mobility patterns, vaccination rates and several other factors. They also assessed the impact of interpersonal and governmental trust. When it came to predicting fatality rates, age stood out. This could explain why rich countries that have a larger proportion of old people had a disproportionate number of deaths. The most surprising were the factors found to have mattered the most when it came to predicting the number of people infected in each country. Among these, measures of trust in fellow citizens and trust in the government had larger, statistically-significant associations with lower infection rates.

New studies validate the importance of behavioural analysis for good pandemic management

One way to quantify the contribution of trust to covid outcomes is to create a 'what if' scenario. According to the study, if interpersonal trust were to reach the 75th percentile, the level of South Korea, it would have prevented 40.3% of global infections. If trust in governments were to reach the same percentile, the level in Denmark, it would have reduced global infections by 12.9%. The level of trust in a country—among citizens and between citizens and their government—is something that an administration can prepare for and enhance during a crisis. This analysis thus suggests that building trust among fellow citizens and in the government might be one of the best investments a country can make to mount a more effective response to future pandemic threats.

The meta-analysis study by Herby, Jonung and Hanke mentioned earlier throws new light on the behavioural aspects of pandemic management. It distinguishes between the effects of mandatory and voluntary behavioural changes. The study found that on an average, voluntary behavioural changes are 10 times as crucial as mandatory behavioural changes in combating covid. This explains why several epidemiological model simulations, which did not model appropriate behaviour traits endogenously, failed to accurately forecast the effect of lockdowns.

The covid pandemic was not just a medical problem. If so, a biomedical solution like a vaccine should have ended it. This pandemic reminds us that public health is really rooted in trust. Policymakers should be aware that beneath every societal problem, there are deep-rooted behavioural undertones. Unless we address these behavioural vulnerabilities, the world will always be defenceless against fast-spreading viruses. And traditional solutions like vaccines will lie unused in nearby health centres.

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DECCAN Chronicle

10 FEBRUARY 2022

As PM ignored questions, attack on Nehru unseemly

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vicious attacks on the Congress Party, which notably included the traducing of Jawaharlal Nehru, the man who spent more years in the jails of the British Raj than Mahatma Gandhi, ill serves the cause of democracy and democratic institution-building in India. This is likely to raise questions over the kind of vision being raised by the current political establishment.

A no-holds-barred attack on the Congress by the present leadership, whose ideological roots and foundational ideas are antithetical to those of the BJP-RSS variety, is par for the course. It is to be expected and viewed as being part and parcel of the cut and thrust of debate in the practice of democracy. In its long periods in governments at the Centre and in states, Congress has indeed accumulated negative points. However, the vituperation against arguably the most charismatic and influential freedom fighter after the Mahatma, who subsequently played an invaluable and foundational part in the construction of India's democracy in spite of the country being steeped in poverty in 1947 and subject to pressures from Communist as well as Hindu majoritarian tendencies at the inception, is incomprehensible six decades after the passing of the first Prime Minister. It suggests a deep ideological animosity.

Indeed, there is irony in the fact that the across-the-board attack on Nehru comes from the leader of an ideological and political trend which dissociated itself from India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule, gave political comfort to colonial rulers, and these days routinely guns for even Mahatma Gandhi. It is a pity that Mr Modi went hell for leather for former PMs Nehru and Indira Gandhi and the Congress while winding up the debate on the motion of thanks to the President's address to the two Houses of Parliament. On this occasion governments are called upon to defend their record and answer questions asked by Opposition parties while discussing the President's address. This requirement has stood violated only in the time of Mr Modi. In the present instance, however, the PM seems to have as good as acknowledged the criticisms made by his political opponents in Parliament by not answering a single one of them.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's forceful speech on the President's address was widely noted. This appears to have been the trigger for Mr Modi's aggressiveness.

This is a serious flaw in parliamentary proceedings. It appears to underline that the government is failing to submit itself to the standards and mandate of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. The Speaker and the Rajya Sabha chairman are expected to remind ministers and the PM of parliamentary procedure and expectations, and not permit them to get away with empty rhetoric or making irrelevant digressions, especially when assertions made by government representatives project a misleading, false, or incomplete picture. In this regard, shallow assertions made by the PM on the processes that led to the liberation of Goa, on the question of inflation in earlier eras, and on the question of expanding India's strategic autonomy, are noteworthy.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's forceful speech on the President's address, especially on India being a Union of states, deep economic disparities that divide India and the government's failings in dealing with China's intrusion in Ladakh, was widely noted. This appears to have been the trigger for Mr Modi's aggressiveness. With election campaigns going on in five states, the PM regrettably chose to use the forum of Parliament for electioneering, which in India typically involves the superficial targeting of opponents while running away from core issues.

Media ban: Alarming trends

The order of the Union ministry of information and broadcasting to revoke the licence of nine-year-old MediaOne, a Malayalam news channel promoted by Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, and the decision of the Kerala high court upholding it should trigger a debate on the way institutions mandated to protect the constitutional rights of citizens wield their powers in these times. The I&B ministry informed the channel that its decision is based on the home ministry's refusal to give it security clearance. There is little information on the reasons why the Union home ministry denied the clearance, except that there were "intelligence inputs".

That the Union ministries chose to smother the fundamental right of citizens guaranteed under Article 19(1)(A) with no transparency is worrisome but the way the Kerala high court approached the issue reflects a larger danger to democratic rights. The court has found the information provided to it in "sealed cover" offered enough reason to uphold the executive's gagging order.

Even more ominous is the way the court penned its order. The Constitution defines the roles of the various arms of the government and stands guarantee for citizen's rights vis-a-vis the State. The court, instead of looking in the Constitution and picking its arguments to substantiate its order, rummaged through Vedic-period scripture Atri Samhita for the definition of the role and rights of the emperor. There it discovered that "national security is an executive responsibility where legislature and judiciary have only complementary roles".

This is unacceptable. We follow not Vedic-era scriptures but a Constitution which holds that the executive is answerable for all its actions to the legislature and that the judiciary has the power to review them. Moreover, the Supreme Court has recently held in the Pegasus case that "the mere invocation of national security by the State does not render the court a mute spectator". Instead of taking recourse to irrelevant decrees and ducking its responsibilities, the judiciary must live up to its constitutional responsibilities and protect the rights of the citizen.

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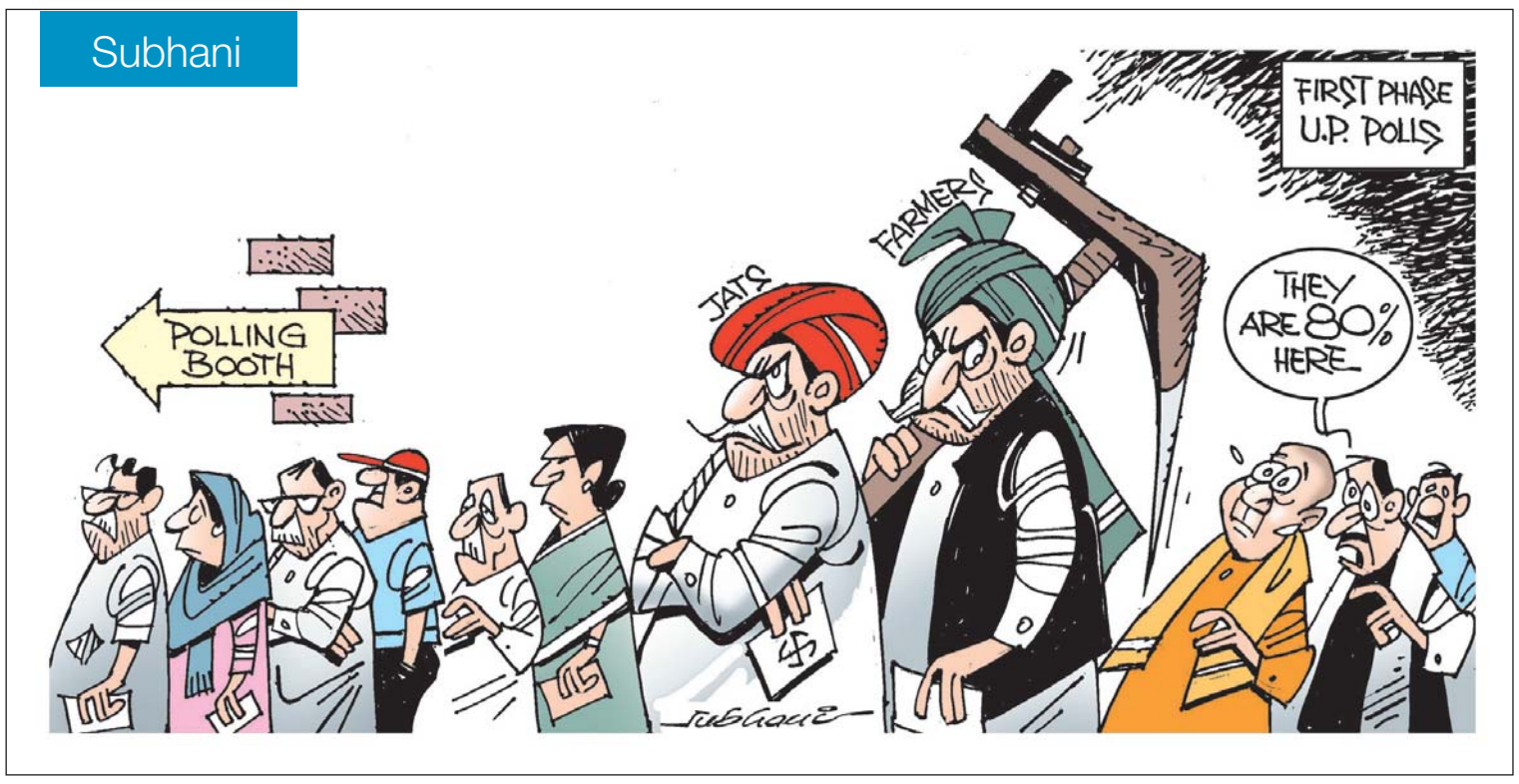
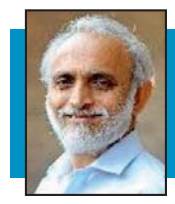


Backward UP's alarm bells for India's divisive politics



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

The first of the seven-phase Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in which voting begins Thursday, February 10, allows the people of the state to express their view through the ballot now that they have heard everyone on all sides, from the Hindutva-driven BJP; the anti-BJP Samajwadi Party, driven by the anger among the people; the Congress, fighting for its place in UP; and the mostly-quiet Bahujan Samaj Party, conscious of its marginalisation. The common promise made by all the parties, big and small, is that they will modernise the state through development. The BJP also harped on its anti-Muslim theme through its so-called unlawful religious conversion law.

Many political observers believe that UP will decide who rules in New Delhi, and this is the unstated credo of the BJP as well. It is for this reason that Prime Minister Narendra Modi abandoned his home state Gujarat eight years ago so that he could become Prime Minister, and it is the reason that Mr Modi's confidant Amit Shah worked assiduously to craft the 2014 Lok Sabha victory for the BJP in the state. The success of the BJP in UP reflects the crude politics of communalism and casteism of the party. The irony is that a state which is considered a linchpin of national politics remains politically, economically, socially, and therefore culturally, undeveloped, and it drags down India's bid to get developed and powerful. The backwardness of UP suits many political parties as it then becomes possible to mislead the people. It is also a mystery that the people of UP, who along with those in Bihar are considered politically sophisticated, are unable to force their leaders to develop the state.

The elites of Uttar Pradesh have few stakes in the state because they have already moved to the relatively greener pastures of New Delhi and Mumbai, and they play no role in changing the political discourse in the state. The late Ajit Singh of the Rashtriya Lok Dal used to be irritated that the national media considered UP as a backward state. But even he was forced to play the Jat, and not the development, card during election time. UP remains a politically backward state, and it does not matter which party wins the election. Once elected, the parties and leaders want to modernise and industrialise UP, but they fail. The dialectical muddle in which UP finds itself is this — it is not possible to become a developed state with an undeveloped political consciousness. The war cries can be the loudest, but the noise is of no avail in the national context. The people and politicians in UP are caught in a vicious circle of their own making. The people are not willing to grow beyond their social divisions and the politicians are only too eager to pamper those divisions.

If Jats want to vote for the BJP because they recall that Muslims ruled over them 300 years ago, and if dalits want to go with the BJP because of their constant battle with the Yadavs, and if the Brahmins want to join hands with the winning side, and Muslims feel helpless that there is no party that can protect them from the anti-Muslim BJP, it only points to the politics of despair. So, the claim that UP's Chanakyan politics is a delight to the intelligent mind sounds hollow and immoral.

It is indeed the case that the backward Hindi heartland, stretching from Haryana to Bihar, with their numbers will keep Indian politics in a crude state of boil, while the rest of the country moves ahead

The vulgar political calculus in the UP election this time is not too hard to fathom. The BJP feels threatened by the SP-RLD alliance in western UP, and Mr Shah has tried hard to drive a wedge between RLD's Jayant Choudhury and SP's Akhilesh Yadav, and behind the scenes, the BJP leaders have tried to convince the Jat community elders that Muslims pose a threat to them. Though continuing to play the anti-Muslim theme, the BJP has not abandoned its groundwork of keeping the non-Yadav backward castes in its fold by accommodating the Apna Dal and Nishad Party. While Akhilesh Yadav will stress on the economic programme of the Samajwadi Party, he cannot overlook the sensitivities of Yadavs. The BJP believes that the only way to defeat the caste formation is through Hindu communalism.

The marginal national party in UP's politics, the Congress, is moving along its outside track of non-caste, non-communal politics. The party's general secretary and UP in-charge Priyanka Gandhi Vadra in focusing on women and youth has tried to sidestep the caste and communal factors. In its own time, the Congress tried to keep the castes and communities in a precarious balance, but it broke. Unless the people of UP are fed up with casteism and communalism, the Congress stands no chance in the state.

Paradoxically, the way out of the cesspool of partisan politics is offered by the Congress as it is the Congress' traditional upper caste leadership in the state that paved the way for the emergence of the OBC, dalit and Hindutva parties.

Despite its sense of political self-importance, UP remains a marginal state in India's economic development. India has become one of the top economies in the world with its most populous state left out of the reckoning in India's economic growth. It is indeed the misfortune of the people of Uttar Pradesh that they are missing out on the excitement of technological changes and economic development. The poor of the state migrate to urban centres in other parts of the country, and the educated youth flock to Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad — as well as Mumbai and New Delhi — for jobs in the service industry and the private sector in general. And UP gets cooked in its own goose of casteism and communalism.

It is indeed the case that the backward Hindi heartland, stretching from Haryana to Bihar, with their numbers will keep Indian politics in a crude state of boil, while the rest of the country moves ahead. The BJP can hope to remain a dominant player because of its overbearing presence in the large swathe of the cow belt. The backward states like UP will prove to be the dangerous underbelly of India, an impediment. Of course, the political teaser is whether UP's communal politics will spread to other parts of India, as it is has in BJP-ruled Karnataka. But communalism is confined to the Mangalore-Udupi belt. Among the southern states, Karnataka is the most backward, notwithstanding the shining example of Bengaluru.

But it is UP that remains the sick man of India.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

MODI'S REPLY

Was it necessary for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bring up the issue of bifurcation of AP in his reply to the motion of thanks in Parliament? He hurt the sentiments of the people of the Telangana state. The BJP had supported it then. By criticising the way the Bill was passed, he has attacked the Parliamentary system.

E. Narayana
Hyderabad

HIJAB ROW NOW

It seems like politics has invaded the last bastion of education as well *(Hijab vs saffron shawl stir continues in Udupi, DC, Feb. 9)*. Innocent minds of students have been irrevocably sullied in the process which does not augur well for the future. Politics is best left out of education.

Dr Prasad Chitra
Secunderabad

The controversy regarding Hijab may be viewed in a larger perspective of how colleges and higher education institutions started imposing dress codes. It is time the judiciary gave a stern message to them to focus only on imparting higher standards of academics, life skills and organise extracurricular activities for all around growth of students.

Dr Sridevi G.
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Email your letters to info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

Indo-Pak war: Nixon hurls new blames

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9.

President Richard Nixon claimed today that the United States had "convincing evidence" of India's alleged intentions to destroy Pakistan's military forces in the west during the December war but neither he nor his National Security Adviser, Dr. Henry Kissinger, would give any details of the so-called evidence.

Mr. Nixon made the claim in his foreign policy message to the Congress, which contained a long chapter on the India-Pakistan War under the heading "South Asia", DPA the German news agency reports.—UNI.

Mahir Ali

Will killing of ISIS' 'caliph' make any difference, beyond a boost in morale?

There was a palpable sense of déja-vu about last week's late-night US military raid on a residential building in the northwestern Syrian town of Atmeh. Helicopters, special troops, gunfire and explosions, a terrorised neighbourhood. And, of course, a presidential team watching events unfold in real time from the Situation Room in the White House.

In this case, however, there was also a slight sense of 'déjà-who?' Unlike Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi was hardly a household name. Despite his elevation to the post of Islamic State's (IS) 'caliph' after Baghdadi's death in 2019, Qurayshi maintained a low profile even within the organisation. And Joe Biden, in his inevitable post-mortem presidential speech crowing about how "thanks to the bravery of our soldiers, this horrible terrorist leader is no more", referred to the target as 'Haji Abdullah' — which matches neither his nom de guerre nor his Iraqi birth name, Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla.

It is far from clear whether the elimination of the figurehead will make a difference, beyond the psychological blow. Qurayshi was apparently a driving force in the atrocities against the Yazidis. It goes almost without saying that a record of ruthlessness is bound to have been a requirement for the post he held.

Beyond that, his biography is rather murky. He evidently served in Saddam Hussein's army, pursued religious studies at the University of Mosul, volunteered his services to Al Qaeda in Iraq, and was incarcerated in Camp Bucca — the American prison in Iraq that served as an incubator for IS. Surprisingly, given his subsequent career trajectory, he became prominent as an informant at Bucca. He named names and provided other details. "Detainee is providing a lot of information," an interrogation report noted, and an analyst described him as "a songbird of unique talent and ability".

His reputation as an eager collaborator with the occupying authorities was apparently common knowledge among his confederates. It's intriguing that he nonetheless became a key lieutenant to Baghdadi. There may be more here than meets the eye, but it could be a long time before we find out.

After all, it has come to light only in recent months, courtesy investigative reporting published in *The New York Times*, that a shadowy component of the Pentagon "sidestepped safeguards and repeatedly killed civilians" during the years of combat that initially decimated IS.

A small unit known as Talon Anvil, operating between 2014 and 2019, was tasked with picking targets for US airstrikes. *NYT* cites "people who worked with the strike cell" in reporting that "it circumvented rules imposed to protect noncombatants, and alarmed its partners in the military and CIA by killing people who had no role in the conflict: farmers trying to harvest, children in the street, families fleeing fighting, and villagers sheltering in buildings".

Another *NYT* report about how Task Force 9, under whose aegis Talon Anvil operated, initiated a 'defence' bombing raid on the Tabqa Dam, which was supposedly off-limits. The dam was under IS control, but the US-led coalition knew a breach threatened hundreds of thousands of lives. Disaster was averted only with an emergency ceasefire and a collaborative engineering effort by avowed enemies. Such collaboration for the common good remains an exception, of course — else it might jeopardise the 'war or terror'.

The recent revelations about the conduct of warfare in Syria, which vary vastly from the official narrative, are based largely on whistleblower testimony. Unlike, on a different front, last week's Pentagon report about the Kabul airport attack last August that killed an estimated 170 Afghans and 13 US military personnel. The death toll has been blamed entirely on a solitary IS suicide bomber.

That isn't inconceivable, of course, given the densely packed crowds. But reports that at least some of the casualties were claimed after the blast by US troops firing into the crowd have been dismissed, without any Afghan witnesses being interviewed. Who can say whether somewhat different details will emerge a few years hence?

Rest assured, though, that every US president will have his 'gotcha' moment. Biden last week claimed that the raid in Syria, conducted this way in order to "minimise civilian casualties", had "successfully removed a major threat to the world".

That may be so. The viciousness of IS, in all its permutations and across its various branches, is beyond doubt. And it's hardly the only group of its kind with an international reach. But who can seriously doubt that when it comes to violence on an industrial scale, 'non-state actors' can only dream of matching the lethal firepower — and all too often even the viciousness — of state actors?

Fifty-five years on, Martin Luther King's 1967 description of his country as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world" sadly remains all too true.

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THE HANS INDIA
HYDERABAD THURSDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2022

ALL TALK AND NO SUBSTANCE

"King doesn't listen. Congress removed the idea of the king. Agar Congress Na Hoti… Tukde Tukde party…" These were some of the expressions that were used as missiles by the Congress and the BJP during the reply to motion of thanks to Presidents address in Parliament. Not just that, there was a passing reference to how Congress party had passed the AP State's Reorganisation Bill-2014.

While the AICC and its leaders perhaps realised that there was not much scope for agitation or they must have felt it would be of no use making too big an issue of the Prime Minister's remarks because it is difficult to match the oratory of Modi, in Telangana the politics have hit such a low that the two parties Congress and TRS are making much ado about nothing. "PM is spitting venom against T." "Where was federalism when BJP at Centre merged 7 mandals and Lower Sileru project?"… and so on.

The first time MP and TPCC president, A Revanth Reddy, says, "Modi is illiterate, doesn't know the rules of Parliament and how a bill is passed. He does not know the history of Telangana." God save the Congress. Modi was CM for 13 years and has been the leader of Lok Sabha since 2014. Modi does not know rules, a first MP is explaining it. He has proved he is no different from the AICC vice-president in making naïve statements.

What won't Congress and TRS simply accept the reality? Telangana has been achieved, according to the pink party it is on fast track development. People are very happy. Then why cry so much when Modi referred to what happened on that day. It is a recorded fact that such a major bill was passed by voice vote. No division had taken place. No discussion was there. Yes, it is a fact that Congress members from AP sprayed pepper spray. It is a fact that there were some fisticuffs in the house and a member fell unconscious. It is a fact that lights were switched off and live telecast cut off. It is a fact that the bill which normally takes at least two to three hours to complete the process of passing or rejecting was over in 22 minutes. It is also a fact that KCR was not present in the house. Let us be very clear. No one is opposing the formation of Telangana. Proper procedure was not followed.

All this is history which is just eight years old. Leaders cannot be so myopic in their view and the memory cannot be so short. Trying to utilise a statement of fact to rake up sentiments for narrow political gains is rather very unfortunate. "Where was federalism when 7 mandals were merged with Andhra Pradesh" … Is one criticism. Federalism does not mean that it exists only if something is given to you and does not exist if it is given to others. The irony is that those who opposed bifurcation when in TDP are now holding important positions in TRS and leading agitations.

But then BJP, too, cannot escape from its responsibility. Agreed Congress had done a lot of mistakes. But the government is a continuous process. Why didn't the BJP government take necessary corrective measures and help both the Telugu States and implement the promises made in the AP State Re-Organisation Act 2014? It failed to give the special category status to Andhra Pradesh. The special package had several clauses like forming a special purpose vehicle etc. It has not resolved the inter-state water dispute till now. The Act promised Bayyaram steel plant, coach factory at Kazipet… all that the BJP government at Centre ignored.

BJP also should not forget what Sushma Swaraj had said then.. Telangana became a reality because the BJP cooperated. It means both the Congress and the BJP should share the blame for the unscientific manner in which the bifurcation was done.

Unfortunately, no leader is thinking in broader terms. The main reason for igniting the fire by Modi is Target 2024 elections.

PART II

Peace and stability still elusive in the world

TALKING OF MANY THINGS

Dr Mohan Kanda

A major reason for the absence of peace is the growth of asymmetric relationships, or the presence of an oppressed party, under the rule of oppressing one, causing a situation in which violence is impending.

The people of the world are paying a heavy price for the conflicts between countries. Precious resources, acutely needed for primary requirements, are frittered away on conflicts between nations, caused largely by the wicked nexus of politician, businessman and administrator on either side. Political philosophers Hegel and Kant had pointed out long ago that the unscrupulous leaders of some countries engineer situations of conflict, often with the connivance of the opposing side, in the belief that the threat posed by an external enemy will divert attention of the common people away from the internal strife and conditions of miserable poverty and deprivation, in which they are living. I recollect, in this context, a quote, which plagiarises the famous quotation of Lord Acton, about the tendency of power to corrupt. It was used by Professor CL Wayper, the author of a book of the ELBS series titled, 'Teach Yourself Political Thought,' which I used while preparing for the civil services exams - "peace corrupts and everlasting peace corrupts everlastingly."

Even the hectic efforts of well-meaning countries and international organisations have often failed to resolve the differences of opinion between countries at conflict. Many peace treaties, signed in good faith, have soon been reduced to mere paper instruments by renewed escalation of tensions.

The two major wars, which the world witnessed in the 20th century, do not, unfortunately, appear to have served as adequate warning to world leaders to desist from disharmony and competition, leading to conflict and tension. Purely in terms of the human cost, the First World War caused the death of 16 million people, military and civilian, with a generation of young men being wiped out. And the Second World War, probably the deadliest in human history, led to 57 million lives being lost, a large number of them being from Russia, Germany, China and Japan with Britain and France also suffering considerably. Nearly 80 million people are estimated to have abandoned their home countries on account of lack of peace. In Afghanistan alone, according to a UN estimate, the number of civilians who died between 2009 and 2019 was a staggering 1,00,000. And in 2020 another 10,000 lives were lost.

Among the other disastrous consequences of the First World War was the great depression that hit the world economy. It, however, in a welcome development, led to the establishment of United Nations, in 1945, with substantial help and support from the US. The US, in subsequent years, also played a significant role in the birth of many other multilateral international organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the fore runner of World Trade Organization (WTO). Many years later, in 1961 to be precise, the USA, with John Kennedy as the President, a commendable step was taken to constitute a Peace Corps to enable Americans to volunteer in programmes aimed at the growth and development of poor countries, as a measure of self-sacrifice and redefining American relations with the countries of the third world.

It is indeed sad and distressing that despite the opening up of the world economy following the advent of the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in the last decade of the previous century, naked greed, imperialistic ambition and the lust for power and authority continue to cause conflict and tension within countries and between them

In the last century, leaders of a majority of countries were heaving a sigh of relief at the establishment of the 'detente' between the superpowers, which, at last, appeared to herald the end of the Cold War. But vested interests, in both the superpowers managed once again to fuel their military and political ambitions to ensure the return of an atmosphere of animosity, confrontation and conflict, resulting in untold suffering to millions of people of other countries.

It is indeed ironic that, quite apart from the exorbitant burden on the economies of the countries at conflict, the United Nations on its part spends a huge sum of money on the raising, training, equipping and deploying of an International Peacekeeping Force. India also constituted a Peace Keeping Force, primarily meant for disarming the militants in Sri Lanka, in the wake of the violence and the uprisals that shook Sri Lanka following a demand by extremist organisations, including the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for a separate state for the north-eastern parts of the country.

Even as this piece is being written, strife and conflict, of acute dimensions, are in evidence, in several places in the world, mostly concentrated in Asia and Africa. While territorial disputes, and civil wars, are the most common forms of conflict, a few have arisen on account of terrorism. The face-off between Israel and Palestine continues unabated, as does the Russo-Ukrainian war. Domestic strife, and civil war, are raging in Afghanistan and South Sudan, to mention only two instances, while the US-Iran confrontation, and the ever-simmering uneasy relationship between India and Pakistan, continue. Many other countries, including Ethiopia and Lebanon, are facing instability which is threatening to erupt into violence any moment.

It is indeed sad and distressing that despite the opening up of the world economy following the advent of the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in the last decade of the previous century, naked greed, imperialistic ambition and the lust for power and authority continue to cause conflict and tension within countries and between them, while the burning issues of poverty, and deprivation remain relegated to the background.

It is time for mankind to accept, and understand, that peace is the only way out of the world's current state. It is the answer to violence and equity is the main foundation for lasting peace and sustainable growth.

(The writer is former Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

(The opinions expressed in this column are that of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of The Hans India)

Winter Olympics on man-made snow

SKIERS AND SNOWBOARDERS ARE COMPETING ON 100% FAKE SNOW

PETER VEALS
WASHINGTON

The winter Olympics conjure up images of snowy mountain ranges, frozen ice rinks and athletes in cold-weather gear. And for good reason. Winter Olympic venues have often been in places that receive an average snowfall of 300 inches per year or more. However, barring some extremely anomalous weather patterns, the mountains surrounding the snow events for the Beijing Winter Olympics will be tones of brown and green and nearly devoid of snow. The region typically receives only a few inches of snowfall in each winter month. This means that basically all of the snow the athletes are competing on are human-made.

I am an atmospheric scientist who specialises in mountain weather and snow. I am also the founder of a snowmaking startup and an avid skier. There are distinct differences between natural and artificial snow, and it will be interesting to see if these differences have any effect on competition. Though artificial snow and natural snow are both frozen water, most skiers and snowboarders are able to immediately recognise that the two are very different.

Traditional snowmaking uses high pressure water, compressed air and specialised nozzles to blow tiny liquid droplets into the air that then freeze as they fall to the ground. But snowmaking is not as simple as just making sure the air is sufficiently cold. Pure water does not freeze until it is cooled to nearly -40 F (-40 C). It is only the presence of microscopic suspended particles in water that allow it to freeze at the familiar 32 F (0 C). These particles, known as ice nuclei, act as a sort of scaffolding to help ice crystals form. Without these particles, water struggles to turn into ice.

Sliding on human-made snow

Natural snow starts as a tiny ice crystal on an ice nucleus in a cloud. As the crystal falls through the air, it slowly grows into the classic six-sided snowflake. By comparison, human-made snow freezes quickly from a single droplet of water. The resulting snow consists of billions of tiny spherical balls of ice. It may resemble natural snow to the naked eye on a ski run, but the natural and artificial snow "feel" very different.

Due to the fact that the tiny ice balls pack together quite densely – and that some of them may have not frozen until they touched the ground – artificial snow often feels hard and icy. Fresh natural "powder" snow, on the other hand, provides skiers and snowboarders an almost weightless feeling as they soar down the mountainside. This is largely because the natural snow crystals stack very loosely – a fresh layer of powder is as much as 95% or more air. While fresh powder is what most recreational skiers dream of, Olympic skiers have different tastes.

Racers want to be able to glide as fast as possible and use their sharp edges to make powerful, tight turns. The dense, icy conditions of artificial snow are actually better in these regards. In fact, race organisers often add liquid water to the race courses of natural snow which will freeze and ensure a durable, consistent surface for racers. Another consideration is the fact that natural snowstorms produce dull, flat lighting and low visibility – hard conditions to race or jump in. Heavy natural snowfall will often cancel ski races, as happened during the snowy 1998 Nagano Games. For racers, clear skies and artificial snow provide the advantage there, too. But hard human-made snow does have its downsides. Nordic skiers recently flagged the dangers of artificial snow in the event of crashes as icy, hard surfaces can lead to more injuries.

Mimicking nature

The first way that people tried to make "real" snow was by seeding natural clouds with silver iodide. The goal was to facilitate moisture in clouds turning into falling snow crystals. If you could make this process – called the Wegener-Bergeron-Findeisen process – occur more easily, it would theoretically increase the snowfall rate.

Winter Olympic venues have often been in places that receive an average snowfall of 300 inches per year or more. However, barring some extremely anomalous weather patterns, the mountains surrounding the snow events for the Beijing Winter Olympics will be tones of brown and green and nearly devoid of snow. The region typically receives only a few inches of snowfall in each winter month. This means that basically all of the snow the athletes are competing on are human-made

In practice, it has historically been difficult to prove the efficacy of seeding. However, recent work using large, meticulously deployed sets of atmospheric instruments has shown that – for a fraction of storms with the proper conditions – seeding clouds with silver iodide does indeed yield modest increases in the total amount of snowfall.

The dry, barren mountains hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic venues are not exactly a skiing destination. But thanks to snowmaking science, the athletes will have reliable, if icy, runs to compete on. And sports fans can all be thankful for the technology that allows them to enjoy the high-speed spectacle put on by the brave souls who compete in the skiing and snowboarding events.

(The Conversation; Writer is Professor of Atmospheric Science, University of Utah, US)

LETTERS

Hijab row: Exercise restraint

Pakistan has waded into the unhealthy hijab controversy which could have been avoided at the local levels. Can religious symbolism in a person's apperance - a turban, a tilk, a crucifix round the neck - be a threat to law and order? This is just one example of confusions and conflicts underlying 'coexistence' in India. Saffron scarves are symbols of Hindutva, not quite on the same plane as the hijab which, apart from customory use by adherents of a faith, fell under the Supreme Court's earlier'essence of religion' test. Till the outcome of High Court verdict all parties should exercise restraint and maintain peace.

Yash Pal Ralhan, Jalandhar

II

The hijab is part of Islam. Muslim girls wear it in the belief that it is part of the dress code prescribed in the Koran. They quote verses in the Koran to justify the custom of wearing the hijab. At the same time, the Karnataka government holds that it is not part of the uniform and hence it should not be worn inside the classroom. Its line of argument does not hold for the simple reason that the right to education and the right to manifest religious identity are not mutually exclusive. It is vital that students are able to exercise both these rights simultaneously. When education is fundamental to success in life, Muslim students cannot be asked to stop wearing the hijab to gain entry into colleges. Their education cannot be made conditional on their not wearing the hijab. Citizens have every right to dress in an attire of their choice. The government has no right to dictate what they should wear.

G David Milton, Maruthancode

III

This refers to "K'taka shuts schools, colleges for 3 days (9 Feb). It is indeed shocking that an issue which could have been handled with deftness and tactics has been allowed to snowball into a major divide between the students. First, what was the need for either government or the individual college or school to bring such an issue to the forefront. The authorities could have called for a meeting for parents before re-opening the institutions and explained to them about implementation of uniforms instead of abruptly imposing something which needs all cooperation from all. Obviously, it seems the Karnataka government is providing new ammunition to their party to use in election campaigns where communal and religious issues have taken forefront.

N Rajagopalan, Hyderabad

Need for debate on Governor's role

The Tamil Nadu assembly had to pass the NEET Exemption Bill for the second time as the Governor didn't give assent and sent back the bill, after brooding over it for a long time. This time he is bound to send it to President according to the constitutional mandate. The role of Governor is nominal practically and he is supposed to function with the aid and advice of the council of ministers. He cannot go against the will of political executive in policy-making. Some States witness frequent run-ins in adminstrative affairs with Governors due to political slugfest between Centre and that State, which is against constitutional spirit. There should be an informed debate nationally on this important office.

Dr DVG Sankararao, Vizianagaram

PM's tone & tenor rasping

Apropos 'Agar Congress Na Hoti' (9 Feb). It is a bit shocking that a century-old party Congress has now become an object of abuse from none other than the Prime Minister so much so that he has called it a party of "Tukde Tukde Ganga" which government sources have accepted that it does not exist. If it was part of such a gang, does it mean those who have voted the party until 2014 have also endorsed it and in 2014 many Congress voters switched their vote to BJP. Congress MP Rahul Gandhi is in a way right let PM abuse Congress, Nehru and their family members. He needs to answer some burning questions raised by the party in Parliament. Moreover, when Nehruji is not alive to counter him, why drag him. Democracy needs stable ruling and constructive opposition, so let the PM keep his tone tenor simple. Lastly, if what PM has claimed true that Congress indeed a part of 'Tukde Tukde' gang, why not seek its ban through EC.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

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FROM THE WEB

Bellary man gets new hands after 14-hour transplant surgery

BENGALURU: A 34-year-old boiler operator in a rice mill in Bellary district, Basavanna Gowda, had lost both his hands in an accident a decade ago. He has now got a new pair of hands after undergoing a very complex but successful 14-hour hand-transplant surgery at Kochi's Amrita Hospital.

The transplanted hands belonged to Nevis Sajan Mathew, a 25-year-old deceased youth hailing from Kottayam district in Kerala who was pursuing Masters in Accounting in France. On a visit to the State on a holiday from France, he suffered from an illness and was declared brain-dead at a hospital in Kochi on September 25, 2021. His parents -- Sajan Mathew and Sherin – readily agreed to donate their son's various organs, including his hands, immediately following his death, and that is when Basavanna's long wait for a new pair of hands came to an end.

Covid impact: Bengaluru Metro suffers Rs 10 cr loss every month

BENGALURU: The financial position of the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd (BMRCL) has suffered a massive blow due to Covid-19. Before the Covid pandemic, the average monthly ridership was 1.20 crore passengers. But currently only 80-90 lakh passengers travel in a month. As a result, the average loss is over Rs 10 crore per month.

Before the pandemic struck, more than 4 lakh people commuted every day on the 48-km metro line in Bengaluru. Even though the metro network expanded to 56.01 km this year, there has been no increase in passenger numbers.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com (Bengaluru edition)

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THOUGHT FOR THE DAY : 'Tis the privilege of friendship to talk nonsense, and have her nonsense respected.

— CHARLES LAMB

FREE PRESS
FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

Freebies, a synonym for political bribes

Assembly elections, now underway in five states, have once again exposed the narrow thinking of all political parties. They no longer fight elections on democratic, republican and secular principles. Instead, they try to bribe the voters by offering them what are known as freebies. Take the manifesto of any party from the BJP to the Congress to the Samajwadi Party to the Aam Aadmi Party, they promise goodies in the form of free electricity for irrigation, free two-wheelers, free laptops and mobile phones, one job per family and free pilgrimage to shrines of their choice.

While taking cognisance of a petition filed against the practice of political parties announcing freebies, the Supreme Court has said, the budget for implementing the freebies would be larger than the normal budget. Freebies are nothing but bribes. The election commission expects the parties to follow certain standard protocols while contesting elections. Freebies are certainly not part of such protocols. Yet, the commission has been unable to control the proclivity of the parties to entice the voters with freebies.

Alas, politics has been reduced to a give-and-take relationship between the voter and the party. True, there was a time when the leaders sought blood from the people by promising freedom. Taking part in such do-or-die battles, people even sacrificed their lives. Now, when crony capitalism thrives and everyone wants creature comforts more than anything else, the voters are attracted by, say, a free television receiver promised and delivered by the late Jayalalithaa in Tamil Nadu and 200 units of free electricity per month promised and given by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi.

Those who know Punjab know how free electricity for irrigation resulted in indiscriminate pumping out of ground water, with the ground water table falling lower and lower. When Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of Bihar distributed free bicycles among girl students, he knew that he was ensuring his own return to power. Now, in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP promises a brand new moped with free petrol for two years to any meritorious girl student. It was the ration kit that Pinarayi Vijayan government distributed among the people, irrespective of their purchasing power, that helped him to return to power. The free power and water that the AAP government provides in Delhi seems to have become a major attraction for the people in Punjab. In the process, the politician has been reduced to a bribe-giver and the voter to a bribe-receiver. Surely, this is not what the founding fathers of the Constitution had envisaged when they drafted its Preamble in lofty words.

Kerala's Lokayukta can bark but not bite

The power to promulgate ordinances is one of the most misused by governments, both at the Centre and in the states. But for this power, Indira Gandhi would not have imposed Emergency on the country. Narendra Modi, too, would not have thought of the farm laws but for this power. The last to misuse it is Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who got an ordinance promulgated to cut the powers of the Lokayukta. It was totally unwarranted as the Assembly session was due and he had the requisite support to get the Bill passed. Why he did not want to wait was the fear that the Lokayukta might take an unpleasant decision on certain cases against him and a minister.

The Lokayukta in Kerala was the most powerful as it could be headed only by a former chief justice of a high court or a former justice of the Supreme Court. Once it gave a verdict against a minister, he or she would have to leave office. What the ordinance has done is to emasculate it. Any former judge of a high court can be the Lokayukta now. Its verdict against a minister is not binding on the government as the chief minister can decide whether the person concerned should leave his office or not. In other words, the institution has been defanged and that, too, without taking the constituents of the LDF, like the CPI, into confidence. The most shocking is the conduct of the governor, who, after seemingly questioning the bona fides of the government's intention, gladly signed the ordinance when Vijayan called on him after his return from the US where he underwent treatment at state expense.

Ironically, the Lokayukta was the creation of the CPM-led EK Nayanar government. When Anna Hazare launched a satyagraha demanding a Lokpal at the Centre, it was the Lokayukta in Kerala which was cited as a model by many experts. Vijayan had once boastfully claimed that the Kerala ombudsman not only had teeth but could also bite. But when he realised that he could be bitten, he thought of the ordinance. So much for his concern for transparency and exquisite political conduct!

Hijab row: First, define what a 'secular' space is

Insight

Bhavdeep Kang

Polarisation of opinion on the hijab being worn in educational institutions is not surprising. Similar controversies have raged across the world for over a decade. While there is public consensus that campus precincts should be secular in nature, there is no agreement on what constitutes a 'secular' space.

The petitioners who have challenged the 'no headscarf' policy of certain colleges in the Karnataka high court have clearly stated that the hijab is a religious symbol. If so, does it have a place in a secular institution?

There are two ways of examining the question: in terms of 'universalism' or 'multiculturalism'. In western democracies, where decades of immigration have resulted in the presence of significant minority populations, the debate has been the outcome of increasing social frictions. Differences among communities have become more pronounced than what they have in common.

France banned all religious symbols, including the hijab, in its public schools way back in 2004. Civil servants and those engaged in providing public services, too, cannot wear symbols of their faith. Proposals to forbid minors from wearing the hijab in public and a ban on wearing of religious symbols in sports competitions have also been widely debated.

The French notion of secularism is founded on laïcité, or separation of church and state. In effect, it places religion in the private sphere, and holds that the state must remain absolutely neutral vis-a-vis religion. Minority communities, notably the Muslims and Sikhs, protested vigorously, but the ban on conspicuous religious symbols, be it the cross or the Sikh patka (turban) has stayed in place through various governments.

The British and American version of secularism, as opposed to French universalism, is founded on multiculturalism, the view that religious minorities need special acknowledgement of their differences within the dominant culture of the country in which they live, in order to preserve their identities. It may even extend to special protection under the law.

A dominant section of intellectuals in Britain and the US have long opposed the universalist view, which has gained traction in many parts of the world. After France forbade face-covering veils in public spaces in 2010, popularly known as the 'burqa ban', several European nations including Belgium, Austria, Denmark, Bulgaria and Switzerland followed suit. Several others have imposed partial bans.

Multiculturalism has attracted increasing criticism in recent years, on the grounds that it discourages assimilation of minority groups with the laws and value systems of the host country. Ideally, in a heterogenous population, multiculturalism should eliminate bigotry and xenophobic tendencies, encourage mutual tolerance, serve the interests of national security and lead to fruitful exchanges of learnings and ideas. In other words, promote peace and harmony.

The experience has been quite otherwise, at least after 9/11. Several European heads of state have admitted that multiculturalism, while an excellent concept, has failed in practice. It has ended up undermining social cohesion and public faith in institutions.

Another criticism is that cultural practices followed by minority groups may violate the rights of individuals. In the US, the case of Naila Amin, forced to marry at 13 and sponsor her abusive husband for American citizenship, led to widespread outrage. A study by an independent non-profit found that thousands of such sponsorships by child brides had been approved by US Immigration.

Historically, India has accommodated different minority groups, which co-existed peacefully for centuries. Multiculturalism was very much a part of the Indian ethos, albeit not institutionalised until Independence

In the UK, clothing chain Marks & Spencer has been criticised for selling child-sized hijabs – small enough to fit a three-year-old. On the one hand, it is argued that hijab bans deprive women of their right to choose whether or not to wear them. On the other, girls as young as three are sexualised by being made to wear headscarves.

In India, personal laws of minority groups are respected, but are in many ways weighted against minors and women. Only in recent times have practices like child marriage, polygamy and female circumcision been challenged in courts of law. In 2020, the Supreme Court struck down the age-old practice of 'triple talaq', that allowed Muslim men to instantly divorce their wives.

Historically, India has accommodated different minority groups, which co-existed peacefully for centuries. Multiculturalism was very much a part of the Indian ethos, albeit not institutionalised until Independence. India adheres to the 'unity in diversity' principle – celebrating different cultures, while sharing a common 'Indian' identity. The problem arises when diversity, rather than unity, becomes the focus.

With regard to the hijab issue, arguments citing majoritarianism, feminism, civil liberties or freedom of expression have been made, but the basic question of whether religious symbols have a place in a secular space has not been addressed.

If the contention is that the co-existence of culturally differentiated students will enhance mutual respect and understanding, it falls flat. Quite the reverse – it will sharpen identities and create deep schisms in the student body. For instance, as a consequence of the hijab row, a section of students have been flaunting saffron scarves.

In the current scenario, wearing of religious symbols cannot serve the cause of education, nor does it unite, rather than divide, the students and faculty. Ultimately, it is for the courts to take a call on just what secular means in the context of an educational institution.

The writer is a senior journalist with 35 years of experience in working with major newspapers and magazines. She is now an independent writer and author

Hydrogen may become the new Holy Grail

Policy Watch

R N Bhaskar

On February 3, 2022, Japan's energy agency NEDO, decided to hold a webinar on 'Hydrogen and the Fuel Cell perspective' in Japan. It was one of the first attempts by any country to publicly discuss the future significance of hydrogen in the world. This topic could play a significant role even at the Expo 2025 in Osaka.

The theme of the expo is 'Designing Future Society for Our Lives'. It is scheduled to be held from April 13 to October 13, 2025.

While discussions are generally calm and ideas exchanged rather dispassionately, a fierce hydrogen rivalry is raising its head in the world, more particularly in India. But more on that later.

Hydrogen is the simplest element. As the IEA puts it, "Each atom of hydrogen has only one proton. Hydrogen is also the most abundant elements in the universe. Stars such as the sun consist mostly of hydrogen. The sun is essentially a giant ball of hydrogen and helium gases."

It is respected for the highest energy content of any common fuel by weight. It packs three times more energy than gasoline, explains the IEA, but it has the lowest energy content by volume (about four times less than gasoline). But when it is compressed and liquefied, it becomes heavier, and can release immense amounts of energy. That also explains why almost all rocket fuels use compressed hydrogen.

Projections

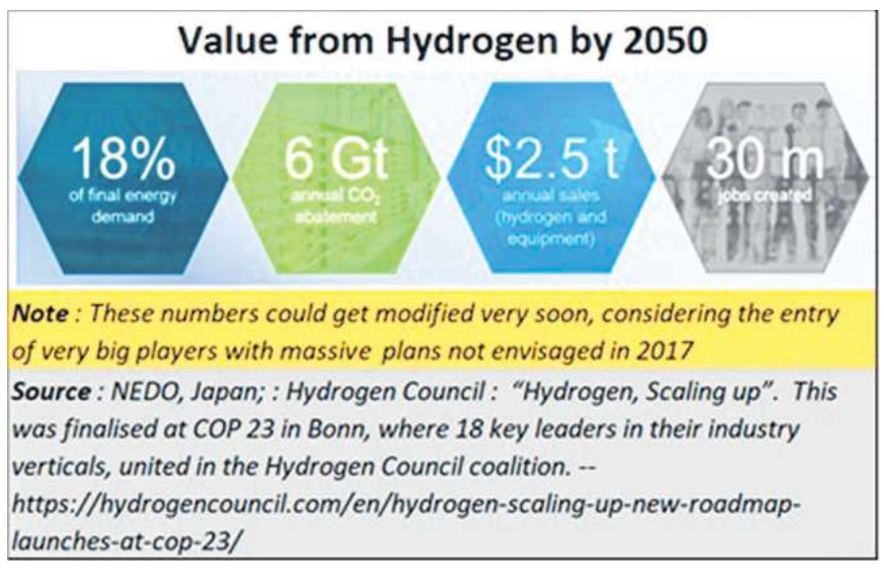
It was important enough for it to be taken up as a subject at COP23 in Bonn – in November 2017– where **18 key leaders in their industry verticals, united in the Hydrogen Council coalition. The deliberations showed that in addition to being a key solution to global warming, it had the potential to develop US $2.5tn of business, and create more than 30 million jobs by 2050.**

The planners had not reckoned on the way solar costs would plunge, as would battery costs as well. Conventionally, hydrogen is created either through reforming methane or hydrocarbons or through electrolysis. The former allows carbon to get generated, so is not the best solution for reducing emissions. The latter has been too expensive. But lower solar costs are bringing down the cost of electrolysis. Another route could be wind or wave power. The latter has the potential of becoming immensely popular.

Adani, Ambani and others

Large facilities are now being created for the production of hydrogen on a massive scale. In November 2021, Gautam Adani, speaking at the Bloomberg India Economic Forum, said that his group would invest US $70 billion over the next decade to become "the world's largest renewable energy company, and produce the cheapest hydrogen on the Earth." In mid-January, 2022, Reliance Industries, led by Mukesh Ambani, let people know that it would be in vesting $75 billion in renewables, and would bring down the price of hydrogen to under $1 per kg.

At around the same time, POSCO – the South Korean steel giant – announced that it had signed a tripartite MoU on January 18 to enhance green hydrogen project collaboration at the Saudi Arabia-Korea Investment Forum for Smart Innovation & Growth. The event was held at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with President Moon Jae-in in attendance. It said that an economically ideal business site would be selected, and a project feasibility review would be completed within this year. It would be the largest project in the world, said the organisers. Expect the share of hydrogen to soar. BloombergNEF expects that plans from the US, Brazil, India and China could reshape the global market. Hydrogen could thus be expected to play a bigger role than the 18 per cent earlier estimated.



Adds Eiji Ohira, spokesperson for Japan's New Energy and Technology Development Organisation, or NEDO, "I recognize that large-scale hydrogen projects are about to start around the world. Japan is also considering various international cooperation projects. I suppose you will be able to see it soon." That is why there will be a great deal of interest in Japan's Expo 2025.

As for India, the race to be the biggest hydrogen producer will be keenly watched. But as of now, Gautam Adani appears to have the edge.

According to Mercom India, when it comes to solar power installations (not paper plans), "Reliance currently has 146 MW of solar projects in operation and Adani has 5,250 MW." And it is worth remembering that of all the countries in the world, Japan has an edge in fuel-cell technologies, considering that Toyota has been running the hydrogen-powered Mirai cars for almost a decade. Today, Japan has FCV technologies for forklifts, hydrogen refuelling stations, and hydrogen trains.

With tumbling costs for hydrogen and fuel cells, expect this technology to compete with EVs. Expect a great deal of churn in the market very soon.

The author is Consulting Editor, the FPJ

FPJ Archives JANUARY 17, 1964

FREE PRESS JOURNAL

Nanda seeks aid of Big Business to check graft

W. Pak Press whips up hate over Calcutta

Arab blueprint to divert river waters takes shape

Indira likely to be Foreign Minister

Reddy wants issue thrashed with Naik

Naga rebels fortify with Pak arms

Indira likely to be Foreign Minister

THE FPJ NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI, JAN. 16: A full-fledged minister in the Union Cabinet will be entrusted with the portfolio of External Affairs to reduce the strain on Prime Minister Nehru. Smt. Indira Gandhi, it is learnt, will be appointed to head this portfolio.

It is pointed out that she has adequate knowledge of foreign affairs as she had toured almost all the countries of the world in Africa and Europe and met topmost leaders there. It is stated that Shri V. K. Krishna Menon, an expert in international affairs, also supports this proposal.

It is further understood that Shri G. L. Nanda, Number Two in the Central Cabinet, will be designated Deputy Prime Minister for the time being. Already Shri Nanda is discharging the bulk of the functions of the Prime Minister.

Smart Kids Corner

Rock-cut Temples

INCREDIBLE INDIA

IN the lush surroundings of the Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh, on a rocky outcrop, stands a little-known and rarely visited group of temples carved out of a single piece of sandstone. The Masrur temples face the snowy peaks of the Dhauladhar range. The 15 temples are built in the Nagara style of architecture, which was popular before the 8th century AD. The complex is laid out symmetrically in a square grid with the main temple surrounded by smaller temples.

There is a sacred pool in front of the temple that measures 50 m x 25 m. Two of the temples are incomplete while the others have eroded over time or been damaged by earthquakes.

The surviving shikaras or towers are intricately carved and the lintels above the doorways are studded with human figures in various poses and decorated with ornamental scrollwork. The inner sanctums of all the temples feature several Hindu deities including Shiva, Ganesha and Durga.

Though the complex was discovered and studied in 1915 by the Archaeological Survey of India, it is still not known who built it and the exact date of its construction. Local legend has it that it was built by the Pandavas during their incognito stay in the

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GUIDING LIGHT

Need to develop values for a better world — Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunj ji

We all dream of a better world where there is peace, happiness and harmony, don't we? No one would like degradation of the environment, loss of human lives due to wars and murders, dehumanisation through poverty and troublesome social, economic and political conditions. But the question is, what are those values and how can a socio-politico-economic system with such values be established, one which will enhance human

experience and enable men and women to have such lifestyles that can make such a society viable? Looking around, it can be said that much of the conflict in society today is due to lack or absence of tolerance. Yes! It is tolerance of difference in views, diversity of religious beliefs and cultures, plurality of races and nations, etc. that brings about unity and co-operation and that, in turn, leads to making concerted efforts for the amelioration of the miserable condition of the world.

Tolerance is easy where one is confronted with civilised and wise people, even if the latter are one's bitter critics or opponents but one has to have a higher degree of tolerance if one is confronted with persons who are compulsive, vile and wicked and for this, one is required to develop in the self, the supportive values of goodwill, patience, introversion, calmness and love that is uppermost among these all. Our present sorry state is the result of neglect or violation of those values. In other words, there has been rapid erosion of social, moral and family values. It is not that science and technology or management skills have caused our present sufferings. On the other hand, it falls in the standards of morality that have prevented even science and technology and management or administrative ability from giving us their full fruit.

Moreover, it is not that people do not know that moral values are necessary to build a happy and peaceful society. People wish to have moral qualities in their life but they do not have that spiritual knowledge that should enable them to successfully follow these values in their life nor do they know that kind of meditation which should make the values stay in them and should give them a deep experience of peace and happiness.

Thus, the need of the hour is that we create mass awareness among people for values like tolerance, humility, mutual respect in order to realise our dream of a world where there is peace, happiness and harmony.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal and UK. You can write to him at nikunjji@gmail.com)

(Spiritual organisations keen to be featured in this space contact : features@fpj.co.in)

One flew over the nest #KarnatakaHC

Keep all emotions aside. We will go by what constitution says. Constitution is above Bhagwad Geeta for me. I will go by the oath I have taken to the Constitution: Justice Krishna S Dixit.
Bar & Bench@barandbench

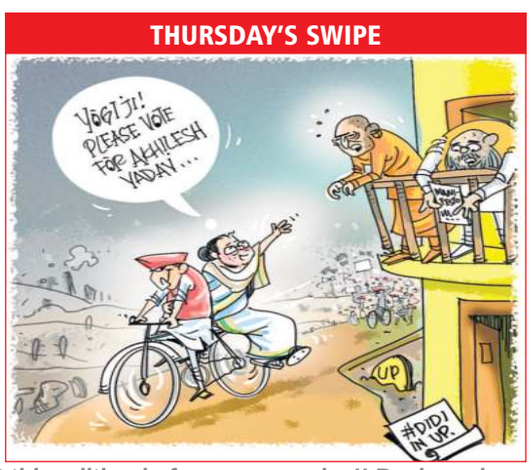
Karnataka hijab row | Karnataka High Court says - we will go by reason, by law, not by passion or emotions. We will go by what Constitution says. Constitution is the Bhagavad Gita for me.
ANI@ANI

If police detained you then Gita won't help you it's article 32 of indian constitution which safeguard our freedom rights. We should respect our constitution as much as we respect our religious beliefs
Shubh@m@IamShubh4u

…We live in a democratic country where the Constitution of India is the law of the land and also safeguards our rights as citizens The Bhagwad Gita doesn't fill that role
Aneesh Menon@AneeshMenon10

Being an Indian, I may not have faith on Gita or Quran or Bible. But I should have the faith and respect to Indian constitution. That's the idea of India.
Rockenjit Sinha@Rockenjit

THURSDAY'S SWIPE



SAIBABA & SWAMI SAMARTH
MESSAGE FOR THE DAY

You have gone through an unexpected and traumatic event, however remember you are not alone. We are with you holding you and comforting you.

This phase is temporary you will feel better with time. The situation will get resolved.

A day of unexpected events, travel or travel plans, slow progress.

Tip for the day: Visualise green light on your heart chakra and say "Please heal me Baba and Swami".

Lots of divine miracles your way, Sheetal Sapan Mhatre.

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A thought for today

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

And The Budget?

State poll manifestos, including those of BJP, are wildly populist & contradict finmin's growth push

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget last week drew praise for eschewing populism in the midst of election season. Its high approval rating was influenced by the combined impact its spending pattern and that of states will have on economic growth. However, following the release of election manifestos by political parties for the assembly elections beginning today, some may wonder if there is a complete disconnect in the economic approach of GoI and the next governments in the five states. If GoI is marked by restraint, wild populism is the name of the game in states.

BJP is the incumbent in four of the five states. But its manifestos have all the characteristics of an opposition party trying to woo the electorate on populist promises. In UP, it has promised free electricity, two free LPG cylinders and 20 million smartphones and tablets for students. A party that attempted to push difficult agricultural reforms at the Centre has doubled down on impracticable schemes in states. Therefore, in Punjab there's a BJP promise of MSP for fruits and vegetables. To this list, in Punjab it has added everyone's favourite and default freebie option – loan waivers and free electricity.

Other parties have manifestos that are as bad. AAP, which thinks freebies were a big part of its Delhi victories, has promised to open the coffers. Therefore, it has got on to the free electricity and monthly income transfer bandwagon. Congress and SP are older hands at this game. Their manifestos have the usual promise of free electricity, too. Congress has now broadbased its approach by grafting direct money transfers to specific groups such as homemakers and pensioners.

The problem with these promises is of course that regardless of who wins elections, state budgets will have to accommodate these populist promises. The issue is not that this will lead to a debt trap, since the extent of a state's borrowing is fixed by GoI. The issue is that in order to fulfil election promises, budgets will have to cut back on something. Typically, that is public investment, or capital expenditure, because there is no voluble interest group for this spending. Public investment is the most effective form of government spending to create an enabling environment for economic growth. That leads to jobs, the most effective form of inclusion. That's the premise of the well thought out Union Budget. Therefore, not just opposition parties, BJP too is in effect undermining BJP's growth Budget.

Not Neat, Guv

TN's anti-NEET bill is wrong. But the manner of governor Ravi's intervention is wrong, too

Governors are all about restraint. Governors are often the first to forget that. Thus it is that the Tamil Nadu governor, RN Ravi, now has the state sending back the anti-NEET bill to him. Ravi had waited 142 days to respond to the first time the bill was sent and when he did respond he added a completely unnecessary commentary that the TN bill was anti-poor. That in turn made the DMK government posture more. The tactful thing would have been to send the bill back without rhetorical flourishes or, even better, send it to the President – medical education is in the concurrent list. The TN bill cannot get assent because it seeks to carve an exception out of a central exam system. Passing the bill was DMK's political theatre. Had it been quietly rejected the issue would have gone away. Ravi should bear this in mind in future, and quickly send the re-adopted bill to the President.

The common national entrance examination for medical undergraduate and PG courses is here to stay. It ended the chaotic system of states and institutes running their own admission tests. The Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality in 2020. So, TN's attempts to challenge it is, and should be, doomed.

That said, there's merit in the broader argument that NEET can favour well-heeled candidates who can afford coaching institutes and pay high admission fees. There's also the argument that rural health services tend to get doctors who come from non-wealthy backgrounds. In fact, in 2020, the then governor Banwarilal Purohit gave assent to the former AIADMK government's bill providing horizontal reservation of 7.5% in undergraduate medical courses for government school students. It is no one's case that NEET cannot be improved. There are absurd cases of students with low marks in science subjects paying their way into medical colleges. But interventions such as Ravi's is not what it needs.

Love, factually

How much of it will we really have amidst the schmaltz of V-Day?

Bachi Karkaria

The usual suspectors may not go after a celebration dedicated to love since they will be busy spreading this poll-time's agenda of hate. In any case, their aversion to a so-called foreign perversion is unfounded. Valentine's Day has become as intertwined with our DNA as the hearts of its brand logo. Not only does it cut across culture, class, caste, creed, Bharat that is India has neutralised the moral police's main target, romantic love. It's no longer a kissa kissie ka.

Several years ago, the attendant in a five-star 'Hers' wished me a cheery 'Happy V-Day. Ma'am' as she offered me a mini hand towel like a rose. After I'd visibly cringed in alarm, I realised that her greeting was totally un-amorous, asexual and innocuous.

As time went by, this annual salutation spread to the office housekeeper and the building's gardening lady. It has become so endemic, that if next Monday, the liftman greets me with a, 'Happy V-Day', I will not slay him with my pepper spray, drag him out and hand him over to Security. POSH has been rendered bosh by this mass conversion of Valentine's Day. Now, like Diwali or Christmas, it's merely about gender-neutral camaraderie and crass commerce.

erratica

If you think it's about Cupid, you're just plain stupid. Don't sneer at me for being cynical. Love is now paired with jihad. Candles are for protest vigils against rape. 'Sweet nothings' apply more to political promises, and anyway everything sugary is banned/damned. Relationships are marked by whine and poses. Only diamonds are 'forever' since divorce courts daily diss the assumption that love is eternal. And the dreamy moon is about to be cratered by billionaire boots. Love's labour is a loser.

Maybe love is all effed up because it's a four-letter word. Like hate, or life itself. This week has been overwhelmed by an outpouring of genuine love for a four-letter lady who gave voice to this elusive emotion. Thankfully, all this gave pause to the current election campaigns with their abundance of four-letter components. The neta gang may talk about care, but all they love is hate.

***

Alec Smart said: "The hijab is doubly disadvantaged. It's about a religion and about women."

How The West Will Be Won

UP polls begin today, with the western region. Key things to watch ■ Jat, Muslim support for SP ■ Non-Yadav OBC & non-Jatav Dalit support for BJP ■ Floating voters like Gujjars ■ Inflation, unemployment vs law & order, welfare

Asim Ali

UP polls start today. And key implications are already clear. If Samajwadi Party has to win Uttar Pradesh, it has to open up a substantial lead against BJP in western UP, in the first two phases of the polls that cover a total of 113 seats. This is because BJP is expected to prove a more formidable opponent elsewhere, where it isn't being dragged down by the millstone of the farmers' agitation.

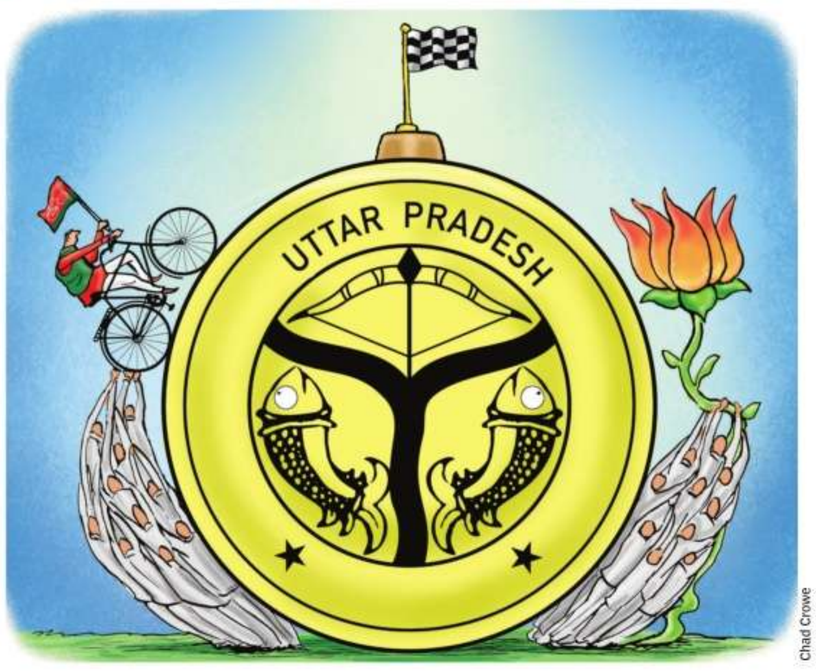
In Awadh and Bundelkhand, BJP appears to be marginally ahead of the SP gathbandhan, while in eastern UP, the competition is slated to be neck and neck. Moreover, if SP is thought to be doing well in the first two phases, it may get a momentum or 'hawa' in its favour, buoying its boat in the choppier waters of the subsequent phases.

So, what may work for SP and what may work for BJP in the first two phases?

For SP, rural Jat voters still seem to be favouring the SP-RLD alliance, at least in the Meerut-Muzaffarnagar sugarcane belt, despite BJP's high-pitched attempts to woo them back. However, this might not translate to the wholesale shift of Jat voters to the SP-RLD camp, particularly in the Braj region (Agra, Aligarh and Mathura), and in seats where the alliance's ticket has gone to SP's Muslim candidates.

Also for SP, Muslim voters appear to have strongly consolidated behind the SP-RLD alliance. A recent survey indicated that 77% of Muslims might vote for the SP alliance. This kind of Muslim consolidation, if realised, would be unprecedented in a state, where, in the last three decades, Muslims have remained divided between the SP-BSP-Congress triumvirate.

In no region of the state are Muslims as heavily concentrated as in western UP: In 58 of the 113 seats of the first two phases the Muslim population exceeds 30%. While Owaisi's campaign has gained some traction among a section of Muslims, how many will vote for his party is unclear. The more worrying question for the SP alliance would be how many Muslims might end up voting for a strong Muslim candidate of BSP, which has fielded Muslims in 35% of the seats going to poll in the first two phases.



Chad Crowe

Therefore, if the SP-RLD has to do well in western UP, it has to be on the back of this Muslim-Jat combination. In many seats of the first phase, these two sections comprise upwards of a third of the electorate; in the second phase seats, Muslims alone often exceed that number.

However, BJP possesses a powerful electoral combination of its own, even without Jats, who had backed it overwhelmingly in the previous elections. The upper castes are solidly behind it, like a resolute vote bank; and the non-Yadav OBC voters (a third of the electorate of western UP) are still tilting towards the saffron camp, even if perhaps not in the same huge numbers as in 2017 and 2019.

Perhaps the framing characteristic of the election in the first two phases is that it is a wave-less election, where voting might vary substantially according to constituency and sub-region

These smaller backward castes – Sainis, Pals and Nishads etc – who are largely untouched by the farmers movement, might still be swayed with hard Hindutva and BJP's law and order pitch. Even the exodus of backward caste leaders from BJP was more concentrated in eastern UP than in the west (with the exception of certain leaders like Dharam Singh Saini).

The intermediary caste that lies in the balance are Gujjars, who also participated to some extent in the farmers' movement. They voted in bulk for BJP last time but have enough resentments against the Yogi government (such as the controversy over its icon Raja Mihir Bhoj) to go for a constituency-wise approach this time. These castes are the swing voters of western UP, and also sensitive to BJP's localised whisper campaigns of Jat domination.

Another section of flexible voters that BJP is banking on are non-Jatav Dalits such as Pasis, Dhobis and Koris, 32% of whom voted for BJP in the last state election. They are also among the core target of BJP's welfare pitch: with many receiving benefits such as free rations and cash handouts during the pandemic years.

BSP has been losing the support of these non-Jatav Dalits, who comprise 46% of Dalits of the state, steadily for the last decade. These are also sections most poorly targeted by SP's campaign so far; hence, any further defection of them from BSP's camp is likely to benefit BJP.

Beyond caste dynamics, there are also material issues that are playing their part in shaping the mood of voters. BJP is weakest on the issues of price rise, unemployment and stray cattle; but is leading in the sphere of law and order, welfare and infrastructure.

Perhaps the framing characteristic of the election in the first two phases is that it is a wave-less election, where voting might vary substantially according to constituency and sub-region.

These two phases represent the home leg of the competition for the SP coalition, where a favourable election pitch had been already prepared for it by the farmers' agitation. SP's hopes to win UP depend crucially on voters going to polls today and on February 14.

The writer is political researcher

Is Wearing Hijab Mandated By Religion?

A scholar of Islam argues that the Quran does not stipulate this form of dress

Zeenat Shaukat Ali

Heated debate surrounding the wearing of hijab in educational institutions in Karnataka has spread across the ideological spectrum and several dimensions – from preserving culture to making a political statement, from the roles of religion and national identity to gender equality. I have also been pondering several questions regarding the protests that have now spread to several colleges in the state, with many girls protesting in hijabs and many boys protesting in saffron shawls.

Are we seeing India's continuing slide into minority suppression in the name of uniformity? Or does a battle need to be at all fought on the hijab issue where young, impressionable women are hostages to the dictation of clerics on the one side and pawns to facilitate male patriarchy on the other? Especially when an integral part of their growth, their educational instruction, is at stake.

Again, on the one hand, in a liberal democracy, constitutionally, can moral policing and vigilantism enforce the choice of a woman's attire? But on the other hand, is the male religious identity by way of the Sikh turban, Muslim skull cap, Hindu tilak, or the Christian crucifix, to be brought under similar scrutiny? If there is no ban on male-oriented cultural/religious forms of dress in India's educational institutions or government offices, why are women the only ones bearing the brunt?

Was the veil invented by Islam?

Significantly, veiling did not originate with the advent of Islam. Elite women in ancient Mesopotamia and in the Byzantine, Greek and Persian empires wore the veil as a sign of respectability and high status. In ancient Mesopotamia, Assyria had explicit sumptuary laws detailing which women must veil and which women must not. Hence, long before the advent of Islam, veiling and seclusion appear to have existed in the Hellenistic-Byzantine area and among the Sassanians of Persia.

Awaiting the Karnataka HC's judgment

The words burqa, abaya, niqaab etc are unfamiliar to the Quran. Also, in the Quran, the word hijab is not equivalent to 'clothing'. The word hijab, or a derivative, appears seven times in the Quran and it has been translated by lexicographers as barrier, partition, screen, curtain. So the word has several metaphorical dimensions, none of which concern women's clothing. It has been equated with 'headscarf' speciously.

How does the Quran enjoin "modesty" upon women?

Indubitably the Quran advocates decency and modesty in clothing for both genders: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty that will make for greater purity for them"; "And say to believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty."

While modesty and decency of dress was the standard, there was no prescribed dress form mandated by the religion. Al-Fakhr al-Razi stated that what should be covered is left to the prevailing custom, while al-Zamakshari left it to the custom and nature. Classical as well as modern scholars submit that verses relating to dress are not absolute fard al ayn (individual obligation) or fard al kifayah (collective obligation) since there is no textual stipulation (nass) which makes it obligatory (wajib).

Prophet Muhammad recommended modesty and decency in appearance and dress. But to suppose that his recommendations enjoined a cloistered uniform for women in the present, is wholly opposed to the spirit of his reforms.

Have Muslim-majority countries banned hijab?

Unfortunately Muslim scholarship has been appallingly negligent in setting the record straight in matters relating to hijab and gender. Still, the garment has acquired different legal and cultural status in countries across the world. Kosovo (since 2009), Azerbaijan (since 2010), Tunisia (since 1981, partially lifted in 2011) and Turkey (gradually lifted) are among the Muslim-majority countries which have banned the hijab in public schools and universities or government buildings, while Syria and Egypt banned face veils in universities from July 2010 and 2015 respectively.

On the other hand, hijab/burqa is mandatory by law in Iran, Afghanistan and the Indonesian province of Aceh.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Bruni, the Maldives and Somalia hijab is not mandatory. Instead women use the customary dress they call the jibab.

Several countries have given hijab a cultural status. Some have attempted banning the wearing of hijab in public facilities like educational institutes, government buildings, military and some other public gatherings for security reasons.

In India, earlier court rulings have thrown up conflicting answers, and with the present Karnataka case the legal rules concerning the dress code for educational institutions are once again before the court. Bearing in mind India's democratic norms, we now await the judgment of the Karnataka high court.

The writer is Director-General, Wisdom Foundation

dilbert

Sacred*space*

I Bow To Thee

From Thee is everything. Thou art everything, O Destroyer of Kama, Cupid; Thou art the consort of Gauri, the Divine Mother. Thou art, verily, the old man; Thou art the youth; and Thou art the child too. What is there that Thou are not? Therefore, I bow to Thee.

Brahmavaivarta Purana

Param Purush Gets His Work Done Through You

Shri Shri Anandamurti

Something that is vast but still within the scope of measurement is called 'vishala' in Sanskrit. Even though the Himalayas are immense, they can still be measured. That which is difficult to measure is termed 'brihat'. Param Purush is called Brihat, because the human mind is always disappointed when it attempts to measure Him.

Actually, it is not enough to call Him Brihat, He is such a remarkable entity that whoever comes near Him becomes as great as Him and is made His own. Not only does He draw all other entities into His lap, but He also makes them lose their individual identities in Him – they become absorbed in Him. That's why He is also called Vipula. And as He's Vipula, He is also called Brahma. Had He not possessed the quality of making others as great as Himself, we would have called Him Brihat, but certainly not Brahma. If He wants to maintain the sanctity of His name, He is compelled to make His devotees, who meditate on Him, who ideate on Him, as great as Himself.

Devotees call Him Brihat and also address Him as Divyam. Divyam means 'possessing divine powers'. What is divine power? The physical force we use in our daily lives is known as energy: electrical energy and mechanical energy. This energy is nothing but a physical force and unless guided by intellect, cannot work independently. The electricity formed in clouds is wasted in most cases because no intellectual being such as the human being utilises it. Electricity generated in power stations, however, is readily utilised because it is the product of human intellect and intelligence. That is why we say that physical energy cannot render service unless guided by some intellectual force.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Physical force is a blind force. Those unaware of the fundamental difference between physical force and divine force often make the flippant remark that everything has come from nature. But how is that possible? Nature does not have its own intellect but is simply the way in which the physical force has manifested itself. Nature cannot do anything original – it cannot create such a well-ordered universe itself. It is not an intellectual force but a blind force.

The divine force walks behind it. The mind, the controller of physical force, has evolved from ectoplasm. The creator of ectoplasm is an even subtler entity, and this is what we call the divine force. That is, the supreme vibrational force lies behind all the vibrating entities. That entity which is great or Brihat is the divine force which, in most cases, directly guides the physical force.

This guidance resulted in the creation of our universe, which follows a fixed set of rules. Under no circumstances can these rules be violated. Sometimes the Supreme Entity controls the physical force through the medium of human intellect. Human beings build cities and towns, construct power stations, organise different expeditions … with the use of their intellect. And thus, the Supreme Entity gets the work done through human frames. If humans think that they work independently of the divine force, they are mistaken.

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Business Standard
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MUMBAI | THURSDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2022

Bank balance sheet recovery

Asset quality is improving, but risks remain

Asset quality in the banking system continues to improve. As the latest Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India, by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), showed, the gross non-performing assets (GNPAs) ratio in scheduled commercial banks declined from 8.2 per cent in March 2020 to 7.3 per cent in March 2021. According to the RBI's estimates, the ratio is expected to have declined to 6.9 per cent by end-September 2021. The financial results declared by banks for the December 2021 quarter suggest that the banking sector balance sheet continues to improve. As a report in this newspaper showed on Wednesday, 28 listed banks reported a year-on-year increase in net profit of 64.1 per cent. Profits went up by 21.5 per cent sequentially.

The sharp jump in profits is largely on account of a fall in provisions and contingencies. GNPAs for these banks declined by 3.5 per cent sequentially. Net interest income, meanwhile, improved by about 10 per cent year-on-year. Continued improvement in the banking sector should help boost confidence as it reduces growth and financial stability risks. With the ongoing deleveraging in the corporate sector, India would be well-positioned to invest as the economy recovers. The government is also pushing up capital expenditure in the hope that it will crowd in private investment over time. However, this might take some time as capacity utilisation is still low and the medium-term outlook remains uncertain.

Although credit growth has improved from a very low base, it is being led by the retail segment. Also, as highlighted by the RBI, credit is not flowing to lower-rated firms. At a broader level, although the banking balance sheet is improving, risks remain. For instance, as the support extended to borrowers is withdrawn, provisioning may have to be increased. Profitability may be hit in the coming quarters because of increasing market interest rates. The value of bond holdings by banks may suffer. Also, it's worth highlighting that a large part of the clean-up in the banking system has happened because of write-offs. This should certainly not be the preferred way as it would require consistent capital infusion. The government, for instance, has infused about ₹3.5 trillion into public sector banks (PSBs) since 2014.

As asset quality gets better, bank managements must focus on improving lending standards. This is critical, particularly in PSBs, to avoid recurrence of asset quality problems as and when investment revives. Further, the government must strengthen the system for the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code with the objective of resolving stressed assets in the given time frame. As reported in these pages, compared to the requirement of about 360 members, the National Company Law Tribunal has 63 members. The government must provide the required human resources to the tribunal and facilitate a quick resolution of cases. This will not only help banks but make capital more efficient, in general, and push growth. The government has also set up an alternative mechanism through an asset reconstruction company to resolve stressed assets. However, it remains to be seen how effectively it addresses the issue. As things stand today, the IBC is the best way to resolve bad loans. Thus, the framework must be strengthened.

Defending a global brand

Hyundai flap has lessons for other MNCs

It is not often that a social media post by a provincial car distributor leads to a conversation between two foreign ministers —but that is just what has happened following a message on social media from a Pakistani vendor of Hyundai cars that expressed support for Kashmiri separatists. Following a firestorm on Indian social media, the South Korean foreign minister spoke to his Indian counterpart to express his regrets. Whether social media posts of this sort should eventually be raised to the level of external affairs ministries is one question. But the other question is how transnational companies, like Hyundai, can effectively manage their operations at a time of increasing geopolitical tension. Hyundai India issued a statement dissociating itself from the post by the Hyundai distributor in Pakistan. This did not noticeably calm tensions, nor was it likely to. It is true that Hyundai's sales in India are unlikely to suffer any lasting damage. But the fact remains that a build-up of such incidents is not good for a brand's image and shifts companies into fire-fighting mode. Multinationals which face significant domestic competition —like a South Korean carmaker in India — will find themselves particularly disadvantaged in that they will fear some offended potential customers will switch to locally-made alternatives.

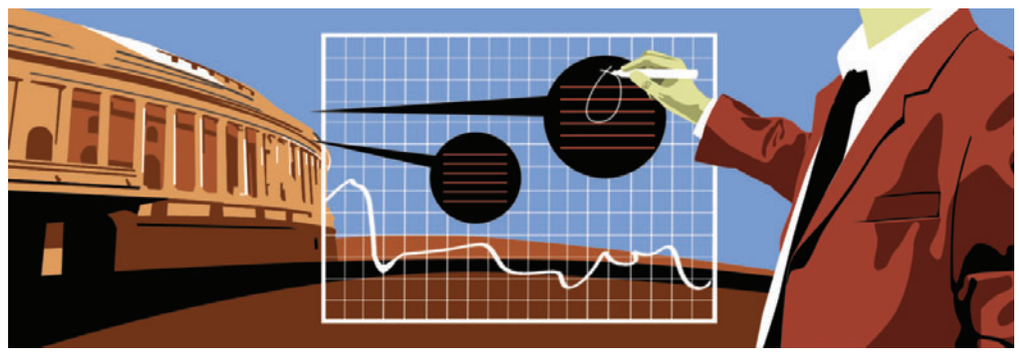
Certainly, companies must carefully manage their brand names and their presence on social media in different geographies. There is no reason why the "Hyundai" name should have been used by a distributor in Pakistan rather than by the national office of the carmaker in that country, which would presumably have had a much more careful approach. It is also true that many transnational companies do not have clear social media policies warning their employees to take into account the effect of their posts on other markets. After all, the global public square is much smaller than it was. Posts made by Pakistani accounts are visible in India and vice versa. Companies that have a presence in multiple countries with outstanding geopolitical issues between them must be especially careful. Tighter control over the ecosystem that is associated with a brand is essential to preserve that brand's integrity and marketability.

In the end, there will be costs to companies from kowtowing too much to such voices, as well. Indian social media may be dominated by hyper-nationalist narratives, but social media in the People's Republic of China — carefully controlled by the government — is even more nationalist. And it is certainly many times more lucrative than the Indian market, and thus losing it is a risk that few companies are willing to take. Brands and multinationals over the past years have grown to understand and fear the response of Weibo and other mainland social media networks to products and advertising campaigns. But this sensitivity is itself causing a backlash. Companies that bend over too far — such as the film studio that removed a Taiwanese flag from a flight jacket in the *Top Gun* sequel —may find themselves the subject of harsh scrutiny in their home markets in the West. For now, it may be possible to seek to stay above the fray, as Hyundai should essentially have managed in this particular controversy. Yet that may not always be possible in the future

Budget 2022: Some musings

The worrisome issue of fiscal consolidation remains a major concern

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



A PIECE OF MY MIND

SHANKAR ACHARYA

A week after the Union Budget, pretty much every worthwhile comment (and many not so worthwhile ones!) has been made in all forms of media. However, as a regular columnist, one feels obliged to declare one's hand. So here goes.

First, it is important to recognise that the finance minister (FM) and her team were charged with making a Budget in an extremely challenging economic situation. The economy had been hammered by the Covid pandemic and the strong initial lockdown in spring 2020, and although the output recovery since then had been quite good, it had been buffeted by the second and third waves of April-June 2021 (Delta) and December-January of 2021/22 (Omicron), respectively. Furthermore, substantial scarring damage persisted in the form of record fiscal deficits and unprecedented debt-GDP ratios, high unemployment and underemployment (especially in the numerically dominant informal sector), stagnant aggregate consumption levels, stalled private investment and an uncertain global economic environment. Aside from the strength of the formal sector output recovery, the rebound in exports and imports was a redeeming feature.

Against this background, I had hoped for a significant fiscal consolidation (perhaps close to a per cent of GDP), the continuation of FM's refreshingly commendable commitment to transparency and proper accounting of budget numbers, continuation of various special programmes to help the most badly hit sections of society (including informal sector workers and micro, small and medium enterprises), a significant, sustainable effort to raise the Centre's gross tax ratio (stuck at 10-11 per cent of GDP for many years) through possible new taxes on the very rich (such as on capital gains, inheritance and wealth) as the only durable solution to our record deficit/debt problems, and significant trade policy reforms to consolidate and strengthen the rebound in foreign trade, especially in our long-stagnating merchandise exports.

As usual, some of my hopes were met and others belied. The Budget does promise a modest fiscal consolidation of 0.5 per cent of GDP, down to 6.4 per cent from the Revised Estimate (RE) of 6.9 per cent. Nirmala Sitharaman's commitment to transparency in presenting the budget numbers has continued, including in the detailed presentation of the cleaning up of the Customs tariff schedule in the explanatory memorandum to the Finance Bill, although one misses the summary table of changes in effective Customs duty rates appended to each of her three previous Budget speeches. So has her commendable penchant for conservative fiscal projections of revenue and expenditure. The special programmes to assist the pandemic-afflicted sections of the population have also been broadly maintained.

However, there are no new taxes on the super-rich or any other significant tax-raising measures, apparently in consonance with prime ministerial guidance. Nor are there any marked reductions in our heightened protective Customs duty structure, which militates against sustained growth of exports and successful global value chain participation. On the other hand, there is a major expansion of capital expenditure, especially on basic infrastructure, which should impart significant multiplier demands for materials and labour and help strengthen the economy's medium-term growth potential.

Let me revert to the worrisome issue of fiscal consolidation. This Budget has been framed against the background of persistence, over three years, of record high fiscal deficits with the combined (Centre plus states) deficit over 13 per cent of GDP in 2020/21, about 11 per cent in 2021/22 and projected at over 10 per cent in 2022/23, and record government debt ratios around 85-90 per cent of GDP. The adverse consequences are beginning to manifest. First, interest payments of the Centre have jumped by nearly 40 per cent between 2020/21 and 2022/23, raising their share in total expenditure by a record 4.4 per cent points over these two years and correspondingly shrinking the share of non-interest expenditures from over 80 per cent to just 76 per cent. With net market borrowings projected at ₹11.6 trillion to finance the Centre's deficit and interest rates beginning to rise because of both global and domestic factors, this unhealthy trend is likely to persist. Second, in current conditions, this order of market borrowings will pose serious monetary and debt management problems to the Reserve Bank of India and will almost surely fan the inflationary potential of persistent excess liquidity in the system. We must always remember that inflation hurts the poor the most, makes exports less competitive and is inimical to sustained economic growth. Third, the risk of crowding out green shoots of private investment revival is not a chimera.

However, there may be a silver lining. Just possibly, the FM's welcome conservatism in estimating revenues and expenditures may have exaggerated the deficit-debt challenges a little. First, based on published trends up through December 2021, the REs for revenues may be underestimates and those for expenditures may be overestimates, thus possibly yielding a sizable government cash balance by end March, which could significantly reduce the scale of market borrowings in 2022/23. Second, the Budget's projection of nominal GDP growth of 11 per cent in 2022/23 sits awkwardly with the Economic Survey's expectation of 8-8.5 per cent real growth, as it would imply a GDP deflator increase of only 3 per cent or less, very different from the 8.4 per cent estimated by the National Statistical Office in its Advanced Estimates of National Income for 2021/22. Bearing in mind the "low base effects" because of Delta and Omicron in the several months of 2021/22, real GDP growth in 2022/23 could be around 7 per cent or so. Furthermore, the GDP deflator is likely to be in the 6-7 per cent range. Together, this suggests that nominal GDP growth in 2022/23 could well be around 13-14 per cent. Assuming a reasonable tax revenue elasticity of unity, net taxes of the Centre could then be around ₹0.7 trillion higher than estimated. Allowing for some under-budgeting of expenditures for subsidies and MNREGA and over-budgeting of capital expenditures, it is possible that, other things equal, deficits and market borrowing requirements might be ₹0.5 trillion less. Adding a couple of trillion rupees of possible underestimated cash balances, noted above, we might well see market borrowings ₹2-3 trillion less than projected.

All this would certainly help. But let us remember that Budget Estimates are just that, and they can go awry for all sorts of reasons, including unforeseen domestic or international shocks. The basic moral of the story is simple: Macroeconomic management is usually a lot more comfortable with lower fiscal deficits. The sooner we get there, the better for the economy.

The writer is Honorary Professor at ICRIER and former Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India. Views are personal

The limits of compassionate capital

SWOT

KANIKA DATTA

Consider two news items in the first three days of this week. The first was that loss-making renewable energy company Suzlon Energy has asked the state-owned Power Finance Corporation for a ₹4,200 crore bailout. The other was that the fossil fuel giant BP reported its highest profit in eight years.

The contrast between Suzlon's crisis and BP's good fortunes are telling. One has seen losses swell from cumulative operational problems — soaring raw material costs, a glut of projects and tariff pressures on wind power. BP, on the other hand, is riding on buoyant oil and gas prices spurred by a geopolitical crisis in the Ukraine.

Suzlon was a poster boy of the early trend of investing on ESG, or Environmental, Social and Governance, metrics. Its failure highlights the risks associated with ESG investing, which has gained momentum after the Paris agreement on climate change, which committed countries to greenhouse gas reduction targets.

This wind turbine maker with debt of ₹6,640 crore had attracted interest from blue-chip private equity players such as IDFC PE, Olympus and Asia Climate Partners and even a white knight investor in Sun Pharma's Dilip Shanghvi. Now, with a step-down subsidiary in the US having filed for bankruptcy, it is asking for a government bailout.

ESG investing can be seen as a continuum of a global investment philosophy that gained traction after the great accounting frauds of the early 21st century — Enron, WorldCom, Freddie Mac, AIG *et al*. Occurring about a decade after capitalism's grand victory over communism in the Cold War, these scandals were an embarrassingly public reminder of the seamier side of free enterprise.

At Davos and other global talk shops, earnest discussions focused on ways to "save" capitalism, and the twin notions of "compassionate capital" and "impact investing" emerged. These concepts posited that capitalism should not be a force of profit only but a source of good ("impact") too. Bill Gates was an early proponent of this concept. Inevitably, vast amounts of compassionate capital sloshed into global markets spawning impact investment funds focused on healthcare, infrastructure and education in poor countries.

These new-age capitalists acquired a confirmatory theory from management guru C K Prahalad, a much-awarded professor of the University of Michigan. He wrote *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* that made the argument for helping the poor and making profits. The book became all the rage, though careful observers pointed out that in several case studies, the "helping the poor" part seemed to be an afterthought to the "making profit" part. Others felt uneasy at the thought of making money by selling soap and salt to the poor.

Strangely, the 2008 financial crisis did not prompt a rethink, though the implosion was caused by high finance chasing bottom-of-the-pyramid consumers with dodgy home loans. The crisis revealed the old risk of accounting and accountability. That applied to impact investing too. These investments poured into countries with weak or non-existent laws and institutional governance mechanisms and rampant corruption. How to determine whether, say, a hospital for the poor or a power utility was delivering bang for the compassionate buck?

The answers were hazy, at best, which opened the doors for a world-class fraudster such as Arif Naqvi, the Pakistani founder of Abraaj Capital. This investing impresario's compelling story of deploying capital to eradicate global poverty fooled Bill Gates, Edgar Bronfman, John Kerry, Prince Charles, Klaus Schwab, Bank of America, McKinsey, KPMG, Hamilton Lane, the World Bank and the US, British and French governments. Abraaj, now in liquidation, extracted capital from top-of-the-line global investors for projects in India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, Turkey and so on, by spinning a fantasy that they wanted to hear.

It took about 13 years for someone to figure out that the profits Mr Naqvi promised weren't forthcoming. In fact, Mr Naqvi, the toast of the Davos crowd, operated a global Ponzi scheme, extracting money from one investor to finance a high-roller lifestyle for himself and senior executives, shifting money from one fund to another whenever payments came due (all deliciously chronicled in *The Key Man* by two *Wall Street Journal* reporters.

This is not to say that ESG Funds are incipient fraudsters — far from it. But the fact that ESG investing is impact investment bolstered by a climate change agenda should raise the level of caution. In May last year, the US Securities and Exchange Commission released an unprecedented ESG-focused risk alert pointing to inadequate disclosure, misleading claims and insufficient knowledge of ESG investment analysis. That's one problem. The other is the variable national policies, especially in emerging markets, that make investments difficult to measure. In India, for instance, the long-standing problems of regulated energy pricing add layers of complexity to the RE business. Equally, high fossil fuel-using companies are known to make token investments in RE power or corporate social responsibility projects to attract ESG money. In short, the more opaque the metric, the higher the risk.

Profiting from purpose

BOOK REVIEW

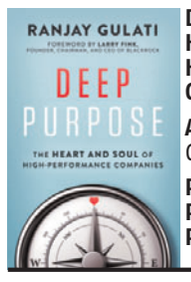
SRIVATSA KRISHNA

Ranjay Gulati is one of the most distinguished professors at Harvard Business School who has done remarkable work on the intersection of leadership, organisational design, and human behaviour. *Deep Purpose* delves deep into architecture of purpose, to examine what sets apart high-performance companies from the rest of the crowd. It is hard to research intangible values such as character, culture, ambition, judgment, and a host of others that we find tough to describe even in an ordinary conversation. This book is a fascinating journey through one such indescribable yet pivotal value: Purpose. All leaders chase obedience to visible and enforceable values, but what about obedience to those that are unseen and the unenforceable yet pivotal? Dr Gulati helps us understand this better through astonishing case studies and insights.

This remarkable book goes into the viscera of purpose, showing how it propels performance and profit and doesn't detract from them. It starts with a few insights from Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock and one of the world's greatest asset managers, who argues that purpose and profits are two sides of the same coin — unless both sides are deeply cut, the coin is a counterfeit. BlackRock manages not just the money but the trust of people and, as such, typifies deep purpose. The book was probably inspired by Mr Fink's classic letter on profit and purpose. As the book argues, the problem isn't that business leaders have the wrong intentions. It is that they find combining profitability with purpose an overwhelming task because they don't understand the concept and how to go about executing it.

India today has the world's third-largest start-up ecosystem with over 50,000 start-ups and about 2,000 investors chasing them. The eternal question for them is: Should growth come first or a higher calling? Dr Gulati's book would suggest that the latter, not the former, should be at the heart of start-ups, even if that is something with which most venture capitalists might not agree. What would happen if a start-up that had everything going for it, including a higher purpose, finds itself unprofitable, even after splurging investor money to acquire customers while pursuing this higher calling?

The book makes a nuanced distinction between shallow and deep purpose and shows how several prominent companies such as Facebook, Theranos and others practice "purpose washing" mainly to hide behind a veil to disguise their own self-serving motive which is harmful to both individuals and institutions. By going deep into companies as diverse as Lego to Microsoft the book discovers the kernel of purpose and how it goes beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) or conscious capitalism. Microsoft is today the toast of the world under Satya Nadella's leadership. He helped it rediscover its deep purpose and become a mobile-first and cloud-first company, from being a jaded monopolist selling clunky software, all within the span of less than a decade. He did so by going beyond Maslow's self-actualisation by reimagining a new world where his employees could add value to others and themselves by finding and following their own deep purposes.



Deep Purpose: The Heart & Soul of High Performance Companies
Author: Ranjay Gulati
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 304
Price: ₹1,799

There is an eternal trade-off especially with modern Internet economy companies. For instance, Google Maps is used by us to do many day-to-day things including finding places, whereas the same Google maps is also used by terrorists to plant bombs. Facebook connects many communities and helps bring people together but has been seen to encourage divisive behaviour between human beings and various groups in society. Above all, there is overwhelming evidence of efforts by foreign actors to subvert US elections, thereby striking at the very heart of democracy via Facebook. So, should Google Maps and Facebook be banned? If not, how can they be regulated by government to make them find their original, authentic deep purpose? The book could do well by guiding political leaders on the kind of regulatory tools they can use to resolve these eternal dilemmas, thereby enabling governments, too, to find their own deep purpose. This is perhaps one of the few things missing in the book.

One of the interesting insights in the book is about how Mahindra & Mahindra tries to find its own deep purpose through one of its executives, Shipra Kumari, who went into the Haryana badlands to help farmers solve the problem of a lack of agricultural labour which in turn prevents them from harvesting their crops in time. Through this programme called "Rise," Anand Mahindra has given deep purpose to an organisation that is producing world-class products for India and the world.

The book also looks at established companies such as Boeing, Johnson and Johnson and shows how they realise the absence of the purpose only after a long period of organisational decay, by which time it is too late to bring them back from the brink.

Deep Purpose is a modern-day timeless classic on how individuals and institutions intersect to produce performance and profit through the alchemy of purpose. Its cases, insights and lessons go a long way, not just by telling us valuable stories but by also nudging the reader towards finding their own deep purpose in life. This is something few others have succeeded in doing.

The reviewer is an IAS officer. Views are personal. @srivatsakrishna

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Better for Workers, Better for Industry

Wage structure changes will help recovery

GoI contemplating phased-in changes in the wage structure is welcome, particularly in the current economic climate. Labour remains a critical factor of production. Ensuring that the rules that govern and regulate all aspects of labour are fair is critical to sustained economic growth. The four labour codes have been passed by Parliament, and the rules for their implementation have been drafted. GoI needs to move ahead with implementing them now. The idea behind capping the value of allowances to 50% of the employee's salary, and setting out clearly in law what constitutes salary or wages and what could be considered as allowance, is essentially to address the issue of growing inequity, especially in these Covid times. This provision requires some fundamental changes in structuring wages and assessment of value in an employee. This will address concerns and improve compliance

particularly in the context of the pandemic where many businesses have experienced a downturn, particularly in sectors such as aviation, hospitality, restaurants and tourism-related segments. The phase-in change will ensure that there is no undue burden of compliance.

The proposed changes can create the space for increased consumer demand as well. The idea of restoring the 100-employee limit for retrenchment from 300, or closing down a unit without government approval, provides safeguards to employees who have images, if not experience, of migrant workers during the first wave fresh in their memory. GoI must ensure that the rules provide the framework for economic growth in a manner that is just and sustainable. It must enable maximum compliance without making the system onerous or giving rise to opportunities for rent-seeking.

A phased introduction should ensure proper implementation and compliance. Without a framework that protects labour from exploitation as well as ensures equal protection for business, the goal of sustained economic growth for all will remain incomplete. For a quicker economic recovery, this makes smart sense for industry as well.

For Voters, This Isn't (Just) the 'Semifinal'

All roads may lead to Rome, but for a vast number of people, it is the upkeep of their own backyards that matters above all. In the five states that go to elections over the next one month starting today, 18.34 crore voters will determine the way almost 20 crore people in Uttar Pradesh, 14.6 lakh in Goa, more than a crore in Uttarakhand, almost 2.8 crore in Punjab and 28.6 lakh in Manipur will live within the federal union of India for (hopefully) the next five years. To conflate the decisions voters in these states make between today and March 7 as a 'semifinal' to the 2024 'final' is to miss a fundamental point not just about democracy, but also about the federal nature of India's polity.

The means to get voters to send a candidate of a party to the

state assembly may be many — invoking the virtues of a central government, highlighting its shortcomings, playing the 'local' card, making promises, offering sweeteners and incentives in exchange for votes, etc. But, for the voter, the end is the same: betterment of life, whichever way each voter decides to interpret 'betterment'.

This is not to say that what happens tomorrow — on March 10, to be precise — will not influence the larger mandate of the nation two years from now. At a time when Centre-state relations are either fraught with more heightened tension than in the recent past — the pandemic only putting this under the scanner — or models like the 'double-engine government' option, first used (successfully) in the 2014 Haryana and Maharashtra assembly poll campaigns, are a hard-sell, it becomes more important to recognise the importance of state elections for their own sake. From public health and agriculture to public order and most taxes, states are where voters get their returns.

JUST IN JEST

We do not need to drop the mask. It could live on as a regular fashion accessory

Living With the Mask As a Style Statement

As more countries drop mandates or regulations for the public wearing of masks as part of the 'living with Covid' regimen, may we suggest that masks continue to be worn if not for reasons of public safety then for the sake of urban fashion. Mask-wearing has a cool, exciting tradition. Worn by bad guys to conceal their identities — forms ranging from the classic 'folded handkerchief' option of bandits, the stylised famous-personality rubber masks of movie bank robbers, to the Halloween-inspired masks of horror movies — masks were always très chic with bad boy and bad girl dangerous appeal. While Bhutanese masks worn by monks while dancing during religious festivals have a different (supernatural?) thrill about them, perhaps the rest of us should take these down as decorations from our walls from time to time and wear them to parties, masquerade ball-style.

Masks were something East Asian countries culturally adopted as an accessory with benefits like sunglasses or hats after the Hong Kong flu (H3N2 virus) struck in the late 1960s. So, even when mask-wearing was not required, citizens *preferred* donning them in public. This also meant a fashion line emerging. So, even as masks are dropped from public health guidelines, it could do well for your street cred to keep wearing them to make a strong style statement.

Proof of the electoral pudding is in voting, something EC has made easier, more engaging for voters

Taste a Tukda of Democracy

Akshay Rout

As another election marathon starts off today — spread over a month, seven phases, and five states — political parties and their candidates will be anxious to see how many citizens queue up in their favour. But a far more essential question for India's democracy will be answered when we know how many citizens will vote, for whichever party or candidate they may choose.

In the five poll-going states of the federal union of India — Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Manipur — there are 18.3 crore citizens listed as electors. More than 60 lakh of them are new voters. In the 75th year of Independence, could we witness a 75% voter turnout in these state elections? Remember, last year's state elections in Assam recorded an 82.39% turnout, West Bengal 77.68%, and the Union territory of Puducherry an impressive 81.66%. Is the voting experience getting better, becoming easier and less cumbersome?

Indians responded to the gift of adult franchise with 45.7% turnout in the first general election held between October 1951 and February 1952 amid nominal literacy, abundant poverty and post-Partition problems. Over the decades that followed, turnout generally stuck to 60% or below. Curiously, rising economic and educational standards did not help much then.

Has political engagement not been credible enough? Or has electoral engagement been the real issue? Following proactive interventions by the Election Commission (EC) over a decade ago, there was a dramatic swing in Lok Sabha voter turnout to 66.44% in 2014 that further improved to 67.4% in 2019. Turnouts in assembly elections have followed this trend. India, having not opted for compulsory voting, is still consistently in the lower half in world voter turnout ranking, though it has been slowly climbing of late. In the US, with a turnout of 62% of the voting-eligible population in the 2020 presidential election — certainly up from 54.8% in 2016 — Joe Biden is desperately pushing to open up voting rights and methods.

Making It a Clean SVEEP

Manipur and Goa, like several other smaller states, as well as Punjab, have always produced better election turnouts, consistently registering 70-80% or even more in recent general elections. Their 'performance' has been further boosted after the EC's SVEEP (Systemic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) interventions from 2010. The younger state of Uttarakhand, having gone through only four assembly elections till date, soon moved into the 65% bracket despite difficult topographical and climatic conditions. Women in these four states have mostly matched men in turning up at polling stations. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, they even surpassed men at the hustings after some focused interventions and political mobilisation.

UP, with its mammoth 15 crore electorate, has made a significant stride to the 60% turnout range in the last two assembly elections compared to 45-55% in earlier ones. Importantly, irrespective of socioeconomic handicaps, women have decisively moved past men in voting, both in the 2012 and 2017 UP assembly elections, forcing issues pertaining specifically to them to the centre of the poll narrative.

AP

Decisions, decisions, decisions

The Nota (None of the Above) innovation in the electronic voting machine (EVM) has, since its introduction in the 2013 Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh assembly elections, provided the voter an option to come and reject on record all available candidates. The recent relaxation of Covid restrictions on physical meetings and door-to-door campaigns should help in connecting further with voters.

For eligible voters to participate, voting needs to be not just an abstract 'celebration of democracy' but it has to also be actually safe and pleasant. Access and convenience aspects are buttressed by a set of assured minimum facilities (AMFs) like waiting sheds, drinking water, toilets and adequate lighting at polling stations. Information slips, voter guides and assistance booths are devices to make the voting process easier. Persons with disabilities (PwDs) and senior citizens tend to face genuine barriers and disincentives. About 13 lakh people with disabilities in the five poll-going states, along with the elderly, will be specially supported by priority voting, sturdy ramps, wheelchairs, free transport along with all polling stations being situated on ground floors.

Postal ballots are being harnessed better, with 4.5 times higher yield than before in the 2021 assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. This year, journalists joined voters above 80, PwDs, Covid-affected persons and those employed in essential services in the list of 'absentee voters' who can opt for the postal ballot. Remote voting for migrant workers and students may become a reality in the foreseeable future.

Keeping It Sanitised

2.15 lakh polling booths are in absolute custody of the election machinery, where compliance of Covid protocols can be expected to be foolproof. EC's elaborate catalogue of Covid-mitigation steps has worked seamlessly since the Bihar assembly elections in 2020. This has been further refurbished recently.

January 25 is observed as National Voters' Day since 2011 to commemorate EC's foundation day in 1950. The proof of the pudding, of course, will be in the actual voting.

The writer is former director general, Election Commission of India

The None of the Above innovation in the electronic voting machine has provided the voter an option to come and reject on record all available candidates

Going Digital Is Going Inclusive

Bhagwat Karad

The Covid pandemic has accelerated the need to enable digitisation, with the support of a stronger policy framework for governments around the world. India is at the forefront of digitisation flagship programmes such as Digital India and Ayushman Bharat Digital. Digitisation in governance has trickled its way to sectors as diverse as fintech and digital health.

Focus on enabling the trinity of Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and mobile phones paid its dividends during the pandemic, as it effectively reached citizens living in remote areas by reducing the number of those financially excluded, disbursing benefits of government schemes and by providing mobile phone updates. The benefits of such digital linkages were not just restricted to the high share of financial leakages but also the ones in the public distribution system (PDS) for distribution of essentials.

Since its launch in 2014, the Jan Dhan Yojana (JDY) has opened over 43 crore new bank accounts. Businesses have greatly benefited from Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions during the pandemic, indicating the growth of fintech users. In her budget speech earlier this month, Nirmala Sitharaman declared that the financial support for the digital payment ecosystem announced in the previous budget will continue to encourage further adoption of digital payments.

Jan Dhan Darshak is one such digital reform policy that maps the nearest financial service providers — such as banks and post offices — with users using a GIS (geographic information system) mobile application, thus working towards impacting financial literacy and wisdom. This application has enabled mapping of over 1.68 lakh bank branches, 2.11 lakh ATMs and 1.36 lakh post offices.

GoI-NITI Aayog's Aspirational Districts Programme launched in January 2018 aims to transform 112 most-underdeveloped districts across 49 key performance indicators and five broad socioeconomic themes. While the programme was launched keeping in mind social development, it has also resulted in positive externalities that have advanced economic growth. This initiative has shown

FILE PHOTO

A day at the bank

great improvements across all six financial inclusion parameters, with significant increase in the number of accounts opened under the JDY and the total disbursement of MUDRA (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) loans.

India has already seen 88% growth in digital transactions over the last three years. There are several milestones, however, yet to be achieved towards the complete optimisation of financial digitisation. This can be achieved by addressing problems in the adoption of fintech due to lack of awareness.

The recently launched mobile vans in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, are a part of a larger awareness drive that aims to not only educate people in the remote parts of the district about digitisation of financial services but also provide such services through these vans. The aim is to familiarise citizens with technology involved in various financial services and, thus, encourage them to adopt digital financial services.

The young of this country have played a pivotal role in the digital transformation of India. It will continue to do so. Technological exposure of the youth has facilitated newer ideas and, thus, GoI's aim to promote maximum uptake of bank accounts and digital financial literacy among the youth. Financially empowering these young adults creates a strong ripple effect within their families and, hence, society at large.

The fintech adoption rate in India currently stands at 87%, well above the global average of 64%, thereby making India one of the largest digital markets. This accomplishment is not only a result of an enabling policy and regulatory landscape, but largely the people's willingness to adapt to change. The growth of fintech sectors along with many fintech startups has made India the third-largest startup network in the world. GoI will continue to extend the necessary support to sustain steady growth in the sector and will further augment it in the years ahead.

The writer is minister of state, finance, GoI

ESG, A Booster Dose for Investors

Shantanu Shrivastava

The country's largest institutional investor, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), is slated to hit the capital markets with an initial public offering (IPO) as early as the end of the current fiscal year, in line with GoI's divestment plans. With nearly ₹37.32 lakh crore ($500 billion) in assets and a valuation estimated up to ₹15.15 lakh crore ($203 billion), the IPO is touted to be India's largest till date, and is bound to elicit interest from all quarters, domestically and globally.

GoI wants an active participation from foreign institutional investors (FII) too and is mulling changes in the foreign direct investment (FDI) policy. Equity investment by foreign investors is allowed for most Indian insurers, but not in LIC, which is a special entity created by an Act of Parliament. In parallel, the finance ministry is reportedly also working to complete an environmental, social and governance (ESG) rating for the insurance behemoth before its mega IPO hits the market, to tap into the large and growing global pool of ESG-aligned assets.

The number of investors aligning their practices with ESG has exploded in the past two years, with some estimates expecting ESG assets to hit $53 trillion by 2025, a third of global assets under management. Further, the United Nations-supported Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), the world's leading proponent of responsible investment, has more than 3,500 signatories, among them the world's biggest institutional investors representing $121 trillion in assets under management. These signatories commit to integrating ESG factors into investment decision-making.

Most of the largest companies in the world are already reporting their ESG profile in line with globally recognised frameworks or standards. Indian companies have been slow to catch up, lacking both regulation and a push from domestic institutional investors. The regulatory environment is transforming as the new business responsibility and sustainability reporting (BRSR) standards become mandatory for Indian companies, requiring listed companies to disclose their ESG footprint.

FILE PHOTO

Umbrella invitation

With LIC going for an ESG rating, it is clear that GoI wants the country's biggest asset manager to be better placed to anticipate future risks and opportunities in its operations and investment practices. To get a favourable rating and get on the radar of global institutional investors, LIC must have a credible ESG strategy. This will entail improving and working upon its most material ESG risks and capitalising on the most pertinent ESG opportunities.

A high ESG rating may bring in long-term patient investors and boost the company's valuation. But it will also invite pressure from these investors to improve the ESG profile. This implies LIC will have to put current and future investments under the ESG lens. As the insurer holds more than 3.5% of the listed equity universe in India, this development is bound to create a buzz in Indian corporate boardrooms and lead to companies rethinking their ESG strategies in turn, to avoid scrutiny and pressure from one of their biggest investors. LIC holds more than 1% stake in 281 companies in India, covering the energy, banking, IT and commodities sectors, among others.

All companies in which LIC holds a stake will be scrutinised, especially energy companies given their weak environmental profile. The pressure to address ESG issues is increasingly an existential question for energy companies as governments, including India's, set net-zero targets.

Crisil last year launched a compendium on ESG scores of the top 225 Indian companies. It shows a stark difference in ratings between sectors. The IT and financial sectors have the highest scores, while oil and gas and thermal power lie towards the lower end. Renewable energy (RE), owing to its environmental profile, also ranks high. LIC's exposure to oil and gas and thermal power companies can potentially tarnish its overall ESG profile.

The insurer seems to have started on improving its ESG profile as it recently increased its stakes in JSW Energy and Adani Transmission. Both have ambitious green energy plans and high ESG ratings, by virtue of their alignment with globally recognised ESG standards and high environmental scores.

LIC has an asset base rivalling the biggest global insurers. The coming IPO will further shore up its equity capital base. The company's ESG efforts can be a blessing for the rapidly expanding energy sector in India, providing long-term patient capital at low-return hurdles. Companies in the power sector seeking to capitalise on this opportunity will need to step up their game, building ESG considerations into their business strategy, and then putting ESG commitments into practice.

The writer is energy finance analyst, Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA)

THE SPEAKING TREE

When Habits Return

SRI AUROBINDO

It would be easier to get rid of wrong movements when you bring down a settled peace and equanimity into that part of the being. There will then be more of an automatic rejection of such movements and less need of tapasya.

It is quite normal for difficulties to come back…and it is not a proof that no progress has been made. The recurrence, after one has thought one has conquered, is not unaccountable.… When a habitual movement long embedded in the nature is cast out, it takes refuge in some less enlightened part of the nature, and when cast out of the rest of the nature, it takes refuge in the subconscient and from there surges up when you least expect it or comes up in dreams or sudden inconscient movements or it goes out and remains in wait.

One has to stand fast till the power of return fades away. These returns or attacks must be regarded not as parts of oneself, but as invasions and rejected without allowing any depression or discouragement. If the mind does not sanction them, if the vital refuses to welcome them, if the physical remains steady and refuses to obey the physical urge, then the recurrence of the thought, the vital impulse, the physical feeling will begin to lose its last holds and finally they will be too feeble to cause any trouble.

Chat Room

Post Apologies, Let Brands Be

Apropos the Edit, 'Global Brands Must Be Market-Sensitive' (Feb 9), global brands *are* market-sensitive. In the case of Hyundai and KFC, it is obvious that someone slipped badly. Whether this was out of design or ignorance can be a matter of debate. Let's not forget that they have to cater to Pakistani consumers too. However, in terms of market size, Pakistan is no match for India. So, if push comes to shove, the MNCs would always back India. Now that the offensive tweets have been deleted and apologies made, the matter should end. A strong action against Hyundai and KFC may prove counter-productive.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES
Mumbai

Stop Flogging a Dead Congress

This refers to the news report, 'Cong Has Urban Naxal Mindset: Prime Minister Modi in RS' (Feb 9). The unrelenting attacks on the Congress by the ruling party reflect the mindset that it is above scrutiny and its actions are beyond reproach. This also demonstrates the amount of research the BJP has carried out for selective nitpicking to demonise the Congress. However, the common man remains unaffected as the Congress is no longer a party to reckon with. Under these circumstances, the BJP is flogging a dead horse. When shall lawmakers discuss and deliberate upon serious business beyond mud-slinging is the question.

DEEPAK SINGHAL
Noida

Hijab Only Hurts Muslim Women

Apropos the Edit, 'Don't Get Spooked By Our Own Cultures' (Jan 8), the editorial seems to be liberal by recommending the state to allow the hijab under the guise of religious tolerance, but it ignores the discriminatory nature of the headgear that only girls and women are forced to wear. Instead of commending that all religious symbols should be avoided to keep the students free of hatred and bias, as is done in France, you are saying that religious clothing should be allowed even though the worst sufferers would be Muslim women. Your biases against genuine liberalism and the state government are visible in the editorial.

R RAGHAVENDRAN
By email

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
editet@timesgroup.com

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Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

Cooked-up controversy

Celebration of diversity and plurality defines the soul of India. Any attempt to alter this fundamental identity will damage the country's social fabric. If backed by a political agenda, such attempts can lead to disastrous consequences. Invoking the xenophobic narratives to rake up the communal divide has been a familiar electoral strategy of the BJP for years. It is this devious design that is at play in the ongoing hijab controversy in the BJP-ruled Karnataka. This appears to be an entirely cooked-up row; a deliberate attempt to stoke the communal flames. There is no ambiguity in the constitutional provisions providing religious freedom for all. The decision of a college in Karnataka's Udupi to ban entry for Muslim girls wearing hijab — headscarf — raises the question of whether educational institutions can impose a dress code that could interfere with the rights of students. The controversy has turned into a full-blown communal issue, thanks to the politically-motivated protests by the saffron scarf donning students. It was a disgusting spectacle to see the girls being heckled and mocked by the protestors; the images that will cause irreparable damage to the country's secular credentials. The clashes, which spilled to other colleges across Karnataka, now threaten to spread to other States.

The Karnataka government has bungled the issue and when the situation appeared to be spinning out of control it simply ordered the closure of educational institutions for three days to cool down the frayed tempers.

Denying educational opportunity to girls on the basis of what they wear is to make a mockery of NDA govt's oft-repeated slogan 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao'

Denying educational opportunities to girls on the basis of what they wear is to make a mockery of the NDA government's oft-repeated slogan 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao'. India's social life has been accommodative of all religious beliefs and practices. The wearing of the hijab cannot be treated differently from any other commonly worn religious symbols. Unfortunately, a divisive political culture centred around religion that has grown in recent years in the country has made this non-issue a big controversy. It is unfortunate that the students are being denied their right to education in the process. Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai should stop prevaricating on the issue and intervene to let the girls return to their classes in uniform and hijab, and show that his government goes by the Constitution, not the dictates of party ideology and political convenience. The choice of Muslim students to wear hijab to colleges and schools is an accepted practice everywhere in the country. Imposing a sudden ban is unwarranted and detrimental not only to the students in question but also to the State and its goal to educate more girl children. The sudden decision to lock gates on these students will harm the congenial relations on campus and create a religious divide. Banning hijab will deprive Muslim women of the benefits of attending multi-religious and secular institutions.

It is their (of the BJP) illusion that we will get scared. No matter how much they try, the (State) government will complete five years. We will be in power in the State, and we will also attain power at the Centre. He (Devendra Fadnavis) is giving directions (to agencies) on whom they should target. You can't grab power using the ED. This is Maharashtra

Nawab Malik
NCP national spokesperson

It is interesting to see that many parties are trying to enter Goa. These parties which are contesting elections in Goa are doing a lot of chest-thumping and resource mobilisation but voters will look at the background of parties who are capable of delivering. Tactics like poaching of candidates and using resources will not sustain in a long run

Sachin Pilot
Senior Congress leader

Who are the wealth creators. For this government, Adani, Ambani, Tata and Birla type of people. This is an Adani Ambani government and a Tata Birla government. The ecosystem of the economy is shattered by the carbon emission from this government. The economy has to be protected from this level of emission of carbon

Binoy Viswam
CPI leader

We oppose exclusive blocs to create bloc confrontation. We hope that the US and relevant countries can get a clear picture of the situation, feel relaxed, abandon the Cold War mentality, stop driving wedges between regional countries and contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity (On Quad meeting which begins on Friday)

Zhao Lijian
Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman

Miles Behind

Placing women and children better

When we look at their status in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, there's a long way to go

DR VANISHREE JOSEPH

DR N V MADHURI

The union Budget 2022-23 focuses on enhancement of productivity and investment; infrastructure development; financing of investments and all-inclusive welfare. In its inclusive welfare and development, women and children have also been given a prominent place.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development schemes are completely revamped and Mission Shakti, Mission Vatsalya, Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 are launched with new dynamism. For Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, the budget has been enhanced to Rs 20,263.07 crore in 2022-23 from Rs 19,999.55 crore in 2021-22. Saksham Anganwadis are new generation anganwadis that have better infrastructure and audio-visual aids, powered by clean energy and providing an improved environment for early child development. Under this scheme, two lakh anganwadis will be upgraded.

More Money

Mission Vatsalya, which is meant to provide services for child protection and welfare, has got a considerable share in the Budget. In 2021-22, the allocation for these services was only Rs 829.65 crore. But, in the present Budget, it is Rs 1,472.17 crore. Likewise, the Budget allocated for Mission Sakti has doubled. Under this , for protection and welfare for women, different schemes are implemented viz, 'Sambal' (Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, One-stop Centre, Nari Adalat, Mahila Police Volunteer, Women's Helpline, etc) and 'Samarthya' (Swadhar Ujjawala, widow home, working women hostel, National crèche scheme, National Hub for women etc).

The overall allocation for women and child development has increased from Rs 23,200 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 25,172.28 crore. However, there is a decline in the allocation of funds under the Development Heads in social services of nutrition. Last year, the amount allocated was Rs 15 crore and this year, it is only Rs 9 crore. Efforts to strengthen autonomous bodies like the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD), Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA), National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and National Commission for Women (NCW) are also evident in the union Budget 2022-23 with an increase in allocation to these bodies.

The sex ratio at birth is 899 whereas our SDG target is 950; the target for reducing underweight children is 1.9% but our present status is 33.4%

Widening Gender Parity

But, for the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), the budget has been reduced to almost half from last year. The changing role of different bodies and an effort to strengthen the institutions to address the issues of women and children are reflected in this Budget.

The Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM-POSHAN), earlier known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in Schools, is one of the foremost rights-based centrally-sponsored schemes under the National Food Security Act, 2013. The primary objective of the scheme is to improve the nutritional status of children studying in classes I-VIII in eligible schools.

In the financial year 2022-23, the corpus of Prarambhik Shiksha Kosh is kept at Rs 10,000 crore in PM-POSHAN. However, support for the National Scheme for Incentive to Girl Child for Secondary Education did not find a place in this Budget. This may widen gender parity in secondary education.

Under health, there is an increase in the allocation to manufacture Sera and BCG vaccine for children — from Rs 104.37 crore to Rs 149.59 crore — and also a marginal increase in Reproduction and Child Health under National Rural Health Mission from Rs 3,118.50 crore to Rs 3,174.57 crore.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has got a fair share to produce children films, organise children film festivals and have an exhibition of children films in schools. For all these activities, the estimated budget is Rs 16.71 crore from Rs 1.57 crore.

Falling Short

Overall, the allocation of funds in the union Budget 2022-23 for the activities of women and children looks reasonable compared with last year. In spite of this, when we look at the status of women and children in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) much more need to be done. At present, the sex ratio at birth (ratio of female babies to 1,000 male babies) is 899 whereas our SDG target is 950; the target for reducing underweight children in 1.9% but our present status is 33.4%. The maternal mortality ratio in India is 113 and our target to achieve in SDG by 2030 is 70.

We need to go many long miles to achieve many targets pertaining to women and child development in SDGs. The SDG's 'leave no one behind' principle requires political commitment demonstrated through the provision of efficient delivery of public services and appropriate investments to resource these initiatives. The judicious use of resources allocated and the effective functioning of institutions will play a crucial role in placing our women and children in a better position.

(Dr Vanishree Joseph is Assistant Professor, and Dr NV Madhuri is Head, Centre for Gender Studies and Development, NIRDPR, Hyderabad)

The key to holding a logical argument or debate is to allow oneself to understand the other person's argument

Letters to the Editor

We invite your views and comments at
letters@telanganatoday.com

Hijab row

Supporters of the hijab ban are quick to point out attitude of other western nations where it is disallowed. But it must be noted that India is a different kettle of fish altogether. And one cannot pick and choose. Only the hijab ban followed and everything else ignored is going to create a fear psychosis if it is aimed at one community. Even the courts have cautioned the governments about the mischievous elements who are trying to take advantage. It is not yet clear whether earlier hijab was allowed in class. In case it was, the authorities can be faulted for trying to change established practices without taking the stakeholders into confidence.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

New ammunition

This refers to 'Hijab row: K'taka schools college shut for 3 days' (Feb 9). It is indeed shocking that an issue which could have been handled with deftness and tactics has been allowed to snowball into a major divide between the students. Firstly, what was the need for either the government or the individual college or school to bring an issue to the forefront at a time when educational institutions have reopened after almost two years. The authorities could have called for a meeting with parents before re-opening the institutions and explained to them about the implementation of uniforms instead of abruptly imposing something which needs the cooperation of all. Obviously, it seems the Karnataka government is providing new ammunition for its party to use in election campaigns where communal and religious issues have taken the forefront in upcoming elections.

N Rajagopalan, Hyderabad

Examine, at least

In a recent press conference, KCR set the tone for revamping the Constitution and it looks like the national debate has begun on this issue. There is nothing wrong in discussing and letting the younger generations participate and debate even animatedly, if need be, and decide how they want their future to be. Let there be an intellectual approach with little room to politicise. Let there be sufficient brainstorming so that we may arrive at some unexpected solutions, maybe over a couple of years if not at once. Innovative thinking with changing times is the need of the hour. The aim should be to better the best of what Dr Ambedkar wrote for us which we are following, notwithstanding the fact that we made many changes. Under the guise of sedition, it is not correct to seal the issue and trash it without even examining it. In a democracy, discussion cannot be dubbed as seditious. Let us not oppose just because of preconceived notion of opposing.

D Nagarjuna, Hyderabad

India the hotspot

FINANCIAL TIMES

Economic distress threatens BJP dominance in state polls

Hundreds of millions of voters will cast their ballots starting on Thursday. While analysts said factors from religion to caste would drive voting, the economic scars after the Covid wave posed one of the biggest threats to the BJP. India suffered a 7.3% economic contraction in the first year of the pandemic, with tens of millions falling out of the middle class and into poverty.

Khaleej Times

World's highest railway bridge takes shape in India

Indian Railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has shared pictures of the arch of the world's highest railway bridge on social media. Being built at a height of 359 metres above the riverbed, it is expected to open by Dec. "Splendid pictures of the arch of 1,315m long Chenab bridge, under fast construction in district #Reasi" Jitendra Singh, MoS for science and technology, tweeted.

ASIATIMES

India on track to list largest state-owned life insurer

India is preparing to file the necessary documents for the initial public offering (IPO) of state-owned insurer Life Insurance Corporation (LIC), the world's largest in terms of home-market share at over 64% of total gross written premiums in 2020. The highly anticipated public issue, whose size has not yet been announced, is expected to be floated in March.

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The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Deluge of freebies

Parties vie with each other to woo voters at any cost

BARELY two days before the first phase of polling in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the BJP released their election manifestos. With large-scale unemployment being a pressing issue, the SP has promised to bring in an 'Urban Employment Guarantee Act', while the latter has announced that it will provide at least one job or self-employment opportunity to every household. Freebies figure prominently in the Samajwadi Vachan Patra as well as the BJP's Lok Kalyan Sankalp Patra, even as the Supreme Court recently gave four weeks to the Centre and the Election Commission of India (ECI) to submit their replies on a petition seeking directions to freeze the election symbol or deregister a party that promises or distributes 'irrational' freebies in the run-up to the polls.

Both parties have gone all out to woo the farming community, which is a make-or-break vote bank, especially so in the wake of the year-long agitation against the three farm laws. The SP has promised that all small and marginal farmers owning less than two acres of land will get two bags of DAP fertiliser, five bags of urea, electricity for irrigation and interest-free loans. The other sops include two LPG cylinders every year to BPL families, one litre of petrol to all two-wheeler owners and three litres of petrol and 6 kg of CNG per month to auto-rickshaw drivers. The BJP's manifesto mentions free electricity for irrigation; free scooty for meritorious girl students under Rani Laxmibai Yojana; two crore tablets and smartphones under the Swami Vivekanand Yuva Sashaktikaran Yojana; and two free LPG cylinders (one each on Holi and Diwali) to every beneficiary of PM Ujjwala Yojana.

Late last month, the apex court had expressed concern that the politics of freebies was depriving the elections of a level playing field. However, it's obvious that various political parties cannot resist the temptation of reaching out to voters through allurements. The so-called vision documents are mostly aimed at short-term gains. The onus is on the ECI to frame specific guidelines on poll-time competitive populism to prevent the deluge of sops from vitiating the poll process.

Moving away from Shimla

Review proposal to allow construction in green belt

NO visitor to Shimla is likely to come to the conclusion that the city needs more buildings and lesser green cover, for the capital of Himachal Pradesh has turned into a concrete jungle over the last few decades. The construction of buildings in a haphazard manner — often in deviation from approved plans — is not only an eyesore, it also condemns people to inadequate infrastructure and exposes them to the danger of building collapses. The proposal in the draft Shimla Development Plan (SDP) of setting up of four satellite towns, thus, must be welcomed. There is an urgent need to decongest the city which, due to its prominence as a prime tourist destination and importance as the seat of political power in the state, attracts people in huge numbers.

The population of the state grew from 42.80 lakh in 1981 to 68.65 lakh in 2011, an increase of 60%; however, in the same time frame, the population of Shimla more than doubled, from 80,177 to 1,69,578. People moved to Shimla for better employment opportunities, as also for better educational facilities. An increased demand for housing led to reduction in green cover, haphazard and dangerous construction beyond the municipal limits of the city, and the surge in the number of private and public vehicles led to congestion of the narrow roads and a parking crisis. It makes absolute sense, thus, to set up satellite townships in Ghandal, Naldehra, Fagu and Chamiyana.

The SDP's proposal to allow construction in the green belt areas, however, must be analysed and reviewed by experts rather than politicians and bureaucrats. It was not without reason that the National Green Tribunal (NGT) had banned construction in these areas in 2000, and removing that ban unilaterally would be unwise. The proposal to disregard NGT's directive on the number of floors allowed in a building, too, must be reviewed. This is important in view of the fact that Shimla lies in Zone 4 of the seismic mapping of India, right on the edge of the most seismically-active Zone 5 in the state. Surveys conducted over the years — including one by the United Nations Development Programme — have shown that a very large number of buildings in Shimla are structurally unsafe. While catering to the needs of the increasing population, the SDP must also focus on environment and safety.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. — **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1922

Round Table Conference Negotiations

WE can understand the disappointment expressed by the Secretaries to the Bombay Conference in their letter to Mahatma Gandhi, an extract from which is now published as a part of the correspondence relating to negotiations for a Round Table Conference, even though we may not consider that they are just in their expression of it. They were a body of mediators, interested in the issue undoubtedly, but still holding a position of independence in relation to both the active parties to the present controversy, and striving for a settlement honourable to both and to the country generally; and it could not but be a matter of regret to them that after having met with an unexpected rebuff from one party, they now received what they, at any rate, appear to have construed into a similar rebuff from the other. Where we are unable to appreciate their position is when they convey the impression by the form of words employed by them that it is Mahatma Gandhi's letter to the Viceroy that is primarily, if not principally, responsible for their realising "the utter futility of their labours to bring about a peaceful settlement." As a matter of fact, the realisation should have been due far more largely to the letter received by them from the Private Secretary to the Viceroy than to any action taken by Gandhi, even though that action might not be correct. Gandhi had never made a secret of his desire for peace on certain conditions, which he had specified and in regard to which he had shown himself ready to enter into a discussion. The Private Secretary's letter gave no indication of such readiness on the part of His Excellency or the Government. It told the Secretaries that their resolutions were not a response to the sentiments which the Viceroy had expressed at Calcutta, and that his Excellency could not discover in them the basis for a profitable discussion at a Round Table Conference.

Canada acting up

Govt should take steps to show that disdain for Indian democracy is unacceptable

VIVEK KATJU
EX-SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

STALLING: Canada is not conducting itself in keeping with internationally expected norms while considering visa applications. REUTERS

THE Canadian approach towards former Indian officials who apply for tourist or other short-term stay visas to visit Canada is becoming increasingly intrusive and obnoxious. This process began around 2010 with former Indian military and paramilitary personnel, but now covers others, including former intelligence officials, and, most strangely, former diplomats, some of whom have served in Indian missions in Canada. While it is the sovereign right of any state to allow or deny entry to foreigners, it is equally expected of responsible countries, especially democratic, to conduct themselves in keeping with internationally expected norms while considering visa applications. This Canada is not doing. And, the fact that millions, some of them illegally, wish to enter Canada is no justification for becoming intrusive or behaving with discourtesy.

All countries, even those in which tourism is an important part of the economy, seek to ensure that foreigners with criminal records or those not capable of sustaining themselves do not enter the country. Advanced countries also scrutinise visa applicants to deny entry to those who, in their view, are likely to stay on illegally in the country after the expiry of their visas. These are reasonable precautions, though they are irksome for visa applicants. However, it is one thing to seek information that is entirely personal and whose disclosure does not violate the applicant's country's laws and rules and quite another when the applicant is asked to give information which is confidential. This is what Canada has been asking of former Indian security officials for over a decade and now this is being extended to other retired officials too.

> Bringing parity to the strength of Indian and Canadian representations, reducing defence-to-defence ties and limiting political-level contacts can be some measures.

It is true that Canada has a large and growing Indian diaspora which has economically prospered and has done very well politically. Indeed, Canadians of Indian origin have been and are members of the Canadian Parliament and cabinet ministers too. One Indian-origin political leader has also served as a Premier of a Canadian province. This shows that Canadian citizens of Indian origin are gaining political heft and that Canadian society and polity are partly shedding their Caucasian-centric identity. At the same time, Canada's acceptance of Indian talent, in the area of high technology and medicine, for instance, is to its advantage. This is an aspect which should not be overlooked by Indian elites or the government.

A few months ago, a former Indian High Commissioner applied for a tourist visa to visit his child who lives in Canada. He was surprised to get a communication from a Canadian representative in India requiring him to give details of all his assignments as a member of the Indian Foreign Service from the time he joined to his retirement. Normally, if a former ambassador to a country wishes to visit it, he is given a visa without any fuss and on a priority basis. This is a basic diplomatic courtesy. The demand was all the more surprising, for there is little doubt that Canada's foreign ministry would have made enquiries about the Indian diplomat's antecedents prior to accepting him as India's High Commissioner in Ottawa.

A few years ago, a senior Indian intelligence official who had served in the Indian Mission in Canada and who subsequently liaised with Canadian intelligence was kept waiting for a tourist visa for months. Finally, the Canadian intelligence intervened and he was given only a 10-day visa!

Some time ago, a retired Indian Army officer who had earlier visited the country on a number of occasions and had an active visa was humiliated when he reached Canada. He was interrogated on arrival; his passport was seized and he was told that his case of stay would be considered by an immigration board.

In addition to these cases, Canada is now making detailed and unprecedented enquiries about Indian diplomats posted there. Consequently, postings of Indian diplomats are getting delayed. Normally, such delays occur only between countries which have adversarial relations.

Canada has targeted former Pakistani defence officers too. Some years back, a Canadian university which sponsored a Track 2 process of Indian and Pakistani retired defence, intelligence officers, diplomats and academics decided to hold a meeting in Canada (normally these meetings took place in a South-East Asian country) but could not do so. The Indian participants in the Track 2 process, of which I was one, were told that Canadian authorities had not agreed to give visas to retired army officers from Pakistan.

Now it is for Pakistan to decide how it wishes to handle Canadian intrusive policies on visas. As far as India is concerned, it has to be conscious that its armed and civil services adhere to the democratic traditions of this country. It should therefore be completely unacceptable that its retired personnel are asked to furnish information about their careers, some of which is classified. The only cogent reason appears to be that all this information is sought to ascertain that they have not been involved in human rights violations during their careers on the basis of their postings. This would especially apply to defence personnel in sensitive areas. Meanwhile, Canada's attitude on Khalistan for all its protestations of support for India's unity is soft and inadequately responsive.

During all these years, India has not taken a strong position on this issue. The time has come to do so, for it is not a matter of individuals and their convenience but of the honour of our defence and civil services. Instructions should be given to all that there should be no response to intrusive Canadian questions. India needs to take a set of measures to show that Canada's disdain for Indian democracy is unacceptable; certainly, Canada applies a different yardstick for western democratic countries. These steps can include bringing parity to the strength of Indian and Canadian representations, reducing, if not freezing, defence-to-defence ties and also limiting political-level contacts. The continuing laissez faire Indian approach is no longer tenable, especially for a government that takes pride in its nationalistic credentials.

Show of snow on hills

RAAJA BHASIN

THE cold is still the same. If anything, it seems icier with advancing age. The snow is still the same, except for moments that climate change and other factors decide to poke their noses. Apart from the tourists who go into raptures and follow with loud tirades against the cold, one cannot but wonder at the silence after a good snowfall. A long time ago, it was amongst the noisiest times of the year. The snow could not muffle the cries, the shouts and the laughter of children sledging down the slopes.

The three sisters next door had the Rolls Royce of sledges. All of us stood respectfully aside when it emerged for the first run of winter. It was a sledge worth drooling over. It could have had a liveried chauffeur. It was the biggest sledge around and could seat three, maybe four at a pinch. If one did not have to concentrate for dear life on that mad rush down the snow-covered slope that lay just outside the gate, one could wave graciously at snow-draped trees, icicles and mournful monkeys.

As the temperature dropped, clouds gathered and the first snowfall of the season was forecast, an assortment of vehicles would emerge from dusty stores, cupboards and other unseen corners. There was my mid-range sledge of sorts. Smoothened slats that may have come from a discarded fruit crate served as a seat, narrow planks acted as runners. It had cost all of Rs 5 and was a part of the winter accessories that the carpenter shops stocked in Lakkar Bazaar. The bow, if it could be called that, had a loop of rope to tug and hopefully turn the sledge in the desired direction. Other children arrived with upturned wooden bathing or chopping boards.

Our own sizes were somewhat in proportion to that of what we rode. There were some, like me, who were just a couple of feet off the ground and if the snow lay too high, I could not see over the top.

Preparations involved the entire household. My mother would place a few sets of clothing out – knowing that several would be soaked and others needed as the day went. A stand was placed before the fire to dry each lot as it was removed and another pair of trousers pulled hurriedly on before running out again. Waterproof clothing, as it exists today, was still a thing of the future then.

All over the hills, wherever there was a slope and where children could reach, there was a trail for racing down and of sledges being dragged back up. In places, preparations were far more elaborate. Just across, on another slope, children bigger than us had a reconnaissance team that would go out at daybreak to check if there were any patches where the snow had melted. If an erring blob of tarmac was sighted, a bucket of water was hurriedly poured over it with the hope that it would freeze over before the sledging began and woe betide the hapless pedestrian who thought that the snow had melted.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Blaming Nehru

Refer to 'PM says Nehru delayed Goa's liberation, was concerned about global image'; it has been more than 50 years since Nehru died, and yet he is blamed for all the ills that we are now faced with. It is sad he is not spared even after his death. The present government has been in power for nearly seven years and is on the threshold of completing its second term in power. It is time it overcame the habit of delving into the past and blaming an earlier leadership. This government came to power as the voters felt they deserved a change for the better. It should focus on what matters now and help improve the welfare of millions who put their trust in it and cast their votes.

HN RAMAKRISHNA, BENGALURU

Ram Rahim's furlough

The politically motivated furlough to rape and murder convict Gurmeet Ram Rahim of Dera Sacha Sauda is sans morality and ethics, though it may be legally correct. Umpteen convicts are languishing in prisons even after completing their jail terms, but here exceptional preferential treatment reminds one of the adage, 'Some are more equal than others.' Truly, the politicians of all hues can stoop low and employ every dirty trick for the sake of garnering votes. '*Iss daur-e-siyasat ka itna sa fasana hai, basti bhi jalani hai, matam bhi manana hai.*'

BAKHSHI GURPRIT SINGH, JALANDHAR

Not real issues

Refer to 'Culture of hate'; the editorial appeared on the day the PM's speech on the President's address was carried by the newspapers. He accused the Congress of separatism and inciting regionalism. The hijab controversy, Dharam Sansad, attack on Owaisi, attack on churches, voting pattern of 80:20 in Uttar Pradesh, calling social and religious communities as anti-national and many other examples point the finger at the ruling party. Rather than making unemployment, under-employment, inflation and other such topics issues, the majority community is being made to feel insecure by the so-called threats from minorities to win majority votes. The most unfortunate fact is that majority of voters, despite knowing these antics, get influenced by such insecurities.

MANMOHAN SINGH, KHARAR

Melodious voice lost

I was jolted and pained to hear about the demise of Lata Mangeshkar. Her death sent shock waves not only across the country, but also globally. She has been a matchless singer and none could reach her heights. There was a strange magic in her voice that would mesmerise the listeners and leave them spellbound. I am a fan and often sing her songs whenever I am in a pensive mood.

BANSI RAM RAHUL, GARHSHANKAR

Golden era ends

'*Swar samaragni Lataji nahin rahin/Bharat ki Kokila kahin gum ho gayi/Aandhi me deep jalane wali aur/Paani mein aag lagane wali/Lataji kahin chali gayee/Kehti thi marna teri gali mein/Jeena teri gali mein/Phir humko chhod kar kyon chali gayee?*' The legendary Lata was a person of conviction. After winning four Filmfare Awards, she announced in 1971 not to accept any more awards so as to promote fresh talent. Her contemporary actors Ashok Kumar, Dev Anand, Nargis, Madhubala, Meena Kumari and Nutan passed away during the past five decades or so. Thespian Dilip Kumar died last year. With Lata's death, a golden era has come to an end. Rest in peace, Lataji.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Doubling farmers' income

Apropos of 'Goal of doubling farmers' income still elusive', increased allocation in certain areas and decrease in other schemes is not going to help farmers. Diversification in agriculture can only be successful if the government supports the farmers through suitable policies. For instance, zero-budget natural farming is to be popularised by approaching them with incentives and assured marketing with insurance cover in case of loss due to natural calamities. A national farmers' database can help in identifying suitability for different crops and help government agencies to procure and supply seeds, fertilisers and chemicals to needy farmers in time. The digital divide in urban and rural areas can be overcome by providing a computer with Internet at least with the village head. FPOs should be strengthened. To ensure that food items reach the needy, a systematic price chain has to be developed.

DARSHAN SINGH BHATHAL, NANGAL

Kudos to team India

The Under-19 cricket team of India deserves special praise and pat for lifting the prestigious U-19 cricket World Cup. This is for the fifth time that our youngsters have achieved this feat. Keep it up. Our country has high hopes from you.

DIVENDER GUPTA, SOLAN

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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Binging on Bhabha, Sarabhai and *Bhai*

DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

THE name Vikram aroused much curiosity among the younger generation of Indians during the launch of the lunar mission, Chandrayaan-2, in September 2019. The module that was supposed to land on the lunar surface was named after the space agency's founder, Vikram Sarabhai. Another reason for the instant recall of the surname 'Sarabhai' is a popular sitcom, *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai,* which, of course, has no connection with the space scientist. Now, for the first time, Indians can see some glimpses of the life of Vikram Sarabhai on the small screen.

The web series, *Rocket Boys,* is not a biopic but a peek into the turning points in the lives of Sarabhai and his mentor Homi Jehangir Bhabha. It is an attempt to bring out the curious inter-twining of India's most successful scientific programmes — space and nuclear — and some behind-the-scene stories. However, since we live in the era of post-truth and twisted history, it is better to raise some red flags.

The stage for science-led industrialisation was set before the Independence in the work of the National Planning Committee chaired by Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated an alliance between science and politics. After Independence, this resulted in the development of government research laboratories and concentration of power in the hands of a few scientists who headed scientific departments while working closely with Nehru. Prominent in this group were Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, Homi Bhabha, and later Vikram Sarabhai. Bhabha used to address the Prime Minister as *Bhai* — a sort of bromance, also seen in *Rocket Boys*.

There were other equally or more eminent scientists but they were not part of this club, like CV Raman, Meghnad Saha and Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya. But no scientist by the name of Mehdi Raza existed — as depicted in *Rocket Boys.* This character seems to be inspired by that of Saha, who founded the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Kolkata. He joined politics post Independence and became a vocal critic of Nehru and Bhabha in the Lok Sabha. The Dorabji Tata Trust, which supported Saha's research in its initial years, later funded Bhabha to establish the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Mumbai.

The similarity between Saha and the fictitious Mehdi Raza ends here and fiction takes over. Raza appears in the company of Nehru at the inauguration of the first nuclear reactor, Apsara. Bhabha and Raza then share a bottle of whiskey, sitting right in the swimming pool in which the reactor had gone critical a few hours ago. In reality, Apsara achieved criticality on August 4, 1956, while Saha had passed away in February that year. Such dramatised mix-up of timelines and personalities apart, the intense rivalry among different research groups for available resources has been captured to some extent.

> Stories of scientists and scientific development need to be told and retold as and when new material becomes available. Such retelling helps us examine the historical characters in a new light. *Rocket Boys* is not a biopic but a peek into the turning points in the lives of Vikram Sarabhai and his mentor Homi Bhabha. It attempts to bring out the intertwining of India's most successful scientific programmes.

INTENSE RIVALRY: Science projects in the 1960s were competing for the limited resources. FILE PHOTO

The decade of the 1960s was a period of turmoil with two wars, famines, food shortages, changing geopolitical equations and leadership changes in India in quick succession. It was also the period when scientific activity reached its zenith — new nuclear reactors were built, a rocket-launching station became operational at Thumba, the Green Revolution unfolded and the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur came up. All these projects were competing for limited resources and scientific leaders clashed to secure their own turfs and institutes.

Like Saha's Nuclear Physics Institute in Kolkata, CV Raman too had developed his centre — the Raman Research Institute in Bangalore. The speed at which government resources flowed to the laboratories of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) due to Bhatnagar's influence on Nehru made Raman caustically remark that it was a result of the 'Nehru-Bhatnagar effect' (a la Raman Effect). The Physical Research Laboratory that Sarabhai founded in Ahmedabad started as a private initiative but managed to get grants from the Department of Atomic Energy for the space programme.

In the initial years, resource crunch, particularly that of foreign exchange, forced scientists working in all these institutes to fabricate instruments on their own, sometimes from parts procured from war-surplus depots and scrap markets. Portraying such efforts as a sort of *jugaad* is a great disservice to their ingenuity and hard work.

The stories of competition and rivalry in building India's nuclear and space programmes have been well documented using archival material and oral history by scholars like Robert S Anderson, Indira Chowdhury, MV Ramana and Jahnavi Phalkey as well as in recent books penned by former scientists of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

Rocket Boys scores over them when it comes to the human side of Bhabha and Sarabhai. Bhabha's relationship with Phiroza 'Pipsy' Wadia, which was perhaps known only to a close circle of their contemporaries, comes alive in *Rocket Boys,* though details of it as shown remain suspect. The love triangle of Vikram, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Kamla Chowdhry has been portrayed somewhat sensitively and may have been done so with the inputs and approval of Sarabhai's children Mallika and Kartikeya.

Stories of scientists and scientific development need to be told and retold as and when new material becomes available. Such retelling helps us examine historical characters in a new light.

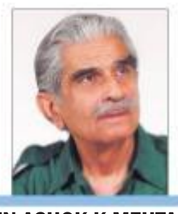
A short biography of particle physicist Bibha Chowdhuri, penned by historian Rajinder Singh in 2018, revealed how her work was ignored though she had worked with both Bhabha and Sarabhai as well as in the laboratory of Nobel laureate PMS Blackett. After this book, TIFR made amends by recognising her work officially three decades after her death.

A newly discovered dwarf star was also named after her. Chinmay Tumbe's essay on Kamla Chowdhry brought out her role as the real builder of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A), shrugging off the stereotypical image of being 'the other woman' in Sarabhai's life.

Some years back, *Hidden Figures*, a movie based on the life of the first African-American female engineer at NASA, Mary W Jackson, caught national attention in America and the space agency named its headquarter building after her in recognition of her contributions.

So, let the show go on.

Two months after Rawat's death, India awaits CDS



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

> In any case, the new CDS, most probably Naravane, must be appointed to end all unnecessary speculation. With an officiating incumbent in place for two months, which might extend to five months, the buzz and urgency normally attached to the CDS office in the basement of South Block has disappeared. The momentum of the reforms process must be revived to preserve Gen Rawat's legacy.

THE government posthumously honoured Gen Bipin Rawat, the country's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and a soldiers' General who conceptualised the path-breaking higher defence apparatus while restructuring combat commands, with the Padma Vibhushan, the country's second highest award, on Republic Day. Gen Rawat was killed in a helicopter accident on December 8, 2021, while on duty. His farewell to arms and last rites were of an unprecedented high order in the honour, reverence and dignity bestowed on him.

The entire panoply of grief and ceremony was impromptu as no SOP has been devised for death in harness of the CDS. Rawat was celebrated as a national hero in death that has no parallel in post-Independence history. President RN Kovind lauded him in his Republic Day eve speech, again a first for any soldier. Awarding the Padma Vibhushan, the unique farewell and the special mention in the President's speech comprised the greatest collective tribute and recognition ever to a soldier. Prime Minister Narendra Modi too mentioned Rawat in his Lok Sabha speech on Monday.

The Padma series was instituted in 1954 with Padma Vibhushan given for 'exceptional and distinguished service of high order in any field' and Padma Bhushan for 'distinguished service of high order…' Altogether, 325 Padma Vibhushans and 1,287 Padma Bhushans have been awarded. Rawat was the sixth among service chiefs, the only one posthumously to receive the Padma Vibhushan. Others are Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh (later first and only Marshal of the Air Force) and Gen JN Chaudhury, both chiefs of their service in the 1965 war; Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, Gen Sam Manekshaw (later Field Marshal) and Admiral SM Nanda — service chiefs in the 1971 war. Air Chief Marshal OP Mehra was given the award in 1977. Except for OP Mehra, the others won the award in war.

UNCERTAINTY: Naming the new CDS after Gen Rawat's death is getting delayed. FILE PHOTO

One notch lower is Padma Bhushan that was given to Lieutenant Generals and equivalent rank in the other two services. The recipients are Lt Gens Harbaksh Singh, PO Dunn, JS Dhillon, KS Katoch and Air Marshal PC Lal in the 1965 war. Awarded for the 1971 war are Lt Gens JS Aurora, KP Candeth, TN Raina, GG Bewoor, Inderjit Gill, Sagat Singh, Sartaj Singh and Air Marshals HC Dewan and MM Engineer from the IAF.

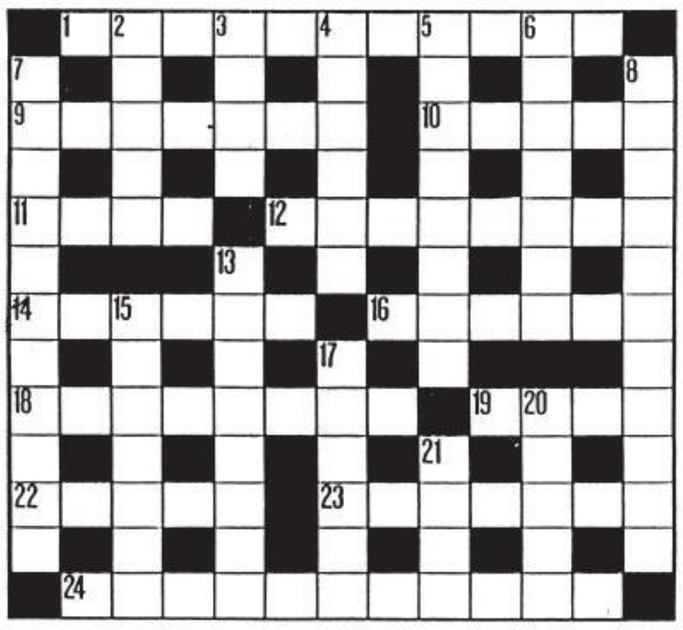
After 1972, three other Lieutenant Generals were awarded the Padma Bhushan: Adi Sethna (1983), ML Chhibber (1986) and Satish Nambiar (2009) for distinguished service in peacetime. The only person to be awarded both Padma Vibhushan and Padma Bhushan was PC Lal. Ninety eight per cent of the awards were given in war and were supposed to have been discontinued, replaced with PVSM.

Only two service chiefs have died in harness: Army Chief Gen Bipin Joshi and Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Lakshman Katre. Earlier, when a service chief passed away, minimal ceremony attended his funeral as per rules and conventions. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was given a very shabby farewell to arms in Wellington. In the Warrant of Precedence, bureaucracy had placed the Field Marshal along with service chiefs at number 12 along with other service chiefs. Similarly, the CDS is also in the same slot whereas the Cabinet Secretary is at number 11 in the ranking. This gives a veneer of civil service ascendency over the military. The then President APJ Abdul Kalam, on a visit to Staff College, Wellington, had carried a cheque of Rs 1 crore as arrears of pension for Manekshaw when he was in hospital. Tongue in cheek, he told the President: "I hope the cheque doesn't bounce," so suspicious was he of the bureaucracy.

Having shown outstanding alacrity in appointing and naming Rawat as the CDS in 2019, the government has displayed surprising lethargy in naming his successor. The urgency that Rawat displayed in accomplishing his charter is not reflected any more in the MoD and the PMO. All that the government has done is to appoint Army Chief Gen MM Naravane, who is to retire in April, as the officiating CDS in a stop-gap measure. More than two months have passed without the selection of Rawat's successor. Two Lieutenant Generals in the queue to become the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) on Rawat's death superannuated on January 31 and another will retire in March. It is clear that the new Vice COAS, Lt Gen Manoj Pande, who was tipped to succeed Naravane, will do so. It is intriguing why the government has chosen to wait it out till April when Naravane retires, leaving the post of CDS vacant for nearly five months. If it is for maintaining the line of succession for COAS, it showed little concern when it appointed Rawat as the Army Chief, superseding two senior Generals. Or is it that the government is having second thoughts on the implementation of theaterisation at present, given that China-Pakistan collusion has become real and the IAF and the Navy are not happy with the Rawat blueprint?

In any case, the new CDS, most probably Naravane, must be appointed to end unnecessary speculation. With an officiating incumbent in place for two months, which might extend to five months, the buzz and urgency normally attached to the CDS office in the basement of South Block has disappeared. The momentum of the reforms process must be revived to preserve Gen Rawat's legacy.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Hard work (5,6)
9 To raise in status (7)
10 Muscular strength (5)
11 Impress deeply (4)
12 Australian city (8)
14 Useless (6)
16 Unfasten and remove (6)
18 Customary (8)
19 Design (4)
22 Confused fight (5)
23 Quizzically (7)
24 Persuasion by moral pressure (3-8)

DOWN
2 Reasoned argument (5)
3 An Arabian sultanate (4)
4 Covetous (6)
5 Encourage (8)
6 Staying power (7)
7 Broadly accurate method (4,2,5)
8 Surreptitious (11)
13 To abuse (3-5)
15 Pipelike (7)
17 Highly seasoned sausage (6)
20 First Soviet premier (5)
21 Satirical sketch (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Radish, 4 Smash hit, 9 Mishap, 10 Skeleton, 12 Duly, 13 Banal, 14 Cell, 17 Antipathetic, 20 Take pleasure, 23 Roar, 24 Blunt, 25 Firm, 28 Long jump, 29 Option, 30 Congress, 31 Excess.
Down: 1 Remedial, 2 Desolate, 3 Sway, 5 Make a beeline, 6 Silk, 7 Hither, 8 Tingle, 11 Fan the flames, 15 Spray, 16 Vital, 18 Fugitive, 19 Terminus, 21 Frolic, 22 Cannon, 26 Ajar, 27 Apex.

SU DO KU

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

EASY

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 10, 2022, THURSDAY

Vikrami Samvat	2078
Shaka Samvat	1943
Magh Shaka	21
Magh Parvishte	28
Hijari	1443

- Shukla Paksha Tithi 9, up to 11.09 am
- Indra Yoga up to 6.49 pm
- Rohini Nakshatra up to 3.32 am
- Moon in Taurus sign
- Gupt Navratre ended

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 18:07 HRS
SUNRISE: FRIDAY 07:06 HRS

Sunny, Partly Cloudy, Cloudy, Rainy, Foggy

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	20	10
New Delhi	22	09
Amritsar	20	06
Bathinda	20	08
Jalandhar	20	08
Ludhiana	20	09
Bhiwani	22	09
Hisar	22	10
Sirsa	21	10
Dharamsala	17	04
Manali	08	–01
Shimla	12	01
Srinagar	12	–02
Jammu	23	08
Kargil	–01	–12
Leh	–02	–14
Dehradun	20	06
Mussoorie	11	01

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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PROFILE

Mahua Moitra: The elite anarchist

Mahua Moitra, the self-anointed ambassador of woke liberals, has a harrowingly dubious history of Hinduphobia (fear of Hindus) and Hindumisia (hatred of Hindus), so to speak.

OPINION

YUVRAJ POKHARNA

On February 2, Mahua Moitra, the Trinamool Congress MP, slammed the government, saying that she "vehemently" disagrees with the President's assessment of the state of the union in India. "The President, early on in his address, speaks about freedom fighters who secured India's rights. He speaks of Gurudev Tegh Bahadur... Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, but this is just lip service. In reality, recalling India's past, a past of decency, plurality, (and) secularism, makes this government very insecure," Moitra conveyed."

Mahua Moitra, the self-anointed ambassador of woke liberals, has a harrowingly dubious history of Hinduphobia (fear of Hindus) and Hindumisia (hatred of Hindus), so to speak. Unbeknownst to the layperson, Moitra has had a clear mandate to slam the Central Government and shame Hindus in any way she can. It's almost a tragic comedy that the words "plural" and "secular" are being used to refer to India's past because the silent majority bears witness to these weapons of crime which have been conveniently and systematically used by the state against the Hindus, but that is a separate debate. Rabindranath Tagore once remarked, "Christianity and Islam have a distinct enmity against all other religions. They are not satisfied with observing their own religions but are determined to destroy all other religions. The only way to make peace with them is to embrace their religions." If this remark, as per the "woke" school of thought of Mahua, makes Tagore a (purported) bigot and communal, then she must have the gumption to denounce and debase him too. This is the tragedy of our country. Possibly, India's decency in the past was well maintained when Mahua Moitra, in utter exasperation, showed the middle finger to Arnab Goswami, the anchor of a TV debate on national television, or when she assaulted a lady constable, or when she called India the "Susu Potty Republic". It won't be difficult for her to answer which of her aforementioned acts accurately projects India's decency in the past, according to her inquisitiveness as to "What kind of India do we want? What is our idea of India that we are willing to stand up for, fight for, be abused for, get jailed for? "

Moments before setting the stage of her speech and urging the government to be impartial against all religions, she tweeted: "Am speaking this evening in Lok Sabha on the President's Address. Just wanted to give early heads up to BJP to get heckler team ready & read up on imaginary points of order. Drink some *gaumutra* shots too."

It is unnecessary to elucidate that the hate directed at *gaumutra* reeks of hate for Hindus.

It is also worth noting that this is not a one-off incident where Mahua has used *gaumutra* as a pejorative term to berate and affront Hindus. Therefore, Mahua has to display her secular credentials that amount to anti-Hindu jibes, effectively mocking everything that is dear to Hindus.

In terms of development, the TMC should be the last party to talk. Never have vote banks been nurtured so assiduously that the allocation of funds for minority institutions has been more than the funds for higher education, or curtailing the time duration allotted to the immersion of Durga Mata idol to make way for the Muharram procession, or the appointment of a Muslim on the Tarakeswar temple board to monthly stipends to thousands of imams and muezzins. This list is endless. In fact, the party that Mahua represents has openly accepted Muslims as being a vote bank while comparing them to milch cows. Yet, Moitra has the gall to accuse others of being partial to particular segments.

Not long ago, her party chief, Mamata Banerjee, took umbrage at the chanting of "*Jai Shri Ram*" slogans. Banerjee, who was sharing the stage with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Kolkata's Victoria Memorial for Netaji's birth anniversary celebrations, lamented being "disrespected" because she could not stand the slogans of "*Jai Shri Ram*," "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*," etc. The glaring hypocrisy is such that, at an event in 2018, Mamata Banerjee conveniently chanted the Islamic verse "*La ilaha illallah Muhammadarrasullah*", but to her, "*Jai Shri Ram*" is insulting. While "Jai Shree Ram" means victory to Lord Ram, "La ilaha illaallah" precisely means there is no god but Allah. The chant denies the existence of other faiths and gods entirely, and such is the inherent and exclusivist nature of Abrahamic cults like Islam and Christianity. *Prabhu Ram* unites *Bharat* across the length and breath of time. We are all his successors, and it is evident that nothing is communal in the chant.

Trinamool Congress (TMC) Lok Sabha MP Mahua Moitra speaks in the Lower House during the Budget Session of Parliament, in New Delhi. ANI

It is also worth noting that this is not a one-off incident where Mahua has used gaumutra as a pejorative term to berate and affront Hindus.

In Moitra's Tweet, it is unnecessary to elucidate that the hate directed at Gaumutra reeks of hate for Hindus.

If Mahua's constant *gaumutra* slurs and traducing of the majority for everything invariably isn't enough to reflect her innate scorn for Hindus, she also referred to the Brahmins, as "*Chotiwala Rakshasa*," which accurately translates to "braided monsters."

Belying to popular perception, she is no ally to the feminist brigade in the country either.

For her political gains, Mahua celebrated women-centric abuses hurled at her political opponent. Instead of strictly condemning the words, Mahua thought the abuse was "priceless." A shame that many swear words still have their roots in oppressive patriarchy, and that their use and celebration over time has only encouraged casual sexism and misogyny.

Next, referring to the US-based "Freedom House 2021" report that declared India's freedom status from "free" to "partly free" with a score of 67 (under Modi), "India remains one of the most dangerous places globally for journalists today," she added. This is the same report that virulently claims that the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir had enjoyed "substantial autonomy until the abrogation of Article 370, which put it under direct control of the Indian Government." It also calls it "Indian Kashmir" and legitimises Pakistani Kashmir. A close analysis of the report clearly reveals that Freedom House's grading of India is based on a fallacious narrative that garners global sympathy while shielding the harsh realities on the ground. This is in line with the same group that says that "India has become intolerant",

Mahua's concern for the media is a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black. Mahua's maiden speech in Parliament, quoting from a poster that was once sold at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gift shop, listing 12 "early warning signs of fascism," earned her the low-hanging "woke star" tag. Along with this, her fashionable way of peppering her language with words like "patriarchy" and "privilege" often enough, favoured her as an "intellectual". However, it was later claimed that she had plagiarised her speech idea from a January 2017 article by Martin Longman on washingtonmonthly.com, replacing Trump with Modi and adding her own words to fit the Indian context.

Still, as the mirage of her fiery stance against the government continues unabated, she continues with a generous pumping of fake news and baseless allegations of concocted hypotheses.

While accusing the ruling government of "altering history", she claimed that the government had removed Urdu and imposed Hindi as the first and official language of Jammu and Kashmir. When the truth is, Urdu was never replaced with any language, but Hindi, English, Dogri, and Kashmiri were added as the official languages in J&K. To be more specific, Urdu language was imposed on the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

For this, Parliament must ask Mahua to apologise for spreading false narratives in the holy house of the world's largest democracy.

India, in 2022, sees through and rejects this fake news and selective outrage more fervently than before. This India is now awake, and the fake narratives of the likes of Mahua Moitra will be challenged at every turn.

In the end, I would advise the left-liberals to do better when choosing their role models because the greatest trick that the devil has ever pulled was convincing the world that he didn't exist.

PERSPECTIVE
HYPOCRISY EXPOSED

IT'S KARMA-TIME FOR JUSTIN TRUDEAU

Talk about karma. Talk about just deserts. Indians can feel justifiably happy at what is happening with Canada's Justin Trudeau—the gentleman one of whose claims to fame in India was dancing on stage in a Bollywood attire during an embassy party in New Delhi. His other claim to fame, rather "infame", was his support for the farmers' protests that hounded Delhi-NCR for over a year. Some of the comments he made were: "Canada will always stand up for the right of peaceful protest and human rights"; "Canada will always stand up for the right of peaceful protest anywhere around the world. We are pleased to see moves towards de-escalation and dialogue." And this when the protests were anything but peaceful, as the violence unleashed by the protesters in the national capital and the desecration of a national monument on Republic Day showed. Trudeau was single-handedly responsible for the deterioration in India-Canada relations by unnecessarily poking his nose into the internal matters of a sovereign nation and then reiterating his stand—and all because of his own domestic compulsions of wooing a sizeable number of Sikh voters ahead of elections.

He returned to power, but again as a minority government, which automatically put a question mark on the extent of public support that he enjoyed. And this lack of support is now manifest, with a large section of people—the protest has extended from being confined to Sikh truckers—making their unhappiness with his vaccine mandate, as well as his government, apparent, by peacefully protesting against him.

Sitting in India, where vaccination coverage is humongous, primarily because of the push coming from a strong government, it may not be possible to understand how intense some of these anti-vaccine movements can be in the West. Obviously, it is strong enough to stall an even otherwise fragile government, to send the Prime Minister into hiding, and for the national capital to declare emergency and mull calling in the military. In a strong speech in Parliament, Trudeau said this week, "Individuals are trying to blockade our economy, our democracy and our fellow citizens' daily lives, it has to stop." This is exactly what the Indian government was saying all through the farm protests, that the protesters did not have the right to disrupt people's lives and livelihoods, that they were allowed to protest but at a designated place. Instead, the protesters made the matter international with the help of their ecosystem abroad, mostly in Canada, and were egged on by cheerleaders of different hues, with Justin Trudeau and his colleagues being in the forefront. But now that he is himself facing similar protests, he is refusing to have even a dialogue with the protesters. Contrast this with the innumerable rounds of talks that the Centre held with the farm protesters in India and the willingness it showed to discuss the three farm laws clause by clause and introduce amendments. It is a different matter that the protesters were adamant that they would not consider anything short of a repeal of the farm laws. Talks broke down only after the mayhem unleashed by many of these protesters on 26 January 2021. In fact, even on that fateful day, the government did not use excessive force. It was the police that sustained the maximum injuries, not the people who were running amok in Delhi. Looking at Trudeau's response to the crisis in Canada it is obvious that he lacks the maturity to run a government. What happened to outreach, to dialogue? All that the world is hearing are threats, warnings and accusations.

Amid this, one of the most interesting responses has come from Trudeau's political "friend", NDP's Jagmeet Singh, who tweeted on Tuesday, "The spread of Trumpism into Canada must be stopped. Foreign actors and money cannot be allowed to sow division in Canada. US interference from the extreme right and millions of dollars via anonymous foreign sources must be shut down." That's quite a statement from a man who is guilty of providing support to the farmers' movement in India. He was one of the main persons behind internationalizing the farmers' protest and had roped in celebrities to attack the Indian government. Worse, he is a known Khalistan supporter. There is no reason to believe that he does not know that the Khalistan movement is a terrorist movement. He also must have known that the Khalistanis were trying to infiltrate the farmers' protests in Delhi. In spite of that, he was meddling in the internal affairs of India. In fact, Trudeau too has been seen with known Khalistanis.

The hypocrisy of these two worthies now stands exposed, also their intolerance to opposing views. Let's just say that they have a long way to go before they learn how to be mature and competent politicians and administrators.

JOYEETA BASU

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IN COURT

Encroachment on public land cannot be retained citing right to shelter: Gujarat High Court

ANALYSIS

SANJEEV SIROHI

While dismissing a PIL that was seeking to restrain the Railway authority from evicting slum dwellers until rehabilitation, the Gujarat High Court in an extremely commendable, courageous, cogent, composed and convincing judgment titled Bandhkaam Mazdoor Sanghathan vs State of Gujarat in R/Writ Petition (PIL) No. 59 of 2021 delivered on February 1, 2022 has minced just no words in holding that the right to shelter is not a ground to continue encroachment on a public land. Those who encroach on public land must pay heed to what the Gujarat High Court has held in this leading case. This will be in their own best interest if they do so.

To start with, this learned, laudable, landmark and latest judgment authored by Justice Ashutosh J Shastri for a Bench of Gujarat High Court comprising of himself and Chief Justice Aravind Kumar lays bare in para 2 that, "Petitioner claims to be a Trade Union registered under the provisions of Indian Trade Unions Act, works for the protection of human rights, legal rights and socio-economic welfare of the workers engaged in the construction industry, brick manufacturing process etc. It has been asserted that by way of this petition, the petitioner – Union is espousing the cause of slum dwellers in question, who are mostly poor workers and are residing at J.P. Ni Chali slum for about three decades. The place at which the workers are stated to have been residing is at Jayantilal Pranlal ni Chali (for short J.P. Ni Chali) at Sabarmati area, near Railway Bridge in Ahmedabad. It has been asserted that this petition is filed for rehabilitation of more than 318 poor landless, shelter-less slum dwellers in the aforementioned Chali, popularly known as J.P. Ni Chali at Sabarmati who are not being provided any alternative accommodation as per various State Government Policies.

2.1. It has been further stated in the petition that in the year 1991, Slums/Chali of J.P. Ni Chali set up at Sabarmati area near Ahmedabad came in existence by intra-State migrants from different districts of State of Gujarat. Upto year 2021, said Chali is comprising of 68-70 houses having population of more than 350 slum dwellers who are mainly daily rated employees or earning on daily basis. Since these slum dwellers are in possession they are entitled to have the benefit of the policy floated by the State of Gujarat known as 'Rehabilitation and Re-development of the Slums 2010' and detailed policy has been formulated in the name of 'Gujarat Slum Rehabilitation Policy 2013. One Mukhya Mantri GRUH (Gujarat Rural Urban Housing) Yojna as well as Mukhya Mantri GRUH Regulations' for aforesaid rehabilitation Policy of 2010 has been formulated and Gujarat Slum Rehabilitation Policy - PPP – 2013 shall apply to the Slums on lands or plots or part of the lands or plots irrespective of the ownership.

2.2. According to the petitioner, a Resolution also came to be passed by the respondent – State Government on 18.07.2013 and the list of beneficiaries was to be prepared by the implementing agency on the basis of any two of the four identity proofs namely, electricity bill, voter identity card, slum survey card or ration card. According to the petitioner, no such list was prepared by the respondent authorities for rehabilitating these persons who are residents of J.P. Ni Chali.

2.3. The petitioner has asserted that on 15.03.2021, demolition took place in J.P. Ni Chali at Sabarmati near Railway Bridge in Ahmedabad. For 30 years or more, some 318 persons of different classes have been living in the huts with their respective families. It is further the case of the petitioner itself that first illegal demolition took place in the year 2018 for the purpose of setting up Ahmedabad-Mumbai Bullet Train and slum dwellers were removed from the area and those who were inside the railway wall/coat towards where the bullet train work was to begin. These slum dwellers/Jhuggis were removed and the wall was built up by the authorities. It is further the case of the petitioner that the residents of J.P. Ni Chali informed the petitioner Union that an agency of National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited i.e. respondent no. 4 herein, then surveyed the slum dwellers and Jhuggis and took necessary documents from the workers. Some photographs were also taken and it was conveyed that the houses would be allotted to them under the Pradhan Mantri Avas Yojna, but no action was finalized and the process rests as it is.

2.4. It is further the case of the petitioner that on 19.03.2021, after two years of waiting period to be rehabilitated, the railway employees verbally instructed the slum dwellers to vacate the huts without giving any proper notice and the slum dwellers in a fearful state of mind apprehended that they would be rendered homeless after verbal notice, wrote a letter to the Ahmedabad office of respondent no. 4 – General Manager on 22.02.2021 informing that when the survey was conducted as stated above, the surveyors at that time stated that rehabilitation measures would be taken under the RFCTLARR Act, 2013, instead, these slum dwellers were asked to vacate their houses verbally by the railway authorities and according to the petitioner when an inquiry was made from National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited, they have denied that they have not undertaken any survey. On 22.02.2021, a common notice was issued by the railway administration informing that if the huts are not removed and railway land is not vacated, latest by 28.02.2021, these occupants/slum dwellers would be removed with the help of JCB machine by the railway administration on 01.03.2021 and in a short time, it was not possible for these slum dwellers to find any shelter and further in the recent past on account of pandemic corona situation, the workers could not find any adequate work nor any shelter, as they could not be move from where they are and as such, petitioner submitted representations before the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation seeking rehabilitation who informed that the railway authorities have issued written notice to vacate the huts after a lapse of seven days, but no accommodation was given. By taking support of the decision delivered by the Hon'ble Apex Court as mentioned in para 4.13, that homeless families should be considered for a separate policy or separate category in Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna Scheme (hereinafter referred to as the PMAY Scheme). On 24.02.2021 a further representation in writing was submitted to the Divisional, Railway Management as well as General Manager of National High Rail Speed Corporation Limited. A further communication in turn was forwarded by the Railway administration on 12.03.2021 indicating them that by 14.03.2021 if the huts are not being vacated, same would be removed with the help of JCB Machine by the railway administration. The grievance of the petitioner is that none of the representations submitted by them to the authorities were responded to by the authorities and on 15.03.2021 at 9:30 a.m., all Slums/huts were removed with the help of JCB machine by railway administration and on 17.02.2021, the railway administration according to the petitioner have started digging pits and have commenced construction work and in such a situation for the present, the workers left with no open space between the wires and the wall even after demolition on 15.03.2021 a further representation was submitted on 16.03.2021 to the District Collector, Ahmedabad in person demanding that their homeless families may be given immediate shelter and it was further highlighted that after demolition, the slum dwellers of J.P. Ni Chali are without any temporary or even permanent shelter, food, water and basic human needs and since none of the representations were responded to by any of the authorities, left with no other alternate, the present petition is brought before the Court under the banner of Public Interest Litigation which is numbered as WP(PIL) No. 59 of 2021."

As we see, the Bench then observes in para 3 that, "From the record it appears that on 07.06.2021, the Court after hearing, called upon the respondents and then various orders have been passed and lastly upon pleadings having been completed, since a request was made by the learned advocates appearing for the respective parties to take up the matter for Final Hearing, in view of the aforesaid circumstances, we have heard the learned advocates appearing for the respective parties at length on 07.12.2021."

Most significantly, the Bench then briefly states in para 13 that, "Apart from that, we have also perused the decision of the coordinate Bench recently delivered on 20.02.2021 in the case of group of Letters Patent Appeal headed by Letters Patent Appeal No. 661 of 2021, wherein, in terms, on the basis of several decisions delivered by the Hon'ble Apex Court including the High courts, it is held that no person has got right to encroach and erect structures on any public places and mere continuous possession and possessing of documents like voter card, ration card, electricity bill etc., is sufficient to contend that they would not be liable to be evicted since right to shelter is a constitutional right. On the contrary, the encroachers in the case on hand have attempted to retain the land by repeatedly encroaching. As a result of this, no case is made out. Coordinate Bench of this Court in somewhat similar circumstances has held :

"25. Deciding a litigation of the present nature is quite painful. The weaker sections of the society like the writ applicants in the present case, no doubt, have the basic human and constitutional right to shelter and it becomes the paramount duty of the State to fulfill those. However, it gives no person the right to encroach and erect structures or otherwise on footpaths, pavements or public space or at any place reserved or earmarked for a public utility. This is exactly what seems to have happened in the case on hand. It may be true that the writ applicants were residing at the place in question past couple of years, but, still, as a Court of Law, we should not be oblivious of the fact that it was nothing, but encroachment over the government land over a period of time. We are not impressed with the submission canvassed on behalf of the writ applicants that the writ applicants cannot be said to be encroachers as they have a right to shelter being both a fundamental as well as a human right. The debate as regards the rights of encroachers over public land vis a vis the right to shelter should come to an end. This debate should not go on for a indefinite period of time. Mere long possession, over public land by way of encroachment by itself, is not sufficient to say that the encroachers are not liable to be evicted as they have a right to shelter. The right to shelter and encroachment are two different facet. An encroacher may save himself from being forcibly evicted only if during his period of stay over the encroached public land any enforceable legal right has crystallized in his favour. Otherwise, merely by asserting the Right to Shelter , an encroacher, over public land, cannot say that he cannot be evicted. There is no way that an encroacher can enforce the Right to Shelter for the purpose of protecting his unlawful possession. The right to shelter, which the writ applicants are talking about, is an obligation of the State. It is the State which has to discharge its obligation in this regard. The documents like voter card, ration card, electricity bill, etc. do not confer upon encroachers any vested legal right in their favour to hold the possession. Such document, at the most, may evidence of only one thing and that is possession. We may reiterate that the right to shelter does not mean right to retain the government land encroached upon. The right to shelter may be a fundamental right under the Constitution, but, certainly, no person has any right to retain the land encroached upon under the purported right to shelter. It is to be enforced under the provisions of the Constitution.

26. It is also necessary to refer to paragraph 9 of the Apex Court s judgment in the case of Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation vs. Nawabkhan Gulabkhan and others [AIR 1977 SC 152], which reads as under: The Constitution does not put an absolute embargo on the deprivation of life or personal liberty but such a deprivation must be according to the procedure, in the given circumstances, fair and reasonable. ... . No inflexible rule of hearing and due application of mind can be insisted upon in every or all cases. Each case depends upon its own backdrop. The removal of encroachment needs urgent action. .. Sooner the encroachment is removed when sighted, better would be the facilities or convenience for passing or re passing of the pedestrians on the pavements or foot paths facilitating free flow of regulated traffic on the road or use of public places. On the contrary, the longer the delay, the greater will be the danger of permitting the encroachers claiming semblance of right to obstruct removal of the encroachment. If the encroachment is of a recent origin the need to follow the procedure of principle of natural justice could be obviated in that no one has a right to encroach upon the public property and claim the procedure of opportunity of hearing which would be a tardious and time consuming process leading to putting a premium for high handed and unauthorised acts of encroachment and unlawful squatting. On the other hand, if the Corporation allows settlement of encroachers for a long time for reasons best known to them, and reasons are not far to see, then necessarily a modicum of reasonable notice for removal, say two weeks or 10 days, and personal service on the encroachers or substituted service by fixing notice on the property is necessary. If the encroachment is not removed within the specified time, the competent authority would be at liberty to have it removed. That would meet the fairness of procedure and principle of giving opportunity to remove the encroachment voluntarily by the encroachers. On their resistance, necessarily appropriate and reasonable force can be used to have the encroachment removed. Thus considered, we hold that the action taken by the appellant Corporation is not violative of the principal of natural justice. Before expressing opinion in paragraph 9, the Apex Court pointed out in paragraph 7 as under: 7. It is for the Court to decide in exercise of its constitutional power of judicial review whether the deprivation of life or personal liberty in a give case is by procedure which is reasonable, fair and just or it is otherwise. Footpath, street or pavement are public property which are intended to serve the convenience of general public. They are not laid for private use indeed, their use for a private purpose frustrates the very object for which they carved out from portions of public roads. ..... No one has a right to make use of a public property for the private purpose without the requisite authorisation from the competent authority. It would, therefore, be but the duty of the competent authority to remove encroachments on the pavement or footpath of the public street obstructing free flow of traffic or passing or re passing by the pedestrians. Thus, it is clear that no one has a right to make use of public property for private purposes.""

As a corollary, the Bench then stipulates in para 14 that, "A conjoint reading of the aforesaid circumstances unfolded in the said case and the facts involved in the instant matter, we would have considered the case of the persons represented by the petitioner to ascertain R & R policy would be extended to them or any other policy of the State Government can be extended. Having found from the assertion of the State authorities in its reply affidavit dated 13.09.2021 vide paragraph 4.4 that pursuant to the final declaration vide notification dated 12.10.2020 the land sought to be acquired in Village Acher was reduced from 351 sq.mtrs., only to 22 sq.mtrs., and such persons being represented by the petitioner not residing in such land, we cannot compel the State authorities to apply the scheme. We are of the view that petition is meritless and in the peculiar background of facts, the decisions which are sought to be relied upon by petitioners would not come for their rescue as they are quite distinct and same cannot be applied as a straight-jacket formula to the facts on hand."

For clarity's sake, the Bench then clarified in para 15 that, "However, while parting with the present order, we may make it clear that it would be open for the petitioner to avail any other remedy to ventilate their grievance by making specific representations, in which case the State authorities with sympathetic approach consider their claim and find out if it fits in any other policy, and if the answer is in the affirmative, the authorities would be at liberty to pass such orders as they deem fit. We make it clear that we have not expressed any opinion on merits and present petition is being dismissed as devoid of merits."

Finally, the Bench then holds in para 15 that, "Accordingly, the present petition stands dismissed. Notice stands discharged with no order as to costs."

In sum, the Gujarat High Court has made it crystal clear that encroachment over public land can't be retained somehow or anyhow by citing the pretext of right to shelter. Of course, those who indulge in such encroachments must mend their ways now. It goes without saying that they must realize that they can't hide now behind the pretext of right to shelter any more as has been made absolutely clear by the Gujarat High Court in this leading case also! It merits no reiteration that the earlier they do, the better it shall be in their own long term interests also!

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ECONOMY

Union Budget 2022: An analysis

OPINION

ANU BHUVANACHANDRAN & VIDHI CHOURADIA

The Union Budget of India, also known as the Annual Financial Statement in Article 112 of Indian Constitution, is the country's annual budget. The cabinet presents it on February 1st in order for it to be implemented before the start of the new fiscal year in April. Until 2016, the Finance Minister presented it to Parliament on the final working day of February. The budgetary department of the finance ministry's division of economic affairs is the main organization in charge of preparing the budget.

It is presented in the form of a Finance bill and an Appropriation bill, both of which must be enacted by the Lok Sabha before they can take effect on April 1st, the start of India's fiscal year. 'Vote on Account' isn't just about same as an interim budget. A 'Vote on Account' exclusively considers expenditures and receipts. An intermediate budget, like a full budget, presents the entire financial statement. While the law does not prevent the Union Government from adopting tax reforms during an election year, past governments have refrained from making large changes to income tax legislation during interim budgets. There have been 73 annual budgets, 14 interim budgets, plus 4 unique budgets, or mini-budgets, since 1947.

Union budget of 2022-23 was presented amidst a backdrop of nascent domestic economic recovery with significant divergence across sectors. While, on an overall basis, the domestic economy has seen strong rebound from a low base, impact on consumption, MSMEs and contact intensive services sector continue to linger. Further, the economy is likely to face increasing headwinds on external front with accelerated tapering and heightened pace of rate increases by US Fed, softening of global growth, risk of China slowdown and elevated global inflation.

Given this background, there was a need to continue to nurture growth while making fiscal progress, this budget has precisely delivered that. This budget ensures continuity in policy, stability in taxation and consistency in the strategic direction of the economy while taking steps towards fiscal consolidation.

Last few years' budgets including the current one can be stringed together on 4 broad themes:

1. Aatma Nirbhar Bharat and Domestic Manufacturing
2. Accelerating Infrastructure and Logistics Development
3. Stability in and Simplicity of tax structure
4. Gradual fiscal consolidation

While this budget maintains continuity of aforesaid policy objectives, it also contains targeted measures towards developing digital ecosystem and supporting rural sector, social causes and pandemic impacted sectors.

India has lagged China in scaling up manufacturing in last 2 decades. The rise in wage costs as well as increasing compliance costs in China has provided a unique opportunity for India to establish itself in the global supply chain through boost in domestic manufacturing. Indian Government's initiatives over last few years are an attempt to make most of the opportunity to establish India as a strong manufacturing hub globally. Key favourable Government policies include raising import duties under Phased Manufacturing Program to promote domestic manufacturing of high growth electronic items. PLI scheme for select industries (13 until now) to boost India's manufacturing output by USD 520 billion in 5 years. A scheme for design-led manufacturing will be launched to build a strong ecosystem for 5G as part of the PLI Scheme.

Recognising the need for robust infrastructure and competitive logistics for improving manufacturing competitiveness, government has been aggressively taking steps over last few years including income tax exemptions for investment income of Sovereign wealth funds, abolition of dividend distribution tax, easing access to debt financing of REITs/INVITs by FPIs, housing for all, innovative model for road developments, privatisation of airports for operation & maintenance etc. Further, in Oct-21 govt launched 'PM Gati Shakti - National Master Plan for Multi-modal Connectivity' for integrated planning and coordinated implementation of infrastructure connectivity projects.

This budget builds on this vision and announced following steps towards achieving these objective

Contract for set-up of Multimodal Logistics Parks at four locations through PPP mode will be awarded in 2022-23

For road transportation, PM GatiShakti Master Plan for Expressways to be formulated in 2022-23.

In the next three years, a hundred cargo ports supporting multimodal logistics facilities would be built. Railways could provide effective logistics assistance to small farmers and SMSME, and take the lead in integrating postal and railway networks for smooth parcel movement.

In 2022-23, 2,000 kilometers of infrastructure will be put under Kavach, a native system for protection and expansion of existing. Bharat Vande Bharat During the following three years, trains with improved energy efficiency and ride comfort will be developed and constructed.

Contracts for eight ropeway projects under the National Ropeways Development Programme will be granted in 2022-23 through the PPP approach. The government's commitment to infrastructure is reflected in anticipated capex of 2.9 percent of GDP in FY23, compared to an average of 1.7 percent in the five years preceding to the pandemic.

Over the last few years, the government has made a deliberate effort to streamline the taxation system and administration in order to improve compliance. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), unaccountable interactions, the phase-out of outmoded exemptions and deductions, the option of an alternative tax regime, E-filing, and other initiatives are aimed at making it easier to do business, encouraging private investment, reducing tax litigation, and so on.

This budget stands out because, aside from minor revisions to the NPS exemption for state government employees, import taxes on electronics manufacture, steel scrap, chemicals, and other items, it has no major tax changes, which is a welcome development. The government has also imposed a 30% tax on income derived from the transaction of electronic cryptoassets such as cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens (NFT). The budget also extended incentives previously offered to particular sectors, such as new manufacturing entities, start-ups, and custom duty assistance to small steel mills, chemical enterprises, and so on.

Post the pandemic, economic growth was significantly impacted and there was need for fiscal intervention to support growth, especially given the backdrop of weak private investments, impact on unorganised sectors, soft consumption, etc. Keeping this objective in mind, Indian Government prudently delayed the fiscal consolidation and now targets to reduce fiscal deficit to less than 4.5% by FY26 instead of 3% by FY23. Further, government has provided leeway to States to keep fiscal deficit at 4% of GSDP in FY23 including conditional 0.5% of GSDP on doing power sector reforms.

The revised estimate of budget deficit for FY22 is 6.9% of GDP, somewhat higher than planned projection of 6.8%. In addition, fiscal deficit is expected to fall to 6.4 percent in FY23. Reduced food plus fertiliser subsidy (from 1.9 percent of GDP to 1.2 percent) are driving the fiscal deficit reduction, which is somewhat offset by increased capex investment (from 2.6 percent of GDP to 2.9 percent of GDP). Furthermore, fiscal deficit projections appear acceptable, with realistic revenue and expenditure assumptions.

India's government debt level to GDP is anticipated to remain elevated (90 percent) in the short future, owing to limited consolidation. However, once growth picks up, it's expected to moderate. Bond markets responded unfavorably, with Gsec rates rising 15-20 basis points, as a result of higher-than-expected borrowing and lack of clarity on unresolved difficulties over Gsec participation in global bond indices. Funding the budget deficit could be difficult given the projected increase in credit growth, rapid tapering by the US Fed, and the assumption of little incremental help from the RBI, among other factors. The borrowing program, however, can be supported by abundant liquidity and the prospect of resolving concerns related to entry in global bond indices. Furthermore, we expect that economic reform beyond FY23 will be dictated by recovery in growth, increased private sector investment, and increased credit demand, among other factors.

Following the recent surge, India's market capitalization is now at 90% of GDP (based on CY 2023 GDP), that is fair considering the cheap cost of capital. Furthermore, the NIFTY 50 has returned 14.2 percent and 11.4 percent CAGR over the last ten and fifteen years, respectively, which is much in pace with ostensibleGDP growth.

The Union Budget for the years 2022-23 is development plan with strong emphasis on investments. Continued improving economic activities, increasing growth prospects, high profitability, and other factors support good view for stocks in the midedium to long term. However, given the current values (PE of 18x based on FY24 earnings predictions), it's a good idea to keep returns expectations in check. In the medium to long run, we expect equities to deliver returns that are in step with nominal GDP growth. The rising cost of capital, particularly in the United States, is headwind for capital markets. If rising inflation persists, monetary tightening and yield increases may be necessary.

The Union Budget for 2022-23 puts emphasis on facilitating growth through increased capital spending. Estimated fiscal deficits of 6.4 percent of GDP in FY23 & 6.9 percent of GDP in FY22 were somewhat higher than the market projections. As a result, the gross market borrowing program for FY23 is much larger, at INR 14.95 trillion, than it was in FY22RE, at INR 12 trillion. As a result, the 10-year G-sec yields increased by 15 basis points.

Furthermore, the Union Budget for 2022-23 is delivered at odds with the background of global fiscal policy normalization, which is expected to push yields higher. Unlike the previous two years, when RBI monetary policy aided the satisfactory conclusion of government borrowing programmes, this year is expected to be more difficult, as the RBI begins to normalize its monetary policy.

High supplies of markets borrowings, normalization of monetary policy, and lesser RBI intervention are all projected to keep rates rising in the future. The danger to this perspective is that the budget deficit for FY23 is smaller than predicted, either as result of decreased spending or higher-than-expected tax receipts. Further participation of India sovereign bonds in global bond indexes might greatly lessen yield pressure.

The Budget is being presented at a period when India's unemployment rate is at an all-time low. In India, record instability and failing development not only increased income and wealth disparities, but also caused a spike in the actual amount of impoverished people – an unprecedented and humiliating reverse in poverty alleviation. There was lot of dispute about the government's strategy in the years preceding up to Covid-led technical recession.

The Economic Survey, which was released only one day before Sitharaman is set to present the Union Budget for 2022-23, emphasized the need for government to offer a buffer against pressures such as global uncertainty, the cycles of liquidity withdrawals by major financial institutions, and so on.

According to survey, requirement actions alone will not suffice in government's efforts to develop a post-Covid economy. This is due to the fact that a number of aspects such as customer behavior, technological developments, geopolitics, supply chains, and climate variability might socialise in unexpected ways, as well as India will have to create a resource-side strategy to deal with post-Covid world's long-term unpredictability.

Previous year, govt decided to establish an asset reconstruction firm to take over banks' bad debts, allowing them to fund economic recovery. This idea to create a "bad bank" was approved just days before Union Budget 2022-23. The proposed 'bad bank,' according to State Bank of India Chairman Dinesh Khara, has "now" secured all essential permits, as well as from the Reserve Bank of India. He said the company is ready to start operations, with 15 cases totaling Rs 50,335 crore to be deposited by March 31.

The views indicated here are as of February 1, 2022, and are based on the Honorable Finance Minister's Budget recommendations presented to Parliament on February 1, 2022. When the Budget is passed by Parliament then notified by the Government, the Budget plans may change or diverge. The information is provided for informational purposes only and does not include a full disclosure of all material facts pertaining to the Indian Budget.

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