



Die is cast

U.P. goes to the polls with parties trying to mobilise people on communal and caste lines

As campaigning gets brisk for the first phase of polls in Uttar Pradesh on February 10, the die has been cast for the six phases to follow too. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is on the defensive in 58 seats in western Uttar Pradesh; 11 districts vote in the first phase. In 2017, the party had won 51 of these seats (last 52). The challenge to the BJP's dominance comes primarily from the Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal (SP-RLD) alliance in this potato and sugarcane belt but also in the fray are the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress alongside recent entrants, the Aam Aadmi Party and the All India Majlis-e-Itehadul Muslimin. The region, abutting the national capital of Delhi, was a hotspot of the farmers' agitation against the Central government last year. The SP-RLD alliance draws its evident energy from the resentment against the BJP among Jats, a farming community that had aligned with the party's Hindutva agenda in recent years. The BJP has put forth a plank of *saraks* (security) and *samman* (dignity). Taken aback by the momentum of the SP-RLD alliance, it is trying to polarise the elections so that Jat farmers who constitute an estimated 1% of the population in the region and who voted overwhelmingly for the party in the last elections do not unite with Muslims who constitute 26% of the population (in the region). The BJP's behaviour signals that it will leave no stone unturned to consolidate the Hindu votes and override caste tensions, across the State.

The BJP is also trying to create a narrative that the SP scores poorly on law and order, and the Yogi Adityanath government has been tough on crime in the last five years. The law and order pitch of the party is communally tinged, however. The party is highlighting government investment in highways, airports and medical colleges; and free vaccine and ration during the pandemic. The SP-RLD alliance is targeting the ruling government on the farm crisis in light of the farmers' agitation and is trying to build on the brotherhood among farmers across caste and religious barriers. Apart from Jats and Yadavs, it is expected to wean a chunk of Gurjars, another agrarian community, away from the BJP. It is raising issues of inflation, particularly high electricity tariffs, unemployment and stray cattle, an outcome of the emotive cow protection drive. Consolidating its vote bank in the name of Hindutva, cultural nationalism, the Ram temple and Article 370, the BJP is also keen to make a dent in the BSP's Dalit vote bank to get over the losses made because of farmers' agitation. Dalit leader and former Chief Minister Mayawati (BSP) has made a strong comeback with a rally in Agra, and hopes to win enough seats in the region to influence government formation.

Sex and violence

The Government should spell out its current stand on marital rape

It is time the Union government took a categorical stand on the issue of treating marital rape as a criminal offence. It informed the Delhi High Court earlier this week that it was having a relook at its position spent over five years ago. In 2017, the Government had opposed the removal of the statutory exception in Section 375 of the IPC for rape committed by a man on his wife, if she is not below 18 years of age. The remarks of the Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smriti Irani, in Parliament also do not throw much light on the matter. She merely said the Government was engaged in a process to introduce comprehensive amendments to criminal law, indicating perhaps that the criminalisation of marital rape is unlikely to be taken up in isolation. At the same time, she observed that it would not be advisable to condemn every marriage as a violent one, and every man a rapist. One can only interpret this as a sign that the Government is quite wary of agreeing with the body of opinion that favours recognising rape as something that could happen within a marriage too. In 2016, the Government had rejected the concept of marital rape, saying it "cannot be applied to the Indian context due to various factors like level of education/illiteracy, poverty, myriad social customs and values, religious beliefs and the mindset of the society to treat marriage as a sacrament".

There is no indication as to the sort of departure from this formulation, if any, that the proposed reconsideration will lead to. However, the question no longer brooks responses marked by ambivalence or tending towards buying time. One cannot expect the courts to delay indefinitely a ruling on the constitutionality of the existing exception in rape law. The conventional arguments against criminalising rape within marriage — that the institution of marriage will be ruined and that it is liable to misuse — no longer hold good. The country has adopted a domestic violence law that enables complainants against physical and sexual abuse. The IPC also holds cruelty to be an offence in a domestic context. Therefore, making marital rape a criminal offence is unlikely to ruin the institution of marriage any more than a complaint of domestic violence or cruelty would. The exception given to marital rape harks back, as the report by the Justice J.S. Verma committee noted while recommending its removal, to an outdated notion of marriage that treated the wife as the husband's property. The notion of 'implied consent' within marriage is also reflected in marriage laws that allow for 'restitution of conjugal rights', a remedy that either party to a marriage may avail of. Looking at marriage through the anachronistic lens of 'coverture' — the view that the wife is under the husband's authority always — should not be allowed to override the autonomy of married women over their person.



YOGENDRA YADAV & PRANAV DHAWAN

The Supreme Court of India's recent ruling on an all India quota (<https://bit.ly/349zEqB>) deserves closer attention for a reason other than its impact on post graduate medical admissions. This judgment has the potential to settle a long, fractious and futile debate in our country: merit versus reservations. The order of the two-judge Bench, comprising Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice A.S. Bopanna, lays to rest a popular misconception of merit while advancing an interpretation that is consistent with our constitutional ideals of equality and social justice. The judgment should have far-reaching consequences for judicial orders, public policy, and, hopefully, public discourse.

Limited case

The case before the Court was very limited: an expeditious removal of the issues around the implementation of Other Backward Classes (OBC) and economically weaker sections (EWS) quotas in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-All India Quota (AIQ) admissions to medical colleges. AIQ refers to a judicially created category where 15% of undergraduate seats and 50% of post graduate seats are filled on a domicile-free, all-India basis.

The Government had recently decided to extend the existing Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reservations within this category to provide for OBC reservations as well. Writ petitions had challenged this order on the grounds that the implementation of OBC reservation would affect professional merit and cause reverse discrimination against general category candidates. Another set of writ petitions had challenged the notification of EWS reservation even as the hearings on the 103rd Constitutional Amend-

ment Act were pending. Another set of writ petitions had challenged the tenability of 8% lakhs as the income limit for EWS reservation. The Court, in view of the public health implications of the delay in medical admissions, upheld the admissions notice, and listed for March the hearing on the validity of the 8% lakhs limit.

Fresh ground

The Court took this opportunity to directly address the issue of merit versus reservations at some length (paragraphs 17 to 28). For the longest time, critics of affirmative action have argued that reservations violate merit. The defenders of reservation too often concede this but argue that affirmative actions serve other goals such as social representation. This is where the judgment, authored by Justice Chandrachud, breaks fresh ground. It builds on a long tradition of progressive jurisprudence on this issue, but takes it in a new direction.

The judgment begins by recalling and reaffirming the principle of substantive equality, rather than formal equality, that underlies our constitutional promise of equality of opportunity. Relying on the debates in the Constituent Assembly, the Court reminds us that the intent of the framers was to remedy real structural barriers that prevented the realisation of equality of opportunity. The Court refers to landmark cases such as *State of Kerala v. N.M. Thomas*, *K.C. Vasanth Kumar* (1985), and *Indira Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) to reiterate sharply that the provision of reservations in Article 16(4) of the Constitution is not an exception to but an extension of the principle of equality enunciated in Article 16(1). Reservations are crucial to achieving the aspirational goal of genuine equality of opportunity and status amongst all citizens. "Reservation is one of the measures that is employed to overcome these barriers. The small difference may be a result of privilege, fortune, or circumstances but it cannot be used to negate the role of reservation in remedying the structural disadvantage that certain groups suffer" (paragraph 22).



Second, the judgment contributes to the specification of the mechanisms through which social privileges work. Justice Chinnappa Reddy in *K.C. Vasanth Kumar v. State of Karnataka* (1985) had critiqued the purely economic understanding of claims for reservation by emphasising the embedded and rigid nature of the socio-cultural institution of caste.

The present order notes Marc Galanter's insight that processes of resource accumulation impact the performance of candidates in examinations. Taking this understanding forward, it draws upon the work of K.V. Shyamprasad to recognise, perhaps for the first time, the role of cultural capital. The order holds: "The cultural capital ensures that a child is trained unconsciously by the familial environment to take up higher education or high posts commensurate with their family's standing. This works to the disadvantage of individuals who are first-generation learners and come from communities whose traditional occupations do not result in the transmission of necessary skills required to perform well in open examination..." (paragraph 24). The judgment is also attentive to the exclusionary implications of these processes as meritocratic discourse legitimises consolidation of 'family habitus, community linkages, and inherited skills'. In addition to 'reaffirming social hierarchies', this obsession with scores in an examination 'serves to denigrate the dignity of those who are not in their advancement which are not of their own making' (paragraphs 24-25).

Stereotypes and skills

Third, it exposes social prejudices that masquerade as concerns

about 'efficiency of administration' and the anxieties about the dilution of merit. It recognises that there is a need to rectify pre-existing stereotypes about the weaker persons belonging to weaker sections.

It relies on the 2019 decision in *B.K. Pavitra v. State of Karnataka*, also authored by Justice Chandrachud, which held, "The benchmark for the efficiency of administration is not some disembodied, abstract ideal measured by the performance of a qualified open category candidate. Efficiency of administration in the affairs of the Union or of a State must be defined in an inclusive sense, where diverse segments of society find representation as a true aspiration of governance by and for the people."

Examinations and merit

Finally, the judgment goes to the heart of the matter and questions examinations as a measure of merit. It cites Ashwini Deshpande's study highlighting a stark separation between what examinations claim to measure, and what they actually do. It elaborates by citing Satish Deshpande's research that shows that often what examinations measure have an indirect and weak link to the tasks the candidate is supposed to perform. He argues that the prestige of competitive entrance examinations and the unimpeachability of its evaluator standards are a manufactured construct. Satish Deshpande calls these examinations 'traumatic bloodbaths' that are administered to jealously guard the social prestige of the professional class.

Thus, Deshpande concludes that if the examinations were to be any less ruthless, their main social function of persuading 'the vast majority of aspirants to consent to their exclusion' would be stymied. Drawing upon this, the judgment opines that exams can 'only reflect the current competence of an individual but not the gamut of their potential, their capabilities or excellence'. Foregrounding the importance of individual character, lived experiences, and subsequent training, the judgment emphasises that examinations are exclusionary, though convenient, meth-

ods of resource allocation and that our constitutional ideals should inform our cautious appreciation of these processes (paragraph 25).

This critique of the widespread misconception about merit — the common sense of the upper caste elite — can have far-reaching consequences. Claims of reverse discrimination by candidates from the unreserved categories would have to be justified under the paradigm of substantive equality. This implies that a crude disparity in cut-off marks would not be construed in isolation of the structural inequalities perpetuated by a competitive examination. This invites a stringent judicial review of the constitutionality of EWS reservations since it overlooks the role of cultural capital for general category EWS candidates and fixes the same income limits for 'creamy layer' OBC and EWS. In the policy realm, this judgment opens the way for designing examinations that are free of linguistic, class, school boards, and regional bias. Justice A.K. Rajan's report on NEET, cited in this judgment, could be a potential blueprint for democratising exams to higher education. The recognition of social privileges that hide behind merit also buttresses the demand for caste census that can document the dynamics of privilege accumulation and caution against oligarchic and conservative policy demands for Savarna Ayog (or Commission for Unreserved Classes) and Brahmin Schemes that are mushrooming across our political landscape.

Is it too much to hope that this reasoning — written in the language and style preferred by our elite — coming from the highest court of the land would open the eyes of our upper-caste opinion-makers to the reality of inherited caste privileges that masquerade as merit? Would this reshape the complacent and condescending drawing-room conversations about "reserved category"?

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India calling with quite a lot of trade in mind

A 'new age' free trade deal with India remains critical in anchoring the United Kingdom economically to the Indo-Pacific



HARSH V. PANT

January this year saw the formal launch of negotiations for an India-United Kingdom free trade agreement (FTA) when Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal met U.K. Secretary of State for International Trade Anne-Marie Trevelyan during her visit to New Delhi. These negotiations were aimed at achieving a "fair and balanced" FTA and cover more than 90% of tariff lines so as to reach the bilateral trade target of around \$100 billion by 2030. It has been suggested that this pact will be a "new-age FTA" covering more than just goods, services and investments and include areas such as intellectual property rights, geographical indications, sustainability, digital technology and anti-corruption.

Despite some potential challenges, there is a new momentum in the India-U.K. bilateral engagement these days with both sides confident of moving forward swiftly. Mr. Goyal was emphatic that "nothing is necessarily a deal-breaker in this agreement", and suggested that no one should "worry about issues which are sensitive to any country, because both sides have agreed that sensitive issues are not our priority". Ms. Trevelyan viewed this deal as

"a golden opportunity to put UK businesses at the front of the queue as the Indian economy continues to grow rapidly", that will "unlock this huge new market for our great British producers and manufacturers across numerous industries from food and drink to services and automotive".

There have been indications that instead of the two nations trying to tackle all sensitive issues in one go, there could be an interim pact to cover "low hanging fruit" to be followed by a full-fledged FTA in a year's time. Such a early harvest deal can often be deleterious for the prospects for a full FTA, but given India's abysmal reputation in concluding FTAs, this may not be a bad strategy in keeping interlocutors engaged in the process.

A new trade outlook

As the global economy undergoes a fundamental transformation in the aftermath of COVID-19 and supply chains get restructured, India cannot lose any more time in setting its house in order. New Delhi is hoping to conclude its first FTA in over a decade with the United Arab Emirates this year. And another one with Australia is in the offing. If concluded, the India-U.K. FTA will be the next in line at a time when New Delhi is demonstrating a seriousness of purpose as it negotiates 16 new and enhancing several other trade pacts with nations as diverse as Canada, the United States, the European Union and South Korea.

In fact, just before the launch of



FTA talks with the U.K., India and South Korea also decided to expedite the upgradation of the existing FTA, formally called the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. The Narendra Modi government is showing a newfound flexibility in engaging with its partners on trade as it seeks balanced trade pacts at a time when new trade blocs in the Indo-Pacific such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) are gaining traction. Strategic partnerships without strong economic content would have no meaning in the Indo-Pacific, where China's economic clout is growing by the day.

The reason

Britain has made a trade pact with India one of its post-Brexit priorities as it seeks a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. India is at the heart of the U.K.'s Indo-Pacific 'tilt', which has generated considerable interest around the world. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson came to office promising one of the deepest and broadest British foreign, security, development

and defence reviews since the end of the Cold War. And the Integrated Review (a 'comprehensive articulation of the U.K.'s national security and international policy) released in March 2021 categorically underlined that, "In the decade ahead, the UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific, establishing a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country". While the U.K. will also be launching trade negotiations this year with Canada, Mexico and the Gulf to underscore its 'Global Britain' credentials, a trade deal with India along with its membership in the CPTPP remains critical in anchoring the U.K. economically to the Indo-Pacific.

Many factors at play

A range of factors have coalesced to create an impetus for the U.K. to adopt a more robust Indo-Pacific strategy: the trading implications of Brexit; the U.K.'s changing approach towards China — shifting from being a major proponent of China to perhaps the most hawkish in Europe; and the fact that the U.S., the U.K.'s closest ally and security guarantor, remains firmly focused on the Indo-Pacific. Like its allies in the region, the U.K. recognises the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific to global stability and prosperity, and has made clear its intentions to deploy strategic assets to this end. London is also looking to amplify its efforts by entering into the regional security architecture. The trilateral security partnership between

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), announced in September 2021, enabling Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines with assistance from the U.S. and U.K., has given London a greater voice in the region.

Trade and investment will be a key dimension of this U.K. tilt. Brexit has necessitated greater access to non-EU markets, and the U.K.'s changing relationship with China requires a diversification of trading partners. But this shift in focus is also driven by a recognition that the Indo-Pacific is now largely the force behind global economic growth. The U.K. is looking to leverage its historical connections, development work, and its credibility when it comes to combating climate change (particularly relevant to these low-lying states vulnerable to sea-level rise) to help establish itself as a serious player in the region where there remain serious doubts about the U.K.'s staying power.

Through its Indo-Pacific tilt, the U.K. is finally carving out a direction and purpose to its post-Brexit foreign policy. And it is this prioritisation that has opened up a new window for New Delhi and London to quickly finalise their FTA. It is a unique "now or never" moment and the two sides seem willing to seize it despite the challenges.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Anti-NEET Bill

The Tamil Nadu Governor's move to send back the anti-NEET Bill must be looked at objectively. Over 70 years after Independence we are still not focused on quality. There has to be a process of filtration to ensure high quality education. A quality entrance examination will put an end to bookish knowledge. The best solution is not to abolish

NEET and, instead, to enable free and quality coaching in rural schools. CHAKRABARTY NARASIMHAN, Chennai

Unfortunately, NEET has been converted into a political issue. The ground reality is that the examination as a concept has been accepted by a large section in Tamil Nadu, and evident from the number of students appearing for the

examination. No other State appears to be opposing the NEET examination on the scale seen in Tamil Nadu. S.N. VENKATARAMAN, Chennai

The Governor has shown staggering contempt for the will of the people of Tamil Nadu. It is worth noting that the Assembly passed the anti-NEET Bill unanimously, reflecting the unanimous opposition of the people of

Tamil Nadu to NEET-based admissions. Perhaps the Governor needs to take note of social realism and evidence-based decision-making. It is important to ensure that social justice does not become a casualty of NEET. G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu

Haryana job quota

Reservation for locals in local jobs seems imprudent given

the fact that it is an onerous task to find locals with the requisite skills. Furthermore, it prevents industries from taking up any greenfield and brownfield investments in the State. A quota of 75% is incongruous and too high.

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A front-page story titled "T.N. Governor returns NEET Bill to Assembly" (February 4, 2022) erroneously stated that the Tamil Nadu government had convened an all-party meeting on Friday. It should be Saturday.

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Even if the Haryana government wants to forge ahead with the quota, it ought to be scaled down. ANANYA SINGHAL, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

An untimely death and its ugly aftermath

The death by suicide of a 17-year-old girl of a school in a village in Thanjavur district has led to political one-upmanship in Tamil Nadu, with the BJP claiming that it was due to an attempt at religious conversion. **S. Ganesan** and **C. Jaisankar** report on the case that the Madras High Court has asked the CBI to probe



Michaelpatti village, where the school is located, is named after the St. Archangel Michael's Church (above) in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. (Below): The police near the lane leading to the school. *SINATHI

Michaelpatti, a laidback village that takes its name from the over-100-year-old St. Archangel Michael's Church in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, has been rudely thrust into the limelight over the past fortnight.

The ubiquitous police presence in the small village, situated on the banks of the Kudamurutti river along the fertile Cauvery delta in central Tamil Nadu, is striking. Policemen and women keep a watchful eye on visitors at street corners, shops and around the church.

The tension is especially palpable near the Christian Missionary-run school at the centre of this controversy, situated on a narrow lane off the main road from Thirukattupalli town. Police officers, including some in plainclothes, take down the details of visitors.

Past the security cordon, there is silence in the air in the premises. It is apparent that the school is yet to come to terms with the death by suicide of a Class 12 student and its unexpected aftermath. The death has become a political rallying point for the Bharatiya Janata Party and right-wing organisations in the State.

Death by suicide

Students have returned to classes since restrictions imposed in the wake of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 have been lifted. But teachers still appear overwrought. "We are tired. We need to and we are being told to focus on academics. But we are constantly distracted by all these visits and all the media attention," says a senior teacher.

The girl, whose untimely death has affected the school and the village, had been one of the school's 677 students, a majority of them Hindus, this year. She had scored 489 out of 500 marks in the SSLC exam and was preparing for the Class 12 exam. "She was intelligent. She would not talk much to us teachers. But she was pretty normal with her friends," says the Sister.

The girl hailed from Vadugapalayam in neighbouring Ariyalur district. She had been staying at the hostel right next to the school gate since Class 8 and was known to be studious. On January 9, she had apparently made a bid to end her life. When she started throwing up, the hostel cook took her to a nurse in the village who administered an injection and gave her some tablets. But as the vomiting did not abate, the hostel authorities called her father, who took her home and later to local hospitals for treatment for 'stomach pain'. When her condition worsened, she was admitted to the Thanjavur Government Medical College Hospital on January 15. Throughout this ordeal, the girl did not reveal the reason for her ill health until the doctor at the hospital determined the actual cause on medical examination and investigation.



The police recorded the girl's statement and later, a Judicial Magistrate took her dying declaration. In both the statements, the girl is said to have alleged that the hostel warden, Sr. Saghiya Mary, had harassed and forced her to do chores. Unable to bear the trauma she had decided to end her life, she said in her statements. She died in hospital on January 19.

Based on the girl's statement, a case was filed under Section 75 (punishment for cruelty to child), Section 82(1) (involving in corporal punishment with the aim of disciplining a child), Section 305 (abetment of suicide of child or insane person) and Section 511 (punishment for attempting to commit offences punishable with imprisonment for life or other imprisonment) of the Juvenile Justice Act against the 67-year-old warden, and she was arrested. An alteration report was filed after the demise of the girl.

Though no suicide note was found, the police reportedly recovered an old student handbook in which the girl had allegedly written that she was awaiting death.

A video clip and a sudden turn

The issue took a sudden turn after a video clip of the girl alleging that the school correspondent, a couple of years ago, had spoken to her parents about converting her to Christianity went viral on social media after her death. "Could be" was the girl's response in the 47-second video clip, to a question on whether she was being troubled because she had refused to convert.

As the word spread, the BJP cadre, led by its State vice president Karuppu Muruganandam, staged a protest near the hospital demanding action against the school authorities for attempting to forcibly convert the girl to Christianity.

The grieving father Muruganatham and the girl's stepmother Saranya too claimed that she had been a victim of an attempt at forcible religious conversion and expressed dissatisfaction over the police investigation. Muruganatham

swiftly moved the High Court seeking a CB-CID inquiry initially but later modified it to a plea for a CBI probe.

It later emerged that the video was shot by P. Muthuvel, the district secretary of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, also from Ariyalur. He claims to have visited the girl at the hospital at the request of a friend, who was a relative of the girl's family, to ascertain her condition and ensure proper treatment. Muthuvel also claimed that he had video recorded the girl's statement at the request of her stepmother. He later handed over the mobile phone used to shoot the video to the police for forensic investigation as per the High Court directive.

Soon, protests spread across Tamil Nadu with the BJP and right-wing organisations not only demanding action against the school authorities but also asking for an anti-conversion law in the State. They also took exception to the statement made by Superintendent of Police (SP) C. Ravali Priya Gandhapani at a press conference that neither the girl nor her parents had mentioned religious conversion as a probable cause during the initial investigation but affirmed that the police would probe this angle too. She also announced that a case had been booked against Muthuvel as it was an offence to reveal the identity of the girl under the Juvenile Justice Act.

BJP leaders, including State president K. Annamalai, accused the SP of jumping to conclusions without taking into account the 'video evidence'. The BJP also sought to put the DMK in the dock, accusing it of double standards and drawing comparisons to the ruling party's stand on the death of Anitha, who had died by suicide after failing to qualify in NEET to get a MBBS seat in 2017. Anitha was also incidentally from Ariyalur district.

As the BJP kicked up a political storm over the issue, the Left pariah, the chairman of the Tamil Nadu State Mi-

norities Commission, Peter Alphonse, and several other organisations came out in support of the school and accused the BJP of attempting to sow the seeds of religious hatred in the State. Without referring to the girl's death, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin too echoed similar views, while calling upon his party to expose the BJP's "destructive politics" in a statement ahead of elections to urban local bodies in the State.

The school management, the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation, has expressed distress over the issue being "diverted for political reasons" and dismissed the allegation of religious conversion as baseless. "Our institution has been rendering educational service for over 180 years. There has never been such an allegation in our schools in the past," says Rev. Sr. Fatima Paula, Superior General, Immaculate Heart of Mary Generalate, Pudukcherry. "Even on holidays, she preferred to stay with us without going home. She grew up as our child and her death is a great loss to us," she says.

The School Education Department, based on an inquiry, asserted that there has been no complaint of any attempt at religious conversion at the school over the years and that it has a large number of Hindu students on its rolls every year.

Family life

Days after the girl's death, a new video clip emerged on social media in which she made no mention of any attempt at religious conversion. In the clip, running for a couple of minutes, the girl claimed that the warden made her write accounts and do other chores. As she was unable to concentrate on her studies, she decided she would take the extreme step, she claimed.

But the girl's parents were not convinced. Muruganatham remains firm that his daughter had died by suicide as she had been unable to withstand the

pressure to convert. "She was a victim of religious conversion. You couldn't find any fault with her, and we wanted to give her quality education. But we never imagined she would meet such a fate. No one should undergo our agony," Muruganatham, a small farmer, says at his home at Vadugapalayam.

He had re-married in 2014, a few months after the death of his first wife Kanimozhi, the mother of three children, including the deceased girl. He and his second wife Saranya have a boy.

The role of Muruganatham and Saranya also came in for close scrutiny. The school management, in its impleading petition before the court, rejected the allegations of conversion and said that the warden had taken care of the girl as her own child and even paid her school fees. The girl, suffering from a dermatological condition, was pushed to die by suicide due to the cruel treatment of the stepmother and the domestic situation, it contended.

Police investigations also revealed that the victim's grandaunt, Nithyananda Saraswathi, had made a call to ChildLine in July 2020 alleging that the girl was being harassed by her stepmother. She had apparently made the call based on information provided by the villagers that the girl had been branded by the stepmother. However, when ChildLine workers visited the girl, she had reportedly denied any such ill-treatment and the matter was treated as closed.

S. Subramani, the father of Kanimozhi, who was Muruganatham's first wife, also believes that the girl was ill-treated by her stepmother. "We do not have any contact with my son-in-law since the death of my daughter Kanimozhi, though we live in the same village. My grandchildren don't visit me fearing punishment from their stepmother. We could not do much when we came to know that my granddaughter had been branded," he says. Incidentally, Kanimozhi too ended her life in 2013 reportedly due to a domestic quarrel.

But Saranya denies the charges vehemently: "I treated all the children equally and never discriminated against any of them. She was the only girl in the family. No trip or festival was complete for us without her. Nothing can compensate for her loss," she says. "Since Class 10, she preferred to spend the holidays in the hostel as she wanted to prepare well for her public exams. She came home only on special occasions and remained here when the school was closed during the pandemic," she says.

Meanwhile, a team of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, led by its chairperson Priyanka Kanoongo, flew down from New Delhi for a spot inquiry with district officials at Thanjavur, the school at Michaelpatti and the girl's parents in Ariyalur. A four-member fact-finding team of the BJP,

which included Sandhya Ray, MP, and Vijayashanti, former MP, too visited Thanjavur and Ariyalur.

Residents of Michaelpatti are not amused by all the "inquiries and politicisation" of the issue. The majority of about 900 families are Christians and a section of them even petitioned the Collector expressing resentment over the parallel inquiries in the village. The villagers maintain that allegations of forcible religious conversion were unheard of in the village.

"I have never heard of any such complaint in the school or the village. The families of all three religions have co-existed here peacefully for years," says J. Gurumurthy (80), who was among those who presented a petition to the Collector on behalf of Hindu and Muslim residents. "My son and daughter studied at the school but they never faced any such issue," says L.K. Azeez, another resident.

With the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court transferring the case to CBI, the villagers hope that the truth will be established soon. "We all stand together and agree that the death of the child is a big loss. We expect the CBI probe will be fair and bring out the truth," says A. Jeyaraj, an AIADMK leader and former president of the village panchayat.

High Court directive

With allegations and counter-allegations flying thick and fast in the case, the High Court, while ordering a CBI probe, said that it had a duty to render "posthumous justice" to the girl and felt that the circumstances, taken cumulatively, will create an impression that the investigation was not proceeding on the right lines.

Ministers and the Education Department have exonerated the school management of the charge of conversion, the order said. The Thanjavur SP asserted at a press conference that the conversion angle was not made out in the preliminary inquiry. Such a statement was unwarranted because by then the private video had already been in circulation, the order said. Justice G.R. Swaminathan observed in his order that the parents had given a complaint alleging that there was an attempt to convert the child to Christianity. By stating that the conversion angle had been ruled out, the SP brushed aside the parents' complaint. After all, an allegation was made that there was an attempt to convert, the order said. Justice G.R. Swaminathan observed in his order that the parents had given a complaint alleging that there was an attempt to convert the child to Christianity. By stating that the conversion angle had been ruled out, the SP brushed aside the parents' complaint. After all, an allegation was made that there was an attempt to convert, the order said.

Whether there is a truth in the allegations is a matter for investigation and for the court to decide. But two conflicting narratives have politicised the suicide of the girl and enmeshed facts in a complex web of lies and propaganda.

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on the State's health helpline 104 and Sneha's suicide prevention helpline 044-24640050)



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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

SAYING NO

As India talks to China, it must be prepared to lay down the red lines — as it has done with the boycott of Beijing Games

INDIA'S DECISION to boycott the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Winter Games was the right response to an unseemly provocation by China. Fielding a People's Liberation Army soldier who was involved in the August 2020 Galwan clash in which India lost 20 soldiers as an Olympic torchbearer was a deliberate finger in Delhi's eye. Resort to this low tactic after India readily lent its support to the games at a Russia-China-India foreign ministers' meet just two months ago, at a time that the US-led diplomatic boycott was taking shape, has only hurt Beijing's own interests. The February 4-20 Winter Games are being held in an atmosphere of unprecedented tensions across the world. Underlying the decision last year to add "together" to "faster, higher and stronger" to the motto of the Olympic Games is the world's aspiration for peaceful co-existence, though the event itself is never free of international realpolitik.

As host, China had the extraordinary opportunity to rise above the unpleasantness and reiterate a message of peace to the world, especially to those nations in its neighbourhood with which it has territorial problems that it attempts to resolve unilaterally by the use of military force. But the PLA torchbearer episode has done the opposite, even if Beijing was dealing with domestic compulsions arising out of a belated acknowledgement of the casualties on its side. India is now the 10th country to announce a diplomatic boycott, which means that it will send no official delegation or diplomatic representative to the Games. The boycott does not extend to the sporting events at the Games but it has marred President Xi Jinping's efforts to tell the world that the Covid pandemic has not affected China's ability to put up a perfect show.

Though not of Delhi's making, the boycott is certain to add to the tensions between the two countries. While Delhi is engaged in military-level talks with the PLA for disengagement and de-escalation in Eastern Ladakh, whatever little progress has been made has been offset by the massive Chinese build-up of infrastructure and war-like preparations on its side, particularly in areas opposite the strategic Depsang Plains, where Indian soldiers have been stepped from patrolling up to the Indian claim line since April 2020. Army chief General M M Naravane has acknowledged that "disputed borders with nuclear neighbours, coupled with state-sponsored proxy war" was stretching the country's security resources and apparatus. The government's work is clearly cut out. As India talks to China, it must be prepared to lay down the red lines in this difficult relationship, as it has done with the Games boycott.

WORDS AND ACTIONS

Attack on Owaisi on UP campaign trail points to disquieting link between bigotry and violence. It must be probed quickly

THE FIRING ON AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi's vehicle in Hapur district, Uttar Pradesh, in the run-up to an assembly election, is extremely disturbing. In the aftermath, the UP police have detained the alleged shooter, Sachin Sharma, and his accomplice, Shubham. The Union Home Ministry has accorded Owaisi "Z-category" security — which Owaisi has reportedly refused — sending out the signal that when it comes to grave matters, politics can still stop at the water's edge. The UP police has said that Sharma was "angry" over Owaisi's speeches, while the AIMIM chief wants an independent probe by the Election Commission to look into the "conspiracy". Beyond the law-and-order response, however, the attack could point to a worrying form of radicalisation among a section of the population.

Sharma, on his social media profiles, claims to be a member of the BJP — he has shared a membership card to that effect and posted photographs with senior BJP leaders as well as a video of Yati Narasinghanand, arrested recently for giving a hate speech at the Hardwar Dham Sansad. On Facebook, Sharma has expressed sympathy and admiration for Ram Bhakt Gopal, who opened fire at anti-CAA protesters in Delhi in 2020. The probe will answer all the questions, but at first glance, the incident serves as a warning — an act of crime influenced by a larger climate of manufactured insecurity and othering. In the internet age, indoctrination and radicalisation need not take place only through the concerted efforts of organisations. People, apparently acting of their own will, are shaped by the world around them, where there now exists an unofficial, poorly-monitored information network — made of public speeches, social media posts, WhatsApp forwards — that can influence the disenchanted and the impressionable. While it may be difficult to establish a direct causal link between hate speeches and violence, it may also be naive to think there are no dots to be joined between the two.

It is incumbent on the BJP government and its leadership to condemn the attack on Owaisi by those who seek to invoke its name. In fact, all mainstream political parties need to unequivocally distance themselves from those who advocate bigotry and violence. As the assembly election campaigns pick up speed in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, the political class needs to remember that the vitriol that has become common on the campaign trail, if allowed to grow unchecked, has consequences.

VOTE FOR THE FISH

In Odisha, panchayati raj candidates take their poll symbols seriously in an old-fashioned and heartwarming way

WHERE THERE'S a will, the politician will find a way. In Odisha, where pandemic restrictions have grounded large gatherings in the run-up to the elections to panchayat bodies, candidates are making the most of intimate, door-to-door campaigns. To help brand recall, they have also been lugging around real-life versions of their poll symbols. That might not create much of a ripple if the candidate's symbol is a lantern or a book, humdrum enough objects. But what if the Election Commission, in all its wisdom, has decided to identify you with an LED TV? For a candidate in Koraput's zilla parishad elections, who has been making a spectacular entry into villages, gleaming flat-screen in tow, this is just the kind of attention she was hoping for. In Nabarangpur district, Bhagwati Bhotra makes a different kind of splash — accompanying her on her campaign trail is a freshly-caught fish, expertly held in the crook of her hand. That's not as easy as it looks. Ask Shashi Tharoor, whose composure was visibly ruffled when he was handed the big catch of the day during a campaign visit to a fish market in Thiruvananthapuram two years ago. Attempts to fish for sympathy on Twitter, when he described himself as a "squeamish vegetarian", did not wash.

What would our elections be without poll symbols? Early on in the life of a democracy that had gambled on giving the right to vote to all, these minimalist ideograms became a way for a largely non-literate population to identify political candidates and parties. For that reason, they have always been drawn from the unremarkable objects of ordinary life — from bicycles to brooms and fruits and vegetables.

Technology has transformed, some would say distorted, the scale and speed at which parties now take their message to the voter. The Odisha campaign is, perhaps, a reminder of old-fashioned politics as persuasion and legwork. And of the voter's choice — if she isn't impressed with the candidate at her door, there are always plenty of other fish in the sea.



HARISH DAMODARAN

SUCCESS STORIES ARE those that have definitive, durable and widespread impact. Uttar Pradesh's sugarcane industry qualifies as one, on all counts. The state has overtaken Maharashtra to be India's top sugar producer in the last five seasons (October-September) from 2016-17. It has also become the largest ethanol producer and the only state to achieve 10 per cent blending in petrol in 2020-21, one year ahead of the target for all-India. These are not overnight accomplishments. Every regime over the last two decades has built on the work of its predecessor, generating a cumulative and durable impact.

Till 2003-04, UP's sugar mills together could crush barely 4,00,000 tonnes of cane per day (tcd). The Samajwadi Party government's Sugar Industry Promotion Policy of 2004 induced large investments, both in new mills and brownfield expansions. By 2006-07, aggregate crushing capacity had crossed 7,00,000 tcd. The state's 120 sugar factories today have a combined crushing capacity of 7,87,275 tcd, much of it coming up during Mulayam Singh Yadav's term from late-2003 to mid-2007.

What Mulayam's SP did for sugar, the present BJP administration under Yogi Adityanath has done in ethanol. Between 2016-17 and 2020-21, UP's ethanol output has more than doubled from 43.25 crore to 107.21 crore litres, and is projected at 160 crore litres this year. The number of distilleries, too, has risen from 44 to 75. Mayawati's BSP government of 2007-12 can take credit for cumulatively hiking cane prices by Rs 120 per quintal — as against Rs 65 and Rs 35 by the succeeding Akhilesh Yadav-led SP and Adityanath dispensations — and also ensuring timely payment to farmers. In sum, UP's sugarcane success story is a product of the effort of all three ruling regimes.

As for widespread impact, sugarcane is cultivated on about 25 million hectares in UP. The whole of northern UP is a ganna pradesh. That includes the districts in north-west (from Saharanpur to Moradabad down to Bulandshahr and Badaun), north-central (Rampur-Bareilly, Shahjahanpur-Hardoi right up to Luckhimpur Kheri-Sitapur) and north-east (Bahraich-Gonda-Ayodhya till Kushinagar-Deoria). UP's cane is grown mostly in the Upper Doabs — the lands between the state's south-flowing rivers. The north-west ganna belt ("West UP") covers the riverine plains between the Yamuna, Ganga and Ramganga; the north-central Doab between the Ramganga, Gomti



SHAILAJA CHANDRA

THERE WERE MANY expectations of the Union budget for the health sector. The big-ticket items — the digitally managed health ecosystem and provisions for mental health — veer away from the prevalent systems. They rely on the power of technology to bypass the need to undertake physical visits to doctors, carry prescriptions and wait in queues. The digital experience could be a game-changer, but only if the facility, doctors, patients, and systems work in tandem.

When it comes to Covid vaccinations, the digital platform has been a runaway success, primarily because the COWIN platform was simple and slick, and the citizen could choose between public and private facilities. Online medical consultations have started in metros and people are setting up appointments with doctors easily. But the management of hospital beds across the country is a different story. Of the 19 lakh beds in India, 62 per cent are in the private sector. Nearly 95 per cent of them are operated by small hospitals or nursing homes — the first port of call for most citizens seeking medical care. The setting up of a National Digital Ecosystem which "will maintain digital registries of health providers and health facilities," is welcome, but one must be clear whether it will encompass both the public and private health sector and include smaller hospitals and nursing homes. And, what about consent, compliance and cost?



Next government in Lucknow should work at making sugarcane part of a 'circular economy'

and Sharda-Ghaghara; and the north-east between Sharda-Ghaghara, Rapti and Gandak extending to Bihar.

The impact of sugarcane isn't only geographic. Taking an average one-hectare landholding, UP would have 2.5 million cane farmer families. The state produces 200 million tonnes-plus of cane annually. A single labourer can harvest one tonne daily at best. Assuming 150 workdays during the crushing season from November to April, harvesting will engage nearly 15 million labourers. Another half-a-million would be employed in the mills, distilleries, gao-making and the transport of cane, sugar, molasses and alcohol.

All in all, some 4.5 million families in UP are directly dependent on sugarcane. Inclusive of their members, they add up to 20 million persons — one in every 12 of UP's total estimated 240 million population!

The creation of new milling and distillery capacities isn't the sole factor, though, for ganna pradesh's transformation. No less important has been Co-0238, the blockbuster cane variety bred by Balshi Ram. From virtually zero till 2012-13, it now accounts for over 85 per cent of UP's cane area. Co-0238 has boosted both average ganna yields and sugar-to-cane recovery in the state — from 60 tonnes per hectare and 9.25 per cent to 80 tonnes and 11.5 per cent, respectively.

Yet, ganna has suffered bad press because of its apparently high water requirement — roughly twice that of paddy and four times of wheat. This analysis ignores the fact that sugarcane is grown over 11-12 months, compared to 4-5 months for the latter crops. Further, the worst ganna grower harvests 40 tonnes per hectare, whereas the best wheat and paddy farmers' yields are 7-9 tonnes. Sugarcane consumes less water per day and even less for every unit of biomass produced. Its green top leaves, moreover, fill the fodder needs of animals through the winter and spring months.

Proponents of the "water-guzzler" theory may also not know that cane contains around 70 per cent water, 15 per cent sugar and 15 per cent fibre. Sugar mills require no supply of external power or water. The bagasse fibre used as boiler fuel and the water that is heated to produce steam are both present in the cane itself. Also, hardly two-fifths of the resultant electricity generated is consumed by the mill; the rest is exportable power. A fifth of the water in cane is similarly rendered surplus, even

after use for steam generation and processing in the mill.

While water-guzzling concerns are valid for sugarcane in Marathwada or Vidarbha, these do not apply to Uttar Pradesh. The lands between its confluent rivers have extremely fertile alluvial soils and no dearth of water, augmented by a network of canals. The Eastern Yamuna and Upper Ganga Canal irrigating the north-west districts, the Sharda Canal in north-central and the recently inaugurated Saryu Canal project of north-east UP. Mother Nature has already made ganna highly efficient at carbon sequestration and a prolific biomass producer. And with its abundant water resources, there is no state better poised to realise the full potential of this champion crop.

The next government in UP should look at how to make sugarcane part of a "circular economy" wherein it gives back to nature what it takes. For farmers, ganna is both cash and fodder crop. For mills, it is an energy crop producing sugar, ethanol and power. Many of them are also treating their surplus water for irrigation purposes, besides supplying press mud — the residual cake after clarification and filtration of cane juice — for use as compost fertiliser. More recent initiatives involve use of press mud as a feedstock for producing bio-CNG and recovery of potash from distillery effluent after burning in incineration boilers. For a country importing the bulk of its natural gas and potassic fertiliser requirements, this isn't a small thing.

There's a lot that the government taking charge after March 10 can do for ganna. UP can take the lead in enforcing 12 per cent and 15 per cent ethanol blending in petrol, for which mass emission standards have already been notified. Mills should be paid on time for the renewable electricity they are supplying to the UP Power Corporation. Such dues now stand at over Rs 300 crore, even touching Rs 1,500 crore at times.

Last but not least is the need for transparent cane pricing. This should be formula-based, linked to mills' realisations from sugar and all byproducts, and any price above that paid from the state budget. With forward-looking government policy, Uttar Pradesh can better Brazil!

The writer is National Rural Affairs & Agriculture Editor of The Indian Express and Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

NOT SO HEALTHY

The Union budget's provisions on medical care are disappointing

The other big-ticket announcement relates to the mental health sector. It serves one purpose straightaway — making society aware that such conditions can afflict anyone, but the disease can be treated, and patients should not be stigmatised. With IIT Bangalore and the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in the driver's seat, we can expect professionalism and results. But the budget speech did not mention if the mental health strategy will focus on all psychological problems or only those that have arisen in the wake of Covid. Many mental health conditions encompass disorders that are not amenable to teleconsultation.

While the budget has provided some financial leg up to the National Health Swasthya and more to the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (under which AIIMS-type of hospitals and government medical colleges are being established or upgraded) these are programmes that have been in progress since 2005. Four announcements were expected but did not come.

First, the need to substantially raise the overall budgetary contribution to the health sector. It is currently pegged at 1.8 per cent of the GDP and the push in the budget appears very small.

Second, during the pandemic the unorganised middle class was caught without adequate (or even any) health insurance. After

excluding insurance coverage for the organised sector (both government and private), and those covered by Ayushman Bharat and state-level health security schemes, a whopping 26 crore people had no health insurance when the pandemic started. They found health insurance costs staggering. One of the biggest expectations from the budget was that the lower end of the "missing middle" would get some handholding.

Third, there was an expectation that Ayushman Bharat would be expanded to cover the outpatient costs faced by the poor. The Economic Survey has recognised that such expenditure is huge.

Fourth, there was a need to address the crisis of non-communicable diseases — hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases largely caused by unhealthy lifestyles. During Covid, people with comorbidities constituted the largest segment that succumbed. Fiscal measures, incentives, and disincentives have reduced the incidences related to lethal consequences of smoking. A reiteration of the prevention of smoking story was called for.

The health sector outpatient leaves many expectations unfulfilled. People's lip to speak to "not everything needs to be announced in the budget." We live in hope.

The writer is a former Health Secretary. Views are personal

FEBRUARY 5, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

SPEAKER SAVES FRONT

THE 39-DAY-OLD UNITED Democratic Front Ministry, headed by Congress (I) leader K Karunakaran, survived its first trial of strength in the Assembly, defeating a no-confidence motion with the help of the casting vote of the Speaker and the vote of a nominated member. In the voting which followed 12 hours of acrimonious debate spread over two days, the ruling side and the opposition were tied at 70 each. A G Jose, who belonged to the Congress (S) until his election as Speaker on Wednesday, then exercised his casting vote against the no-confidence motion. Two members of the Janata Party voted against the government, while

three others who were suspended from the party, voted for it. The lone independent member of the House, K K Nair, also voted for the government.

KAPIL DEV'S 100

KAPIL DEV SCORED a breezy 116 and added 169 runs with Yashpal Sharma (55 not out) in 178 minutes for a record 7th wicket stand at the Green Park stadium in Kanpur. India, 193/2 overnight, came within two runs of overthrowing England's 378/9 (declared) when the sixth and final Test ended in an insipid draw. With the draw — the fifth in a row — India regained the rubber against England

1-0 after losing in England in 1974. Kapil Dev was awarded the well-deserved man of the series award.

KENNEDY TAPES

JOHN KENNEDY HAD a secret taping system to record his conversations with associates, friends and foes and visiting foreign leaders. The Washington Post reported. Kennedy's secret, known only to Evelyn Lincoln, his personal White House secretary, and some select service agents, is quite embarrassing to his admirers. Theodore Sorensen, who is regarded as among one of Kennedy's closest aides, said: "I am dumb-founded."

THE IDEAS PAGE

The moves that matter

Much like in chess, in life, the rules of the game are simple, but playing is a complex art. It has an opening, middle and end game



OPENING ARGUMENT

BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

MY FATHER INTRODUCED me to chess when I was eight years old. Almost 40 years later, I know that many of the skills and qualities learnt from the game stand out in good stead in life and in litigation. Indians are believed to have invented the game in the 6th century CE, in the era of the Gupta Empire. It was known as "chaturanga" at the time. The word "chaturanga", which in Sanskrit means four limbs, refers to the four arms of the army — infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots.

During the Gupta era, the game was played on an 8x8 grid, much like the modern chessboard of today. By the 11th century, it spread to Persia where it was known as "chaturang" or "shatranj". From Persia, it went to China and Japan before arriving in Europe via North Africa. In Europe, by the 16th century, some cosmetic changes were brought to the game, including the renaming of the pieces after medieval European figures like knight, bishop and rook (or not).

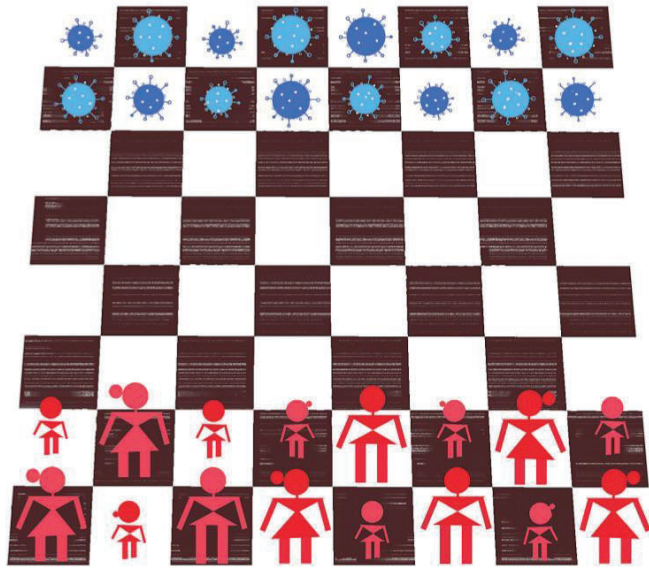
The rules of the game are simple, but playing it is a complex art, necessitating concentration, a calm mind and the ability to sit still and shut out the world. These are modern qualities for any discipline or art form, especially advocacy in a courtroom. First, a little more on the rules for those who don't play. Essentially, when your king is captured or checkmated, you lose. Perhaps in a reflection of real life, the female piece, or the queen, is the most powerful and hardworking piece, while the pawns are committed foot soldiers. Bishops move diagonally, rooks vertically and horizontally, while the horse-headed knights move in an L-shape.

Each piece has its own role, but all must work together to be utilised most effectively by the force that runs them — much like any army, bureaucracy or state institutions. The handling of any crisis — whether Covid or war — reflects how effectively the ruling regime deploys the limbs of the state. Each institution is but a piece on the larger board that is the state. Much like in chess, the constitution describes the role or function of each institution and sets the rules.

Chess has meant different things to me at different points in my life. As a bored teenager, the establishment of the school chess club was an outlet for my restless mind, which was not engaged by the curriculum taught in class. Soon this led to participating in state and national level competitions for junior players. This was in the late 1980s, when I heard of an exciting player named Viswanathan Anand from Chennai who became India's first Grandmaster.

In my final years of school, I was invited to attend the Pioneer Artek camp in Yalta, Ukraine, then still part of the Soviet Union. Yalta, a resort town, was surrounded by the Black Sea and hosted a camp for young people from all over the world. There I would encounter talented and highly trained chess players who would dismantle my game quickly. At the time, a politician called Mikhail Gorbachev was talking about "glasnost" and "perestroika". The Soviet Union would soon come undone in 1991.

I was excited to be in the motherhood of chess — the Soviet Union. For long, chess had



CR Sasikumar

been used to settle ideological wars and issues of national pride. At the peak of the Cold War years, a challenger from the US, Bobby Fischer, and the defending champion Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union, played at the World Chess Championships in Reykjavik, Iceland. From July 11 to August 31, 1972, spanning 21 games, the two players competed for themselves and their countries. Symbolically, capitalism took on communism. Both Fischer and Spassky were under tremendous pressure to win.

The Soviets had dominated world chess till this point, winning the world championships for the past 24 years. The eccentric Fischer, critical of his government, brilliant and unpredictable, asked for the prize money to be increased, refused to attend the opening ceremony, threatened not to play and, finally, had to be persuaded by Henry Kissinger to compete. He would go on to win the championship and break Soviet domination.

I found chess again during this time of relative isolation, with the pandemic and the resultant lockdowns and curfews. In the land of its birth, chess has witnessed a renaissance over the past decade. Abhijit Nair writes in *Bridge in that* that as of 2021, India has 72 Grandmasters, having tripled the number in the last decade. In the last three years alone, from 2018 to 2021, India has produced an astonishing 22 Grandmasters.

During the pandemic, one could still play in the online world of chess sites. Rumour has it that the former world champion and Russian dissident Garry Kasparov often plays anonymously on these sites. If that's not to one's liking, then chess programmes on laptops are designed to entertain or destroy as per the level of proficiency selected. I played furiously during the loneliest of the lock-

Each piece has its own role, but all must work together to be utilised most effectively by the force that runs them — much like any army, bureaucracy or state institutions. The handling of any crisis — whether Covid or war — reflects how effectively the ruling regime deploys the limbs of the state. Each institution is but a piece on the larger board that is the state. Much like in chess, the constitution describes the role or function of each institution and sets the rules.

downs, used it to bury grief as friends and colleagues at the bar were felled by the brutal second wave of Covid. As migrant labourers starved or decided to walk to their far-off homes, I wondered what kind of "middle game" our rulers had in mind? As Omicron entered India, I re-watched Satyajit Ray's only Hindi language film, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*. Set in 1856, shortly before the revolt of 1857, the movie revolves around two noblemen living in Awadh. Obsessed with the game, both spend all their time playing and neglecting their families and businesses, until they are completely ruined. Starring Amjad Khan, Sanjeev Kumar, Shabana Azmi and Richard Attenborough, the movie is based on a short story by Munshi Premchand. Both the short story and the film are intended to capture the selfishness and cowardice of India's ruling classes at the time, who did not put up a fight against the small group of British soldiers who threatened the grand old kingdom of Awadh. In due course, Awadh would fall and India soon after.

How one lives life is a series of choices. Chess games are divided into opening, middle and end games. In life, the opening moves are determined by the values one decides to live by, the middle game entails honing the craft of one's choice, contributing to one's community, finding love, taking care of family, mentoring the young and speaking up against the powerful when demanded by circumstances. For the end game, you must look at the legacy you leave behind as you walk into the sunset. You may win or lose, but you have played the game by your rules.

The writer is a senior advocate at the Supreme Court

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The combined effect of energy price hikes, higher taxes and continuing inflation means that, for Boris Johnson, April may indeed be the cruellest month."
— THE GUARDIAN

The blurred battle-lines

In a Punjab election teeming with old cynicisms, new breakaways and mixed messages, alliances may prove to be key



PRAMOD KUMAR

A PREPONDERANCE OF politicians with fickle loyalties. A battle of false claims and empty promises to entice voters. Entertainment, Sidhu Moose Wala and theatrics garnished with the Delhi model of governance. The Punjab election has everything in it, except seriousness, to bring about an urgently needed paradigm shift in the state's development path.

The election will see a three-cornered contest between the Congress, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Punjab Lok Congress (PLC)-Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) putting up some semblance of a fight in some targeted constituencies. The entry of the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), a conglomerate of 22 farm organisations, may change the architecture of Punjab elections.

The new electoral alliances have ironically liberated the political parties and leaders from the shackles of ideology, principled positions and consistent normative behaviour. The BJP has entered into a pre-election alliance with the breakaway parties, the PLC and the SAD (Sanyukt). It has elevated itself as a dominant partner by contesting 65 seats — the PLC has 37, and SAD (Sanyukt) 15 seats. This alliance may not improve the BJP's electoral performance but may adversely affect the chances of the Congress.

The SAD has not entered into an alliance with its traditional ally, the BJP due to its disagreement on the three Acts on agriculture. It has allied with the BSP after two and a half decades. This may give an advantage to the SAD, as in the previous elections, the BSP had acted as a mega-spoiler for the SAD in over 15 seats.

There are blatant efforts to polarise Punjab on religious and caste lines, with arguments that say Punjab can only have a Sikh Chief Minister or a Scheduled Caste Chief Minister. On the contrary, multi-cornered contests and demographically different electoral alliances have evolved to place the urban Hindu and Dalits as game-changers. There are only 10 Jat-majority, two Dalit-majority and three non-Jat general category majority constituencies in Punjab. The composition of more than 102 constituencies is diverse. As a result, historically religious and caste fault lines have tended to blur in Punjab's electoral politics, unlike other states.

The appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi who belongs to the Ravidassia sub-caste has posed a question: Will the 32 per cent Scheduled Castes continue to vote for all the political parties as in earlier elections? The answer is, perhaps, yes. Caste has been weakened at the behavioural level by the Sikh religion. Among Scheduled Castes, sub-

castes like Mazhabis, Valmikis, Ravidassias and Adharmis may continue to respond differently from each other. These sub-castes are also intermeshed with the deras associated with babas or saints. For instance, a majority of the Ravidassias are affiliated with the Dera Ballan, and a section of the Mazhabis are affiliated with the Dera Sacha Sauda. So, it would be the Dera establishment that may continue to barter its support in elections. Channi may only exercise a limited influence.

Unfortunately, elections have been reduced to a ritual of democracy, as political parties promise goodies and doles and selectively target political adversaries. A party's menu card offers something for everyone — from farmers, traders, students, Dalits, industrialists to women. The "menu-festo" replaces the manifesto which is, by definition, a declaration of principles, policies, intentions and ideological commitment. The credit for this infamous invention goes to the AAP. Divisive politics, issueless campaigns, doles and invoking religious deras — all this constitutes the subtext of this election.

Alliances are likely to be key. The SAD looks to gain from its alliance with the BSP, the AAP might be at a disadvantage due to its failure to enter into alliance with SSM. The vote share of the AAP declined from 24 per cent in 2014 to 7 per cent in the 2019 elections. Is it a sign of the decline of the AAP in Punjab? Perhaps not. There is a visible undercurrent for the AAP in many constituencies. But around 11 out of its 20 MLAs elected in 2017 and three of the four elected members of Parliament in 2019 have deserted the party. The AAP has an advantage as it has not located itself on any fault lines of caste, religion or region. The SAD has a baggage of unresolved sacrilege cases, but it has the advantage of having a regional flavour, a stable and socially acceptable leadership across various fault lines, and an experienced leader in Sukhbir Badal as compared to Bhagwant Mann of AAP and Navjot Singh and Charanjit Singh Channi of the Congress.

The Congress is in a self-destructive mode. Metaphorically, the Punjab Congress is divided into five Misals (to use Maharaja Ranjit Singh's governance model) — the Sidhu Misal, Channi Misal, Balu Misal, Jakhra Misal and Randhawa Misal. Unfortunately, there is no Maharaja Ranjit Singh to coordinate these warring confederates. So they overtake to outmanoeuvre each other and are bound to adversely affect the winning chances of the party.

With the three main parties in a close contest, there are indications that Punjab is heading for a hung assembly. The margins of victory are likely to be small. It would be a political misadventure to predict the outcome in favour of or against a political party. But it can be safely concluded that in a hung assembly-like situation, the SAD may be part of government formation — whether it includes the BJP or the AAP or even the Congress.

The writer is director, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CURRENCY DOUBTS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The digital rupee" (IE February 4). The idea of a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) needs to be translated to reality. It negates the ills of cryptocurrencies and welcomes the benefits of digital currencies. While the uncertainty and speculation associated with the former are absent, the stability and legality of the latter are present in CBDC. But to adequately leverage the utility of CBDC, efforts to bridge the digital divide in the country are needed. Improving the financial literacy of the citizenry and bolstering privacy settings of CBDC should not be overlooked either. If so, CBDC can be a game-changer in the post-Covid economy with minimal physical transactions.

Anjali Bhavania, Thiruvananthapuram

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The digital rupee" (IE February 4). A digital rupee may have enormous consequences for the banking sector, including implications for the sector's very existence, depending on the model chosen by the Reserve Bank of India. Banks could well become superfluous and expendable if customers start to transact directly with the RBI for their deposit and credit needs. The RBI would then become a very powerful institution. Moreover, with its autonomy under question, it could well become a willing tool of the government. These are serious implications which will have to be carefully considered and thought through before the final architecture of the digital rupee is framed.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

COURT STEPS IN

THIS REFERS TO the news report, "HC stays Haryana law on 75 per cent quota for locals in private sector jobs" (IE February 4). The private sector has taken the right step in this matter. Reservation for locals in jobs would not be prudent given the fact that it is an onerous task to find locals with the requisite skills. Furthermore, such a law would discourage industries from taking up any greenfield and brownfield projects in the state. Such a law would also act as a deterrent for the non-locals in taking up jobs in the state even if they are not from there. In any case, a 75 per cent quota is too high.

Aanya Singhal, Noida

UNSCIENTIFIC ACTS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Trust with unreason" (IE February 4). It is regrettable that reputed institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology have been observed to support the government in its pseudoscientific ventures. The obsession with historical revisionism, particularly with a thrust on doing justice to "neglected" persons, reviving a purported Indian "golden" age, and attempts to erase all traces of our multicultural past are the hallmarks of the current ruling class which is eager to promote the ideology of a uniform India. Far more worrying is the fact that this blatant pseudoscience has made its way into the public sphere and is seeking to control young minds. The scientific community must condemn all such ventures.

Ila Raikar, Mumbai



A R VASAVI

Unseeing the real problem

Budget offers little to meet needs of farmers and other rural citizens

BUDGET 2022 HAS assured us a comfortable passage from the "achhe din" initiated in 2014 to an "amrit kaal" until 2047. From now onwards, there will be no poverty, deprivation, unemployment, ill-health or pandemics. For rural India, much is promised via the "amrit" (nectar) that digital technologies, interlinked rivers, world-class infrastructure, super-fast trains, and new-age start-ups can enable. In this "amrit kaal", the rural poor will receive free rations to satiate their hunger (but not meet their nutritional needs), children will attend schools improved via the digital PM e-Vidya, youth will attend ITIs to gain skills in the new digital technologies or have access to the new "digital university", healthcare access will be assured via the digital health platforms, and farmers across India can learn about organic farming from the model farms that will be developed along the banks of the Ganga.

Applauding the budget and its sacred visions (Blessed by a citation from the Shanti Parva), the Prime Minister himself has told the nation that this budget heralds, "Vikas ka naya vishwas" (new hope for progress), and has assured us the plenitude of "more infrastructure, more investment, more growth and more jobs". Water, gas, toilets are what everybody will get and "garib ka kalyan"

(welfare of the poor) — that venustous and persistent national goal — will be achieved.

Most of our budgets over the past decades have not factored in the real needs of the people, especially that of rural citizens, and have been instruments that have largely served the interests of the ruling political class. Yet, this budget stands out for extending the cultural ideology and political strategies of the BJP. In what is an audacious assertion of overconfidence, this budget is positioned as a blueprint for realising a BJP-reconstructed India in 2047. The strategy to realise this, the Economic Survey claims, is to shift from the previous dominant "water-fall" (or detailed study) approach to an "agile" approach in which "feedback loops" and "high frequency indicators" related to data from GST collections, power consumption, mobility, digital payments, satellite imagery, toll collections etc. are drawn on to make budgetary allocations and plans. Overlooked, significantly, are data and the pressing responsibilities to address the complex structural deficits of rural India (the caste-class skewed distribution of land and natural resources, the inadequate public institutions of health and education, the persisting problems of malnutrition etc.), the impact of monetisation from which many are yet to re-

cover, the pandemic's most vulnerable victims, and the now full-blown manifestations of climate emergency. Nor is there any interest in articulating and deploying a vision in which the strengths of India's biodiversity, rich agricultural and ancillary crafts industries can be revived and strengthened. Instead, as has become all too common since the 1990s, budgetary allocations for rural India are marked by a combination of economic neglect and political rescue. Sufficient funds are not allocated to enable a decent living standard for the majority. Instead, there are allocations that reap political dividends by catering to the interests of a narrow class of people — primarily large farmers, who are now also emerging as regional satraps and entrepreneurs.

In a budget that is suffused with the promotion of digital technologies, the failure to envisage that the basic services of health and education cannot be met via technology indicates the callous treatment of rural citizens. As public sectors that have sharply declined over the years, both health and education require not remote and technology-enabled access but brick-and-mortar institutions, with real and human personnel to cater to health and learning needs.

The pressing problem of unemployment

ment, made all the more severe by poorly quality mass education, should have received attention via the creation of learning, skilling and employment opportunities for rural natural resource restoration, agricultural and agri-processing cooperatives, and for a range of new services and skills that now form part of the rural service economy. Instead, this "amrit" budget postulates the possibilities of training youth in ITIs for employment in the digital economy, and assumes that the availability of 5G networks and fibre optics will resolve the myriad problems of rural India.

The sheer insouciance towards farmers is best highlighted in the fact that the allocation for MSP of crops is not substantial and is a slap in their faces for forcing the BJP to accept the three farm acts. In co-opting the call to transit to organic agriculture, there is no assurance that the diverse agri-cultures of rural India, including the millet-growing belts, will be sustained or enabled to grow to a sustainable and profitable level. One grain of hope in all this is that, like all budgets and their promises, much of this will not be translated into efforts on the ground.

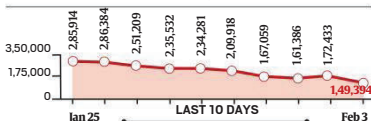
The writer, a social anthropologist, is with the Punarathi Collective

TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

DASHBOARD, AS ON FEB 3

704 DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN
New cases: **1,49,394** Active cases: **14,35,569** Deaths: **1,072**
Weekly CFR: 0.39% Overall CFR: 1.30% Total deaths: 5,00,055

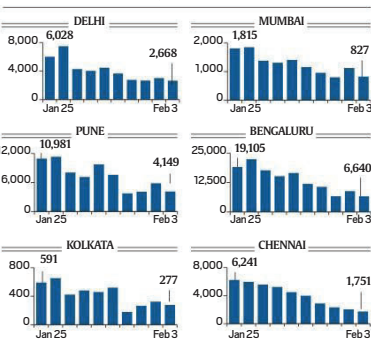
NEW CASES, DAILY



SURGE IN THE STATES

State	New Cases	Active Cases	Deaths	Weekly positivity
Kerala	42677	3,69,819	601	43.78%
Karnataka	16436	1,48,833	60	16.02%
Maharashtra	15252	1,58,151	87	12.72%
Tamil Nadu	11993	1,66,878	30	14.22%
Rajasthan	8073	59513	22	15.20%

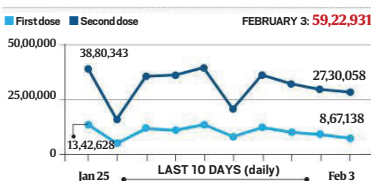
CASES IN THE CITIES, LAST 10 DAYS



TOTAL TESTS	73,58,04,280
TESTS ON FEB 3	16,11,666
WEEKLY POSITIVITY	11.03%
OVERALL POSITIVITY	5.70%

INDIA TOTAL DOSES

168,47,16,068
(Adults 1st dose: 89,82,12,076; 2nd: 72,07,60,671; 15-18 age group 1st dose: 4,83,47,278; 2nd: 34,90,074; precautionary: 1,39,05,969)



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SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Freedom of religion and attire

A Karnataka school's denial of entry to six girls in hijab throws the spotlight on freedom of religion. How is religious freedom protected under the Constitution, and how have courts ruled on students wearing a hijab?

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

AFTER SIX students were banned from entering a college in Karnataka's Udupi district for wearing a hijab last month, the row over whether educational institutions can impose a strict dress code that could interfere with rights of students has spilled to other colleges in the state. The issue throws up legal questions on reading the freedom of religion and whether the right to wear a hijab is constitutionally protected.

How is religious freedom protected under the Constitution?

Article 25(1) of the Constitution guarantees the "freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion". It is a right that guarantees a negative liberty — which means that the state shall ensure that there is no interference or obstacle to exercise this freedom. However, like all fundamental rights, the state can restrict the right for grounds of public order, decency, morality, health and other state interests.

Over the years, the Supreme Court has evolved a practical test of sorts to determine what religious practices can be constitutionally protected and what can be ignored. In 1954, the Supreme Court held in the *Shirur Mutt* case that the term "religion" will cover all rituals and practices "integral" to the religion. The test to determine what is integral is termed the "essential religious practices" test.

What is the essential religious practices test?

In the first place, what constitutes the essential part of a religion is primarily to be ascertained with reference to the doctrines of that religion itself. The SC had held in the *Shirur Mutt* case. So the test, a judicial determination of religious practices, has often been criticised by legal experts as it pushes the court to delve into theological spaces. In criticism of the test, scholars agree that it is better for the court to prohibit religious practices for public order rather than determine what is so essential to a religion that it needs to be protected.

In several instances, the court has applied the test to keep certain practices out. In a 2004 ruling, the Supreme Court held that the Ananda Marga sect had no fundamental right to perform Tandava dance in public streets, since it did not constitute an essential



Students sit outside their school in Kundapura village, Karnataka on Friday after the authorities denied them entry for wearing a hijab. PTI

religious practice of the sect.

While these issues are largely understood to be community-based, there are instances in which the court has applied the test to individual freedoms as well.

For example, in 2016, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the discharge of a Muslim airman from the Indian Air Force for keeping a beard. Justices I S Thakur, D Y Chandrachud and Nageswara Rao distinguished the case of a Muslim airman from that of Sikhs who are allowed to keep a beard.

Regulation 425 of the Armed Forces Regulations, 1964, prohibits the growth of hair by Armed Forces personnel, except for "personnel whose religion prohibits the cutting of hair or shaving of face". The court essentially held that keeping a beard was not an essential part of Islamic practices.

The court did not examine religious practices as required in the *Shirur Mutt* case, but referenced an input by senior advocate Salman Khurshid.

"During the course of the hearing, we had inquired of Shri Salman Khurshid, learned senior counsel appearing on behalf of the Appellants whether there is a specific mandate in Islam which prohibits the cutting of

hair or shaving of facial hair". Learned senior counsel... indicated that on this aspect, there are varying interpretations, one of which is that it is desirable to maintain a beard. No material has been produced before this Court to indicate that the Appellant professes a religious belief that would bring him within the ambit of Regulation 425(b) which applies to 'personnel whose religion prohibits the cutting of the hair or shaving of the face of its members', the verdict stated.

How have courts ruled so far on the issue of a hijab?

While this has been put to courts on several occasions, two sets of rulings of the Kerala High Court, particularly on the right of Muslim women to dress according to the tenets of Islam, throw up conflicting answers.

In 2015, at least two petitions were filed before the Kerala High Court challenging the prescription of dress code for All India Pre-Medical Entrance which prescribed wearing "light clothes with half sleeves not having big buttons, brooch/badge, flower, etc. with Salwar/Trouser" and "slippers and not shoes".

Admitting the argument of the Central

Board of School Education (CBSE) that the rule was only to ensure that candidates would not use unfair methods by concealing objects within their clothes, the Kerala HC directed the CBSE to put in place additional measures for checking students who "intend to wear a dress according to their religious custom, but contrary to the dress code".

"If the invigilator requires the headscarf or the full sleeve garments to be removed and examined, then the petitioners shall also subject themselves to that, by the authorised person. It is also desirable that the CBSE issue general instructions to its invigilators to ensure that religious sentiments be not hurt and at the same time discipline be not compromised," Justice Vinod Chandran ruled.

In Anna Binti Basheer v Central Board of Secondary Education (2016), the Kerala HC examined the issue more closely. Justice PB Suresh Kumar, who allowed the plea by the student, held that the practice of wearing a hijab constitutes an essential religious practice but did not quash the CBSE rule. The court once again allowed for the "additional measures" and safeguards put in place the previous year.

But both of these cases involve restrictions placed on the freedom of religion for a specific purpose — to ensure a fair examination process — and the CBSE had cited a resource crunch to check every candidate if they allowed autonomy in choosing their dress.

However, on the issue of a uniform prescribed by a school, another Bench ruled differently in Fatima Tasneem v State of Kerala (2018). A single Bench of the Kerala HC held that collective rights of an institution would be given primacy over individual rights of the petitioner. The case involved two girls, aged 12 and 8, represented by their father who wanted his daughters to wear the headscarf as well as a full-sleeved shirt. The school that refused to allow the headscarf is owned and managed by the Congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) under CMI's Joseph Province.

"Petitioners cannot seek imposition of their individual right as against the larger right of the institution," Justice Muhammed Mustaque held.

The father appealed before a division Bench of the High Court. The division Bench headed by Justice Vinod Chandran dismissed the appeals as it was "submitted that the appellants-petitioners are not now attending the School and are no more in the rolls of the respondent-School."

Why Facebook users, valuation have declined

PRANAV MUKUL
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

FACEBOOK'S DAILY active users have dropped sequentially for the first time — a development that has sent parent company Meta's valuation into a nosedive. In addition, the social media giant has also flagged the move by Apple to introduce the 'App Tracking Transparency' as one of its key pain-points going ahead.

What was the decline Facebook has witnessed, and did it happen?

In the October-December quarter, Facebook's daily active users fell by about half a million (from 1.93 billion during July-September) to 1.92 billion. This loss mainly saw contribution from Africa and Latin America, it said. Overall, the company reported a topline of \$33.67 billion during the three-month period, compared to \$28.07 billion in the same period last year.

According to Reuters, Meta reported a

weaker-than-expected forecast, blaming Apple's privacy changes and increased competition for users from rivals like TikTok. Notably, during the three-month period ending December, the company also came under severe backlash for its practices of prioritising profits over user safety. This was highlighted through a trove of internal documents of Facebook released by whistleblower and former company employee Frances Haugen.

What else did Meta announce?

For the first time, Meta started reporting its financial results in two segments — the Facebook Family of Apps that includes Facebook app, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp and other services; and Reality Labs, which augmented and virtual reality-related consumer hardware, software and content. Of its total revenues of \$33.67 billion, the Reality Labs segment accounted for only \$877 million, suggesting a long path ahead in the company's pivot to its metaverse ambitions. Further, Meta's chief financial officer, Dave Wehner, told analysts in a conference

call that the impact of Apple's privacy changes could be "in the order of \$10 billion" for 2022.

What are these privacy changes introduced by Apple?

Last year, Apple introduced the 'App Tracking Transparency' feature to its iOS mobile operating system, through which users of iPhones could select whether apps such as Facebook could monitor their online activity. Since the rollout of the update, only if users grant permission to specific apps, they are able to gather data that can be used to track users across third-party sites and apps.

Why does it hurt Facebook?

According to a report by The New York Times, with users being given the choice to opt out of app tracking, many have done so for apps such as Facebook, symbolising the social media app's main modus operandi of supporting its online advertising business. With less user data gathered from their online activity such as e-commerce and search engine queries, and other social media surfing activity,

it has become more difficult for Facebook to target specific ads, thereby causing advertisers to potentially run fewer promotions on the platform. Additionally, the fact that it is iPhone users that are able to opt out of app tracking makes it worse for platforms dependent on online ads such as Facebook, given that these users typically have higher conversion rates than Android users and end up spending more money through targeted online ads.

How has the company reacted?

Since the announcement of the new feature last year, Facebook has rallied against it, suggesting that it would hurt consumers and small businesses that rely on the platform's reach to advertise their products and services to potential customers. Moreover, the hit to Facebook has resulted in its rivals such as Google moving their business elsewhere. In the analyst call, Wehner pointed out that with Apple introducing the changes, advertisers now have less visibility into user behaviours, and therefore many have started shifting their ad budgets to other platforms.

Diplomatic boycott of Winter Olympics: what it entails, what it entails

MIHIR VASAVDA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

ON THE eve of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, India announced a diplomatic boycott of the Games, joining several other countries who have not sent government delegations to the event. Soon after, Prasanna Bhanu said it would not telecast live the opening and closing ceremonies. The Olympics began on Friday, with the lone Indian athlete, alpine skier Arif Khan, marching with the Tricolour.

The US announced a diplomatic boycott of the Games in December, and was joined by several countries including the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan are in Beijing for the Games.

What is a diplomatic boycott?

While there is no obligation for heads of state or government, or high-ranking diplo-

mats to do so, senior officials from governments around the world often travel to the Games as VIP visitors. A diplomatic boycott means these countries have not sent high-profile delegations of officials to Beijing.

Does a diplomatic boycott affect the participation of athletes?

It does not. Unlike the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the 1984 Los Angeles Games, from which thousands of athletes stayed away amid Cold War tensions, athletes and sports officials from all countries have come to Beijing. The Olympics are now a billion-dollar enterprise, and a total boycott would cost broadcasters and organisers, as well as athletes, very large sums of money. In the US, NBC pays billions of dollars to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to show the Games, and non-participation by American athletes would impact revenues.

A diplomatic boycott by contrast is a very visible but low-cost option — a snub that makes a political point with no major

financial costs attached. Doordarshan's decision to not telecast the opening and closing ceremonies will, however, impact the event's TRP, and could have financial implications as well. None of the major sponsors or broadcasters have pulled out.

What political messaging is involved in the diplomatic boycotts of Beijing?

The Ministry of External Affairs announced on Thursday that the Charge d'Affaires of the Indian Embassy in Beijing would not attend the opening or closing ceremonies following the "regrettable" decision by China to pick a soldier involved in the Galwan clash of June 2020 to be a Games torchbearer. "It is indeed regrettable that the Chinese side has chosen to politicise an event like the Olympics," MEA official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said. The Western countries, led by the US, have chosen to deliver a snub to China over its "regressive" abuse of human rights, including against the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province. The US, Australia, and



Chinese President Xi Jinping during the opening ceremony. Pool via Reuters

Germany have also cited the alleged sexual abuse and mistreatment of Peng Shuai, a top ranked Chinese tennis player, who posted on social media accusing a high-ranking member of the communist party, Zhang Gaoli, of sexually assaulting her.

Some countries like Austria, New Zealand, Slovenia, Sweden, and the

Netherlands have cited pandemic-related risks for not sending government officials. France's President Emmanuel Macron has been quoted as saying the Olympics should not be politicised.

How has China reacted?

In a tweet following the US announcement, the Chinese Embassy in Washington had said: "In fact, no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022 to be successfully held." The state-run Global Times newspaper had targeted Australia — with which China has serious disputes — for making an "immature, arrogant and stupid" decision.

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson had accused the countries that had announced the diplomatic boycott of using "the Olympics platform for political manipulation", and warned "they will have to pay the price".

Will the diplomatic boycotts have an impact going forward?

Some fear a retaliation by China during the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (2028) and Brisbane (2032). The US is reportedly looking to stage the Winter Olympics as well in the near future. Many of the key Olympic sponsors are Chinese companies.

For the ongoing Winter Olympics, athletes have been cautioned by authorities in both China and in their own countries not to indulge in protests against Chinese policies. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, asked American athletes to "not risk incurring the anger of the Chinese government because they are ruthless," according to a Bloomberg report. Al Jazeera had earlier quoted a senior Chinese official as saying that "any behaviour or speeches that is against the Olympic spirit, especially against Chinese laws and regulations, are subject to certain punishment".

Some countries have advised their athletes to not carry their phones to the Games and instead use burner devices while in China to guard against potential privacy breaches.