



Limits of power

SC serves a reminder that the House should work within constitutional parameters

In ruling that the one-year suspension imposed last year by the Maharashtra Assembly on 12 BJP legislators was illegal and irrational, the Supreme Court has set the limits of the legislature's power to deal with disorderly conduct in the House. It has laid down a significant principle that the effect of disciplinary action cannot traverse beyond the session in which the cause arose. Citing precedents from rulings of the Privy Council and the Supreme Court, the Court has sought to read the power of the House to suspend a member as essentially defensive or 'self-protective' so that disorderly conduct does not overwhelm its proceedings, but it should not assume a punitive character. Therefore, the suspension beyond the duration of the session was illegal. It was deemed irrational because the need to exercise the power was limited to restoring order in the House; logically, it was not needed beyond the day, or in case of repeated disorderly conduct, to the session so that scheduled business could be completed. It has termed the one-year suspension as a punitive action worse than expulsion. Its reasoning is that if a member is expelled by a resolution of the House, the Election Commission is bound to hold a by-election within six months and the member could seek re-election. On the contrary, the year-long suspension will mean that the constituency remains unrepresented, while there would be no vacancy to be filled through a by-election.

The State government argued vehemently that there was no limit to the action that the House could take for maintaining order and the Court could not examine the proportionality of the action. Rule 53 of the Assembly allowed the Speaker to adopt a graded approach to disorderly conduct; naming members after which they should withdraw from the House for the day, and, in the case of the conduct being repeated, for the rest of the session. However, the Government insisted that the suspension was imposed under the inherent power of the Assembly to ensure orderly functioning. Even then, the Court ruled, in the absence of a rule enabling such a power, the House had to adopt a graded approach and that the same-session limit could not be breached. Referring to the bar under Article 212 of the Constitution on the judiciary examining the regularity of the procedure adopted by the House, the three-judge Bench ruled that the present action was illegal and irrational, and not a mere irregularity of procedure. The ruling is yet another reminder to legislative bodies that their functioning is subject to constitutional parameters. In an era when the government side accuses the Opposition of being obstructionist, and the Opposition alleges that it is being silenced, it is gratifying that the higher judiciary grapples with questions related to the limits of the power exercised by the majority in the legislature.

Risky bets

Russia should do more to reduce tensions along its border with Ukraine

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comment, after receiving a written response from Washington to Moscow's security demands, that 'Russia doesn't want wars' raises hopes of a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis. Last week saw a flurry of diplomatic activities aimed at de-escalating the situation. Besides the U.S.'s written response to Russia, which could set the stage for further diplomatic talks in the coming weeks, French President Emmanuel Macron has held talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. Mr. Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz are also reportedly trying to revive the stalled Minsk process that sought to find a peaceful solution to Ukraine's internal conflict between Kiev and the Russia-backed separatists in the eastern Donbas region. Mr. Putin has said the U.S. response does not address Russia's core security concerns. Fears of a military conflict are still there. Russia, which has mobilised thousands of troops on its border with Ukraine, in Belarus in Ukraine's north and in Transnistria (a breakaway region from Moldova) in its south-west, has a clear military advantage. But the West's willingness to press ahead with diplomatic options and Russia's reciprocity suggest that neither side is in a hurry for armed conflict.

There is a strong case for de-escalation. Mr. Putin has already achieved many things, without a shot being fired. He has got the Western leadership to talk to him over the contested issue of NATO's expansion, which Russia has long been complaining about. By putting a gun to Ukraine's head, he has effectively drawn a red line in Russia's relations with the West. Also, as the U.S. and its allies are scrambling for economic measures to punish Russia "if it invades Ukraine", the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and Moscow's continued support for separatists inside Ukraine have practically become non-issues. Nobody is threatening to punish Russia for not returning Crimea to Ukraine. The status quo has been redrawn. Besides, the U.S. has said it is open to discuss some of Russia's security concerns, including missile deployments in Eastern Europe and military exercises in sensitive regions. Russia should accept the U.S. proposals, de-escalate the crisis around Ukraine and opt for more dialogue on critical issues, including NATO's eastward expansion. If it still goes ahead with an attack, which U.S. President Joe Biden said could happen, it could well be a mistake. Russia might be in a position to overrun Ukraine militarily, but what comes next in Europe's largest country is as unpredictable as it can get. If the post-9/11 military adventures of the U.S. are any lesson, it is that great powers could clinch swift victories against weaker countries but could fail miserably in sustaining those victories. Mr. Putin should not walk into the same mistake and thereby push Europe back into the darker days of the Cold War.

Show commitment to equity in the Budget

The Government needs to stop India's avalanching slide into a grossly divided society, made worse by the pandemic



NIKHIL DEY & ARUNA ROY

On January 17, 2022, Oxfam International presented its annual global "Inequality Report". Titled "Inequality Kills", the report calculated and presented the quantum growth in wealth of a minuscule few, and the simultaneous impoverishment of millions of working people. During the novel coronavirus pandemic, the report reveals, more than half the world's new poor are from India; 84% Indian households have suffered a loss of income, with 4.6 crore people falling into extreme poverty. In this period, the richest 142 people have more than doubled their wealth to more than ₹53 lakh-crore. This is clearly happening by design, and can only be corrected if our policymakers reverse their framework of paying lip service to the poor while making policies that support the rich. One of the most important places to show commitment to equity, is the Union Budget; and inequality should perhaps be discussed threadbare in India before, and after every Union and State Budget.

This is the guiding light

There is also a constitutional mandate to reduce inequality. In India today, some of the most basic human rights that allow people to stay alive are under threat. It is the sacred responsibility of the Government to follow the Constitution, and ensure delivery of these rights. The policymaking "duty" of all governments is to follow Part IV of the Constitution – the Directive Principles of State Policy. The Budget is one of the most important annual exercises in state policy, and it is the Directive Principles that should be a guiding light. In terms of inequality, Articles 38

and 39 mandate a policy path. Among other important principles, Article 38(1) states: "The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life." Article 39 (c) states: The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing – (c) that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment;

'Duties' talk

A rights-based policy framework, should, therefore, be followed by the Indian state to protect the poor and the marginalised. But the Prime Minister advocates that people concentrate on their duties and stop demanding their rights. On January 20, 2022, at the launch of the Brahma Kumaris' year-long programme of events (as part of the Government's celebration of 75 years of Independence) the Prime Minister declared, "In the last 75 years, we only kept talking about rights, fighting for rights and wasting our time. The talk of rights, to some extent, for some time, may be right in particular circumstances, but forgetting one's duties completely has played a huge role in keeping India weak." Ironically, the Prime Minister did not seem to be referring to his own duties.

In a country like India, reducing inequality should be a high priority. Today, this principle is being inverted. The Oxfam report does not exclusively examine the multiplying wealth of India's billionaires. Let us look outside this 0.00001% of our population, and for the purposes of the Budget, look at their analysis of basic social services – particularly those that affect the survival of the poor.

India must be one of the only countries in the world where during the COVID-19 pandemic the



health Budget has declined – and that too by a huge 10% in the last year. Social security expenditure has declined from an already pathetically low 1.5% in 2020-21 to 0.6% of the Union Budget in 2022. It is at this end of Budget allocations where people are deprived of the most basic services and entitlements and are unable to survive. Social security pensions, for the elderly, for the disabled, and widows have been frozen at ₹200-₹300 a month for almost 15 years. The Government says there is not enough money to even index these to inflation. In contrast, policymakers have just in the last year increased their own salaries and pensions through a DA increase to 28%, and given themselves a bonus of 3% – with just the increase for one crore central government employees and pensioners costing the exchequer more than the total social security pension budget for 3.3 crore beneficiaries.

The Prime Minister's outburst against "rights" perhaps explains his lack of support for the implementation of rights-based laws. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, even his government had to turn to the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to save millions of Indians from hunger and premature death. After increasing allocations in the first phase of the pandemic, allocations were frozen, and budgets were slashed in Budget 2021-22. The Government said it will supplement as and when needed. Ho-

Mahatma Gandhi, the out-of-the-box thinker

Since Gandhiji does not fit into any hard and fast category, he continues to disturb us



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

The 74th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's death provides us an opportunity to think about his character and contributions as an important figure of world history. Usually, to praise a historical figure, one tries to enumerate on their qualities to show how marvellous they had been in all areas of life.

But Mahatma Gandhi was both an enigmatic and disturbing figure. He used to think out of the box. He was an open-minded soft reader of concepts and categories. In this regard, he saw his place among the weakest and the poorest. His notion of a just and truthful politics was that in such an environment, the weakest should have the same opportunities as the strongest. It would, therefore, be suspect to see Gandhi being celebrated by the powerful and the victors and not by the weak and the defeated.

If Gandhi continues to disturb the powerful and the victorious, it is because he does not fit in the victors' histories and narratives.

Why do we continue to read

Gandhi and to admire him? Not because he is the Father of the Indian Nation, but because he disturbs us. He was a chief doubter of oppressive systems and a rebel against all forms of hidden and open authority.

An example of simplicity

It is also because in an arrogant and unchecked civilisation like ours, Gandhi is a great example of simplicity and transparency. Gandhi's simplicity was reflected in his deeds and acts, but mostly in his mode of life. Unlike most of us, not to say all of us, Gandhi had more joy and fulfilment in pursuing less in life than in pursuing more. The corporate mindset – that of being successful – which dominates all aspects of our lives, did not exist for him. And maybe, it is because of his pure simplicity that we continue to have so much trouble in understanding Gandhi. Naturally, corporates, even when they use him as a logo or an emblem, fear him. Maybe because Gandhi, like Sisyphus, continues to roll the rock up to the top of the mountain. With Gandhi we are never confronted with absolute Truth. Gandhi is a perpetual truth seeker. In fact, Gandhi is victorious through his effortful trials. His position remains ambiguous and disturbing.

Assuredly, Gandhi was an ambiguous personality, but he never



wore a mask. He neither masked himself nor put a mask on the face of Indian history.

Rather, he challenged Indian history by asking lucid and limpid questions from it. As such, in practically all of Gandhi's historical actions, there was moral or spiritual interrogation. He, therefore, led Indians to a historical and civilisational awareness that went as far as a spiritual conversion to non-violence. That is to say, the Gandhian maieutic completely reversed the relationship between a leader and his people.

Like Socrates, Gandhi was a midwife of minds (Gandhi was very much influenced by Socrates and his method of thinking). He reversed the guiding values of Indian life. His philosophy was that of a spiritual exercise, accompanied by an active reflection on truth and a lively awareness of all walks

of life. Gandhi believed that the true test of life for the individual can be summarised in two principles: self-discipline and self-restraint. In this relation, he observed: "A self-indulgent man lives to eat; a self-restrained man eats to live." His vision of community goes in the same direction and Gandhi gives ethical and political primacy to the two concepts of self-realisation and self-rule. For Gandhi, a self-realised and self-conscious community is a society of citizens who reconcile the self-determination of the individual with the recognition of the shared values in the community.

During a recent 18-day "Accountability Yatra" in the State of Rajasthan, we came across thousands of cases of needy people not receiving ₹2 per kilo wheat. The answer to grievances and appeals filed in writing is that the portal is closed and no more entries allowed. The priority list of households under the NFSA has been frozen in absolute numbers, based on a percentage determined from the 2011 Census. In the last 11 years, population increases amounting to approximately 10 crore eligible beneficiaries have been kept out. Therefore, approximately 12% legally entitled people – even children of existing "priority households" – cannot get subsidised foodgrain. To use digital codes to block even the appellate process mandated by law is a live example of callous multi-dimensional inequality, demonstrating why the "Inequality Kills" title of the Oxfam report is poignant and true.

Children and education

The pandemic has also produced a generation of children who have forgotten what formal education is. Many teenagers from poor households have already joined the workforce. In this period, there has been a 6% cut in the education Budget. Relying on online teaching, accompanied by Budget cuts, amounts to the institutionalisation of endemic multidimensional poverty.

The list can go on and on. As we await Union Budget 2022-23, will this trend be reversed? There will be much talk among affluent analysts cautioning against social sector expenditure, calling them "welfare and doles". Programmes such as the food security Act will not receive the quantum of allocations needed, even though food grain stocks are more than 90 mil-

lion tons. The People's Action for Employment Guarantee (PAEG) has estimated that approximately ₹2,64,000 crore will be needed to guarantee 100 days work for currently active job cards. Even half that amount is unlikely to be allocated for MGNREGA. Social security pensioners will continue to face hunger, insult, sickness and death. One would expect that if nothing else, their millions of votes in crucial State elections would fetch these families some basic rights. But, in polarised elections, the basic needs of unorganised and voiceless people are easily ignored.

Time to generate data

Policymakers will tell us that resources are scarce. Oxfam says the combined wealth of India's 142 billionaires has increased by a massive ₹30 lakh-crore, in just the pandemic period. Jan Sarokar, a network of more than 30 social sector movements, has suggested that a 2% wealth tax, and a 33% inheritance tax on the top 1% of our population will fetch an estimated ₹11 lakh crore per annum, to support basic social sector entitlements. Suggestions such as this are already being ridiculed by market fundamentalists. Which way will the Government go?

The Bharatiya Janata Party's response to most international reports has been to claim flawed methodology and analysis. It is time to introspect, generate robust data, and face the truth. The Budget is a policy that matters to all. There is, unfortunately, little hope that this Government will stop this avalanching slide into a grossly divided society. It is perhaps up to society to stand up and make sure that we are true to our constitutional commitment of building a more just and equal society. That is our most fundamental duty.

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tually what we can call the wake of responsibility. Undoubtedly, Gandhi knew well that global responsibility is nothing but an overriding loyalty to mankind. It goes without saying that remembering Gandhi could be a way for us to be reminded of our global responsibilities and our loyalty to mankind. Without it there would be no solidarity and no universal harmony among the peoples of the world.

Need for moral leadership

The pandemic shows us clearly that our world is in lack of a moral leadership which can evolve through experiments of empathy and by redress of the sufferings and grievances of humanity. Even if Gandhi is no more among us, his spirit has been with the great transformative leaders of the 20th and 21st centuries like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Václav Havel and Pope Francis. As a global thinker with a transhistorical and transgeographical influence, Gandhi was a moral and political leader who stayed out of the box. We continue to wrestle with the radical parts of his vision.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Spyware purchase

The Opposition parties are again hopelessly found wanting by not getting their act together (Page 1, "Opposition slams govt. as report says India bought NSO spyware", January 30). Let us look at the statements from the Opposition, especially from the Congress and the Left, following the report by *The New York Times* on a 'India-Israel Pegasus deal'. Will mere statements serve the purpose of digging out the truth? The government of the day will obviously duck and obfuscate this burning accusation as far as possible. This is an issue that concerns the privacy of the citizen.

P.K. SHARMA, Barnala, Punjab

■ It is unfortunate on the part of *The NYT* not to have divulged its sources – not even responding to an e-mail from *The Hindu*. This does cast a shadow of doubt on the veracity of the report. On the contrary, a sitting Minister calling *The New York Times* a "supari" (hit-job) newspaper does not augur well for the image and the reputation of our country abroad. Has the Minister concerned forgotten that our Prime Minister wrote an opinion piece in the same *The New York Times*, titled "Why India and the World Need Gandhi", in 2019?

A. VENKATASUBRAMANIAN, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

■ The NYT's claim that Pegasus was a larger backroom deal makes the

issue even more serious. The Supreme Court of India needs to fast-track the hearing of the case with ruthless objectivity and an urgency to get to the bottom of the issue. The Budget session of Parliament would see the Union government stonewalling questions, even pertinent ones, from the Opposition. Hence the need for the Supreme Court's quick completion of the investigation.

S. SANJEEVI RAO, Puducherry

■ The foreign report only gives credence to the snooping process by the Centre. It is not surprising that a Union Minister has used an unsavoury term to describe the paper. If this was such a big inter-country

deal struck at the highest level of leadership, it will certainly weaken India's stand in many an international issue.

G.B. SIVANANDAM, Coimbatore

Access to spaces

The article, "Women and public spaces" ('Open' page, January 30), reminded me of my wife's agonising experience years ago. It was near Deepavali and she wanted to buy a sari from a famous textile outlet. Being a working day, I asked her to go early and wait for me in front of the store. When I was about to start out from office, I received a message about a new pending assignment. I managed to reach the store late in the evening, but my wife was not

to be seen. Her angry response to my telephone call was that she was back in the house and that she did not want any sari at all. Back home there were tears and a statement: "You just asked me to wait in a public place. I was standing there for two hours and so many people were staring at me." It was obviously an uncomfortable experience. When can women claim their rightful access to public spaces?

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

It's Nadal

It is astounding that, collectively, the triumvirate – Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer – is still holding strong. It would seem as if their fingers cannot be prised off the

biggest trophies. Meanwhile, none would have been more disappointed than Djokovic who messed up a golden opportunity to create tennis history.

R. SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

■ Nadal has proved that he is made of sterner stuff. That said, Daniil Medvedev played a fantastic game too.

C.K. PREM KUMAR, Palakkad, Kerala

■ Nadal has proved that age is no barrier to sporting excellence. His work ethic and perseverance will be a beacon of inspiration for young athletes for decades.

KANNAN B., Bengaluru



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A year on from Myanmar’s ‘annus horribilis’

The road ahead looks dark and New Delhi’s outreach needs to be guided by realism and pragmatism



RAJIV BHATIA

The coup in Myanmar will be a year old tomorrow. On February 1 last year, the military seized power, violating the Constitution. A decade-long experiment with hybrid democracy ended abruptly, paving the way for violence, oppression and instability. The road ahead looks dark, but diplomatic efforts are under way to bring amelioration.

Internal scene

The Opposition camp has called for a nationwide silent strike that ends in mass clapping, an act representing the indignation and the frustration of the people. They are angry with the military that has oppressed them and imprisoned their elected leaders. They are also frustrated with the international community as it failed to show up with a magic wand to restore democracy. Some of their leaders are promising freedom from military rule by the end of 2022. But few believe them.

The military leadership has persisted in marching on the dangerous path it chose last January. It convinced itself that the November 2020 elections were fraudulent, resulting in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. It feared that, armed with a strong popular mandate, she would clip their wings and establish full democracy. President Win Myint and Daw Suu Kyi were arrested and there was a brutal clamp-down. The result: 1,498 people have been killed and 11,787 imprisoned till January 27, 2022, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Besides, a sizeable number of security officials have been killed. An exodus of people seeking refuge in neighbouring countries followed, which included over 15,000 people to Mizoram, India.

After the coup, the Opposition was active in articulating people’s anger. A parallel government named the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed. Slowly it lost momentum as Naypyitaw denounced NUG as “ter-



The ground has shifted: “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who no longer dominates the political narrative as she did before the coup.” Picture shows Daw Suu Kyi during a voter education campaign in Shan state, in 2015.

rorists”, and used its overwhelming power to subdue the resistance. The military now has an upper hand although normalcy still eludes the nation. Instability has ruined the economy, with the World Bank terming it as “critically weak”. The crisis also weakened the Government’s efforts to manage the pandemic. In short, Myanmar has just gone through its annus horribilis.

ASEAN’s role

Attention has now been focused on mediation by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It began well by persuading Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the regime’s supremo, to accept the ‘Five-Point Consensus’ comprising, inter alia, the cessation of violence, national dialogue and mediatory efforts by ASEAN. Insiders recall that Min Aung Hlaing’s consent was implicit. This became explicit when Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin formally conveyed Myanmar’s “commitment” to the plan last August. But the military resiled from its implementation. With uncharacteristic firmness, ASEAN barred the Senior General’s participation in its summits. It offered representation at the non-political level which Myanmar turned down.

In this impasse, Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen, the current ASEAN Chair, has adopted a softer approach which is backed by Thailand and Laos. It aims at adjusting to the military’s refusal to compromise on its key requirements such as denial of access to Daw Suu Kyi for

ASEAN mediators, and little dilution of the 2008 Constitution. Other ASEAN States led by Indonesia are opposed to Cambodia’s diplomacy. But long-time ASEAN watchers believe that through further consultations, the grouping will craft internal consensus and re-adapt its negotiating mandate.

Whether this happens on Cambodia’s watch, or later under the Indonesian leadership, remains to be seen. A key person to watch is Noeleen Heyzer, the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres’s special envoy, who could help both the UN and ASEAN to craft a modus vivendi for Myanmar.

Other players

The West exerts influence in Myanmar, but it has been unable to comprehend the dynamics of power. The United States and the European Union have not accurately assessed the military’s resolve and core conviction that without its driving role, national unity and integrity would disappear. The western policy to promote democracy and impose sanctions against the military have produced minimal results.

The media paid huge attention to Russia’s endeavours to woo Myanmar by increasing its defence cooperation since the coup. But the principal player is China, not Russia, despite evident coordination between the two. Beijing enjoys enormous leverage in the ‘Golden Land’ through its control over several ethnic armed organisations, projects covered by the Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI), the regime’s protection via veto in the Security Council, and a thick cheque book. Whoever wields power in Naypyitaw develops stakes in close partnership with China. But Myanmar’s rulers also desire independence and balance in their external policy, provided the international community gives them the means for it. Japan understands this geopolitical reality, but acting by itself, Tokyo cannot make a difference. It should act in coordination with ASEAN and India.

India’s policy

As the world’s largest democracy, India is always happy to work with fellow democracies, but it has never been in the business of exporting democracy. Nevertheless, it has done much to shape and to strengthen diplomatic efforts at the UN and through its support to ASEAN for putting Myanmar’s transition to democracy back on the rails. This line was reiterated by India’s Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla in his interactions with the top military leadership in December 2021. He was given a patient hearing even though his request to meet Daw Suu Kyi was denied, as was expected. Besides, New Delhi provided one million doses of “Made in India” vaccines, and humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar.

For India, the well-established two-track policy of supporting democracy and maintaining cordial relations with the Government remains in operation. South Block has to protect the state’s interests, guided by realism and pragmatism. It has to discourage a mass influx of refugees; cut the capability of insurgent groups to endanger security in the North-east from Myanmar soil; safeguard the ongoing projects and investments; and, above all, counter China’s growing influence.

Finally, what future awaits Daw Suu Kyi who no longer dominates the political narrative as she did before the coup? Sadly, she faces three choices, all difficult: long imprisonment, foreign exile, or imposed retirement from politics. The last option seems the most likely at present.

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For the Finance Minister to note

The Indian government has to prepare for the introduction of the global minimum tax on MNCs



T.C.A. RAMANUJAM & T.C.A.SANGEETHA

The World Inequality Report 2022 authored by Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman says India is now among the most unequal countries in the world. The bottom 50% of the population earn ₹53,610, while the top 10% earn more than 20 times that. The top 10% and top 1% of the population hold 57% and 22% of the national income, respectively, while the bottom 50% hold just 13%. India stands out as a poor and unequal country with an affluent elite. Inequality today is as great as it was at the peak of western imperialism in the early 20th century. The pandemic has exacerbated it. Nations have become richer but governments have become poor, says the report. The totality of wealth is in private hands. Global multimillionaires have captured a disproportionate share of global wealth growth over the past several decades.

The Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, will take the findings of the report while framing the Budget. The long-standing complaint about corporate houses abusing provisions for tax exemption and deductions was addressed in a unique way by Ms. Sitharaman when she brought in a twin system of tax rates for companies claiming deductions and not claiming deductions. Domestic companies are charged 25% when their turnover is less than ₹250 crore and 30% when their turnover is above ₹250 crore. Suitable surcharges are also levied. A glaring inequality arises in the case of partnership firms; they are taxed at 30%. The idea seems to be to encourage corporatisation of firms. But medium- and small-scale industries find it a pain to go through the legal processes of corporatisation. Promoters of companies devise novel ways to escape the rigour of taxation.

The revolt of the haves

The decline in corporate tax rates reduced government revenue at a time of growing public deficit and declining public wealth. It erodes the progressive nature of the tax system. High-income individuals choose to incorporate their business so that they can shift income from personal income tax to corporate tax. There is also the recent phenomenon of wealthy families of promoters of big corporate houses creating a succession plan through private trusts. Assets are transferred to the trusts. India’s corporate houses

are taking a cue from wealthy families in the West like the Waltons who run Walmart via private trusts. The time has come for the re-introduction of estate duty in India.

Global minimum tax

The Government of India has to prepare for the introduction of the global minimum tax on MNCs, as agreed to by 130 countries in July 2021. The rate then fixed was 15%. This is lower than what working class and middle-class people in high-income countries pay. MNCs are always ahead of the governments. Mark Zuckerberg chose to change his company’s name from Facebook to Metaverse. Google, Apple and Intel are all working on devices to circumvent the minimum global tax. Metaverse will pervade daily life offering new avenues for buying goods and services, communicating with friends and collaborating with colleagues. Metaverse refers to a collection of shared online worlds in which physical augmented and virtual reality converge. The CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella, points out that people can now hangout with friends, work, visit places buy goods and services and attend events on Metaverse. Digital access has not been equitable. This provides a challenge to the implementation of the proposed global minimum tax. Augmented reality attempts to provide a new kind of computing platform so as to find a new source of revenue.

The rate of global minimum tax at 15% on MNCs will mean a gain of \$0.5 billion for India without deductions. The gain will be zero if deductions are allowed. The World Inequality Report suggested a minimum global tax on MNCs at 25%. This will yield \$1.4 billion for India without deductions and \$1.2 billion with deductions of 5%. MNCs and their shareholders have been the main winners from globalisation. Their profits have boomed due to the ever-closer integration of world markets.

Inflation indexing has long been suggested as a way out to sort out the difficulties of the fixed income group.

India is a poor country. Pericles said, “Poverty is no disgrace to acknowledge but it is real degradation not to attempt to overcome.” The Finance Minister will do well to remember Justice Chagla’s famous saying, “Equity and income tax law may be strangers to each other but they are not sworn enemies.” No doubt, our socially conscious Finance Minister will do everything to promote equity while presenting the Budget.

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STATE OF PLAY

New districts, new challenges

The YSRCP government has proposed 13 new districts at a time when A.P. is facing a cash crunch

APPAJI REDDEM

The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government’s proposal to create 13 new districts in Andhra Pradesh on the lines of what has been done in Telangana may ensure good governance but it adds multiple challenges to the existing ones in the State.

As promised before the 2019 Assembly election, the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government has carved out 13 new districts, taking the total number of districts to 26. Each of the 25 Assembly constituencies will now become a district. However, the tribal communities-dominated Araku constituency, which is spread over many districts, has been split into two. Prakasam district will now be the largest in size after the reform and Visakhapatnam will be the smallest. The new districts are set to come into force from April 2.

Objections or suggestions in writing from the people of these districts have been invited within 30 days of the notification. The government’s stated aim is to ensure administrative convenience and better development of all the regions.

The decision comes at a time when Andhra Pradesh is staring at stressed finances, dipping revenues and growing expenditure, largely owing to numerous welfare programmes which were promised before the election. A rough estimate indicates that half the budget goes to employees’ salaries and the other half to welfare. The new districts will require additional infrastructure such as office buildings for the Collectors, Superintendents of Police, and other officials. Carving out borders, building roads and bureaucratic exercises are likely to further burden the State exchequer. Added to this, the stalemate between the government and employees over pay revision doesn’t help. As the district delimitation exercise is expected to be expeditious, support from employees is crucial.

Though objections and suggestions have been invited for 30 days, there seem to be new demands and protests surfacing every other day and so, the matter is likely to stretch beyond 30 days. Some have protested over the choice of names for the proposed districts. There are demands emerging from some districts for new names. There are also complaints that the move will affect people’s identity with their districts and that changes in district headquarters will affect the people. For instance, the proposal to merge agency region Rampachodavaram from East Godavari district with Araku district was resisted by many as the new district headquarters, Paderu, is about 300 km from Rampachodavaram. Some suggest that Rampachodavaram should be made the headquarters. Chintoor, another place in the same district, is over 400 km from the district headquarters Paderu. Similarly, the people of Ongole feel that the district has lost its identity as most parts of it have been merged with two other districts. There was also a demand that Hindupur be made the district headquarters for a new district.

The protests notwithstanding, the State government seems to be on a mission. It has planned nine fishing harbours and three major ports across the coastline besides 13 airports. There are already six airports in the State and two more are in the planning and development stages in Bhogapuram and Nellore. While these mega projects are at different stages of development, the State is also under pressure to repair the highways and district roads which are in bad shape.

With massive projects waiting to be completed and with the State facing a cash crunch, how the Jagan Mohan Reddy government plans to rise up to the new challenge of creating 13 more districts and infrastructure within a short span of time is unclear.

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DATA POINT

Assembly polls 2022: Where Manipur stands

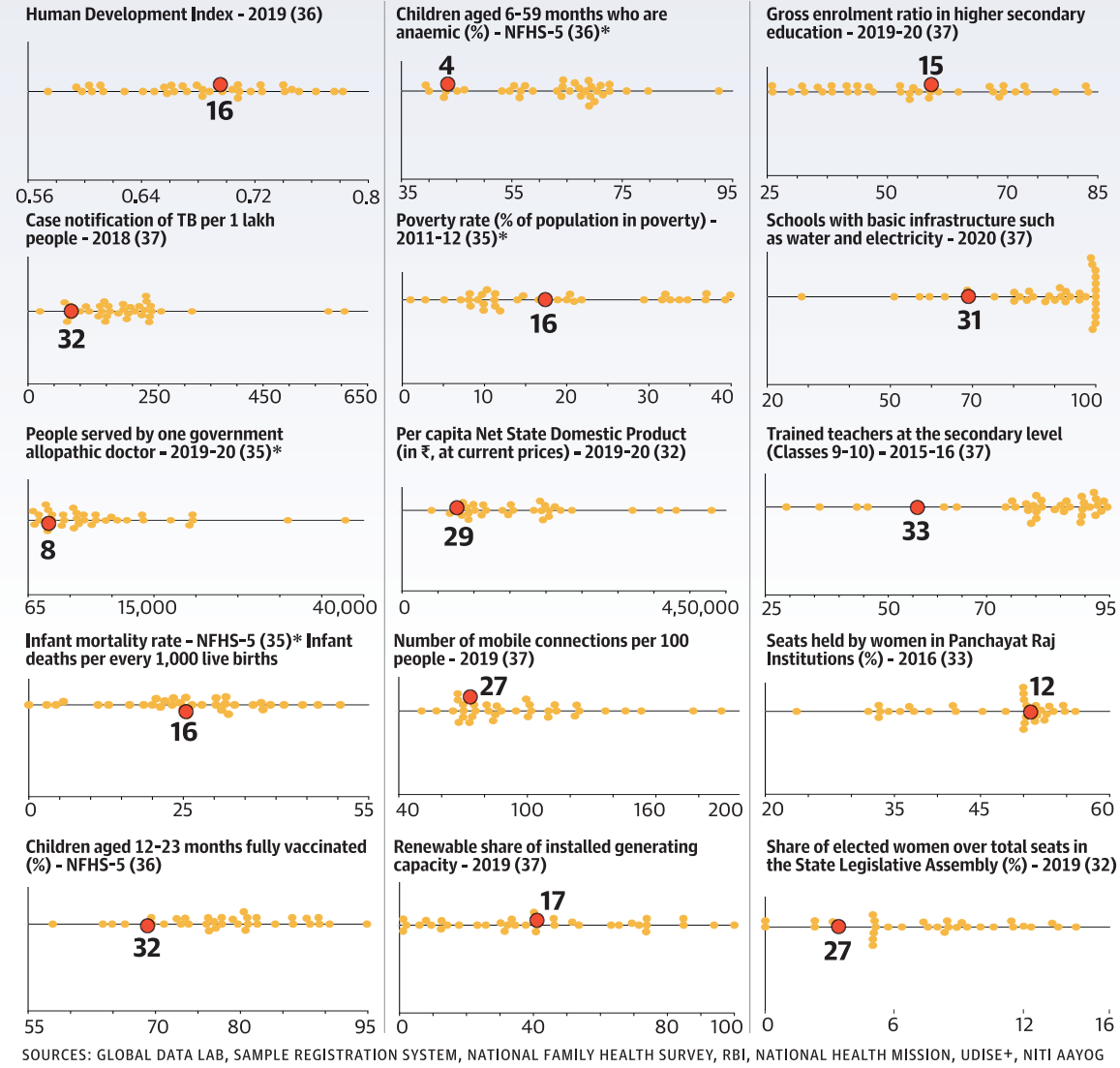


Slow progress: Two Manipuri women weaving fishing nets in their house. Manipur’s per capita GDP stood at ₹75,226 in 2019-20, third-lowest in the country.

Manipur, which is scheduled to have a two-phase election in February and March, is ranked relatively in the middle on the Human Development Index (HDI) among all the Indian States/UTs. Out of 36 States/UTs, it was ranked 16th. The State scores among the lowest in vaccination for children and has a relatively low tuberculosis notification rate. However, it also has a lower share of anaemic children. It is situated in the middle in terms of the poverty rate but its per capita GDP is among the lowest. It also ranks relatively lower on indicators such as availability of basic infrastructure in schools and trained teachers at the secondary level. By The Hindu Data Team

How to read the charts:

Each chart depicts Manipur’s ranking in an indicator among other States/UTs with the relevant data. Each circle corresponds to a State/UT, and Manipur’s position is highlighted. The total number of States/UTs with data for an indicator is mentioned in brackets after the indicator’s name. The number near the Manipur circle indicates its ranking in an indicator out of the States/UTs considered. For instance, Manipur ranked 35 among the 36 States/UTs assessed for HDI. The numbers below the axis indicate the actual value/score of the indicator. Indicators in which the lesser value depicts a better rank are marked by *



The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 31, 1972

Pakistan quits Commonwealth

New Delhi, Jan. 30: In a desperate gamble to shore up its untenable diplomatic stance, Pakistan to-day announced its decision to quit the Commonwealth with immediate effect in protest against the impending recognition of Bangla Desh by Britain and other member countries which had made up their minds to fall in line with the new realities in the sub-continent. The Pakistan Government said in a statement issued in Islamabad this afternoon that it was informed to-day that Britain proposed to recognise Bangla Desh soon. Two other Commonwealth countries, Australia and New Zealand, had notified that they would announce their recognition to-morrow. The Pakistan Radio, which broadcast the statement, recalled President Bhutto’s earlier warning that if Britain and other principal countries of the Commonwealth recognised Bangla Desh, Pakistan would leave the organisation. The statement voiced Pakistan’s strong indignation against the decision of those countries to endorse the “dismemberment” of a member State and put the “seal of respectability” on what it described as an act of blatant aggression contrary in international law and the principles of the United Nations. What had apparently provoked Pakistan to resort to this extreme step was not so much the decision of these white Commonwealth countries to recognise Bangla Desh as the active interest they were taking in persuading the other European and Asian countries to accord similar recognition.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 31, 1922

Russian famine

London, Jan 26: The famine expert, Sir Benjamin Robertson, reports telegraphically from Buzuluk that he has found conditions in Saratov and Samara provinces even greater than he had been led to believe. The personal inspection of villages showed that there was practically no food left and that relief was hopelessly inadequate. Whole households especially adults were literally dying of starvation. Sir B. Robertson testifies to the devoted work of the “Save the Children” fund in Saratov and the Society of Friends in Buzuluk. The work has been carried out in a practical systematic manner, food exclusively reaching those for whom it was intended. Sir B. Robertson recommends systematic feeding of as many as possible of adults who number over a million in these two areas until the harvest comes. Relief at present is being largely confined to children.

BusinessLine

MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 2022

Back to school

Opening schools, colleges should be backed by plans to offset two years of de-learning

With the third wave proving to be infectious but mild, some States have rightly decided to fully open schools and colleges, while others, oddly enough, remain undecided. Tamil Nadu and Telangana have mandated opening of all schools and colleges from next month, while Karnataka's announcement pertains to schools alone. Rajasthan and Haryana will open higher school classes, while Maharashtra is opening schools in Mumbai and Pune. But West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (where election crowds are kosher) and Delhi remain closed for now. The ideal way to go is for schools and colleges (the latter opening for children who are fully vaccinated) to open fully with some Covid protocols in place, which can be relaxed as the pandemic retreats. Any further delay in opening institutions cannot be justified at a time when the pandemic has ceased to be a major threat to health; children are neither a huge threat to the rest of the population, and nor are they a vulnerable group. They have been locked out for too long. What has strengthened the case for opening is that 75 per cent of the eligible adult population is fully vaccinated, with adolescents lining up for their jabs. State governments, such as Delhi, have been far more keen

to open up shopping complexes and cinema halls than schools and colleges. As a result, India has earned the dubious distinction of keeping its educational institutions closed for longer periods than most countries.

There has been no official acknowledgment of the damaging impact of this closure on 40 crore children and adolescents. Online education has led to poor learning outcomes, with the underprivileged being out of it altogether for lack of digital access and the rest being forced to put up with incomprehensible teaching sessions. Yet, no government, Centre or State, has spoken about this epidemic of de-learning that now needs to be addressed on a war footing, particularly among the poor. A survey by NCERT has claimed that 70 per cent of the students, teachers and parents find online learning "joyful and satisfactory". This cannot be a starting point, as institutions reopen after two years. It may not be a bad idea to drop an academic year. This 'loss' should be seen against the larger prospect of students failing to cope later and dropping out. Children who have retreated into child labour need to be weaned back into schools. A SCHOOL survey conducted last August among 1,400 children between grades 1 and 8 (largely from rural, under-privileged backgrounds) across the country reveals that only 8 per cent of rural children and 24 per cent of urban children are studying online regularly. Access to resources has widened the learning gap between the poor and the rich, limiting the former's prospects.

The Centre and States should work out out-of-the-box ways to bridge the learning gap in absolute and relative terms. The Budget must take the education crisis seriously. Sadly, this finds no mention in campaign speeches, where political parties are sparring over jobs without sparing a thought for a broken, post-Covid education system.

Spring of hope, or winter of despair?

Bitcoins and cyptocurrencies are flaky, speculative assets, best regarded with a healthy dose of suspicion

PRATIP KAR

I was debating whether to retain the title of the piece, or change it to "Down the Rabbit Hole" because the brave new world of bitcoins and cryptocurrencies (for this piece, I will call the two loosely as cryptos) we will enter, is strange, confusing, defies common sense and logic, but hard to escape.

While Bitcoins may have got the geeks and less than 40 age group excited, what about the economists? Nouriel Roubini, a well known US economist, appearing before a US Senate Committee on Banking in October 2018, called Bitcoin "the mother or father of all scams and bubbles" and blockchain, the most "over-hyped — and least useful — technology in human history." Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman debating on Crypto on November 3, 2018 (video available on YouTube) said the worth of Cryptos depends on what people decide; if people decided it is worthless, as there is no backstop, it can drop to zero.

US Federal Reserve's Chairman Jeremy Powell views these as "really speculative assets." Despite such strong views, going by the media reports and the websites of Cryptos and the broadcast of the Crypto exchanges globally, one would tend to believe that cryptos have created a global mania, and the number of people jazzed about these is increasing.

A rational prognosis of whether it is the spring of hope, or the winter of despair, for cryptos, is not easy, for one has to tread between two strong irreconcilable and anti-

thetical views and we must necessarily look only at hard, unassailable facts.

A few hard facts

Cryptos and the likes –

(i) are not tangible assets like gold, silver, metals, and though called currencies, these are not fiat currencies like the rupee, pound, dollar. These are complicated computer codes, or hashing algorithms, which are beyond the comprehension of lay persons. To accept these as currencies requires a paradigm shift in our thinking;

(ii) are not legal tenders, guaranteed or value underwritten by a Central Bank, or the State. So unlike the fiat currencies, Cryptos have no backstops. One may say these are a sort of community currency; its value depends on what the community says. Recently El Salvador recognised Bitcoin as a legal tender. The IMF is now putting pressure on the country to revoke the recognition;

(iii) are not issued by any Central Bank. Cryptos, come into existence through a highly energy intensive process called mining, which requires an enormous network of large number of high end computers forming the blockchain which forms

the corner stone of Cryptos;

(iv) are unregulated. No government, Central Bank, or regulatory body in any country, regulates these. Regulators are only providing broad hints of their intent to enforce regulations; no country except China has banned it. India has been trying to bring a law but has postponed it for the second time.



Speculative fears Cryptocurrencies are unregulated by central banks REUTERS

boom and sell dreams. The absence of a regulator is giving rise to cunning businesses attempting to piggyback the crypto boom;

(v) are exposed to scams. For example a digital currency based on the Netflix series "Squid Game" soared in value before collapsing dramatically in a few weeks as its promoters quickly pulled out their funds, causing a loss of several million dollars to investors. It was shut down by US SEC;

(vi) are traded on exchanges which are at best trading platforms, and unlike stock exchanges have no trade guarantee mechanisms or risk containment measures;

(vii) are inherently volatile with no economically or financially sound explanations for the frenzied volatility. Bitcoin price veered around \$60k+ in September 2021; it came down in a roller coaster fall to \$40k+ in December 2021 and is currently trading around \$36k+ - impacted by the Fed monetary policy.

An agnostic prognosis

Let me try a "reasonably agnostic prognosis" of the immediate future of cryptos.

1. The level of usage of a currency determines the confidence people have in the currency. For example the US dollar, can be spent almost anywhere in the world. Despite the hype, the cryptos are nowhere close to wide acceptance.

2. Though Satoshi Nakamoto had envisioned cryptos to be above the trust and support of traditional institutions like the banks, and the US Fed, the behaviour of crypto prices and the sell off in the past few days before and after the Fed's monetary policy announcement, only shows that it would be height of ludicrousness to expect cryptos to remain insulated from traditional policies which influence financial markets.

3. As cryptos are risky assets, higher interest rates across the yield curve make risk assets like Cryptos relatively less attractive

India's 'sticky' core inflation puzzle

A new consumption basket based on current trends is needed for inflation measurement

R GOPALAN/MC SINGHI

During April 2016 to October 2021 (67 months), the overall CPI inflation was above 4 per cent in 27 months, above upper ceiling of 6 per cent for 14 months, hovered between 2-4 per cent for 24 months, and stayed below 2 per cent for 2 months. Both CPI and WPI have shown upward trend since Q3 of 2019-20 when GDP declining from Q3 of 2019-20. One reason for elevated CPI and WPI was increased global commodity prices including fuel.

Growth started decelerating from Q4 of 2018. This deceleration was due to moderation in global output growth, deceleration in growth in global trade, domestic expectation, lower investment, and factors such as demonetisation, and stabilisation issues relating to GST. From March 2020, growth has been affected by the pandemic.

Monetary policy considers inflation based on CPI. In inflation based on CPI, food inflation has been more volatile. Food inflation is seen to have a standard deviation exceeding the mean inflation during 2017-19. Inflation of non-food items, core (non-food, non-fuel) and services have been steady and sticky as well.

Variation in inflation is seen to be clearly contributed by food inflation. However, food and fuel infla-

tion are generally believed to be structural as their demand is less elastic to prices. Hence price rise is more supply related and, therefore, somewhat insensitive to monetary policy. If we seek guidance from inflationary expectations numbers in India, they are far removed from the inflation that is realised later.

Core inflation stickiness

The relative stickiness of non-food and core inflation is somewhat puzzling. We witnessed two opposite shocks: one, upsurge due to accommodative monetary policy and the other, deceleration due to moderating growth. Besides being sticky, core inflation has started moving upwards since October 2019. Fuel prices have been high in the recent past thanks to taxes and duties. An assessment of CPI in past few years indicates that food was the prime mover of inflation until 2019 which started declining since then.

The normal behaviour in India is that food inflation spills over to services, but we found that deceleration in food inflation did not affected inflation of services. They remain sticky. We attempted an exercise in correlating overall inflation with its various components. We found that correlation with food inflation was very high, while correlation with non-food, core and services are insignificant.

We attempted to calculate stand-



Price concerns ISTOCK.COM/ANDRZEJ ROSTEK

ard deviation of core inflation with its various components. We found that except during 2014-15, the standard deviation of core inflation with overall CPI inflation continued to remain very low. They were moving in narrow band around mean CPI. The only exception was in 2019-20 where inflation averaged 3.82 per cent. On further examination it was seen that sticky core inflation was not due to prices of consumer durables which had remained moderate during 2015-2020. Inflation of services remained sticky and this contributed to the stickiness of core inflation in line with their share in weight for non-food commodities.

CPI numbers are arrived at based on consumption expenditure of household as observed in NSSO survey of 2011-12. This base has not yet been updated. The government addressed the hunger problem during pandemic through free supply

of essential foodgrains to the most vulnerable section of population.

This programme has been extended till March 2022. Though income of this group has been considerably eroded, essential foodgrains were available to this section of population. It is known that inflation has a differential impact on the different classes of household as the consumption basket differs for these households.

Aggregate CPI conceals the food and non-food expenditure composition for these households. We did an exercise to decompose CPI with revised weights to food and non-food and observed the different inflation patterns. For consumers where food accounts for 80 per cent of expenditure, inflation sharply decelerated during the pandemic and the gap between CPI with food weight 80 per cent and CPI with food weight 20% widened after Q3 and Q4 of 2019-20.

The segment of population where food accounts for 80 per cent of expenditure is not only most sensitive segment from the viewpoint of inflation but are also vulnerable to slow down in output growth and employment.

Percentile-based consumption expenditure and commodity composition available in the NSSO surveys indicate that consumption basket differs for each class of consumer. Labour Bureau compiles consumer price index for agricul-

ture and rural labourers. This statistic attempts to capture vulnerabilities at rural level to some extent.

However, their base goes back much beyond 2011-12. If we look at the consumption pattern based on NSSO Survey and that which is derived from national income accounts, we found that there is a continued downward bias to the consumption expenditure based on NSSO Surveys.

This downturn bias has only continued to accentuate. Despite this difference in NSSO and NAS (National Accounts Statistics) private consumption expenditure, inflation as measured by private consumption expenditure deflator and the overall CPI were nearly aligned until Q4 of 2019.

However, in the last six quarters, they have moved in different directions. This is a clear indication that commodity composition in the NSSO Survey has completely changed. A new composition based on current consumption should be immediately established if we should get a clear understanding of the behaviour of the CPI.

This has significant impact on the monetary policy and certainly on the direction for taking investment decisions by various economic agents.

Gopalan is former Finance Secretary, and Singhi is a Senior Economic Advisor, Ministry of Finance

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



BELOW THE LINE



Greening the Budget

Buzz in the corridors of power is that the upcoming Budget will be packed with reliefs for 'Green' industries and measures that will boost the shift towards a green economy. Given the new obligations that India has taken at the international level— don't be surprised if the upcoming Budget gives a big push to green technology and takes the Hydrogen Mission forward to decarbonise the economy!

Let's hope the rupee does not turn green after the Budget, quipped a corporate observer who

also expects a 'green' Budget. While one may have to wait and watch for the Budget proposals, one gaint 'green' step the government has taken is to cut down on the vast printing of Budget documents. Most people have to settle for reading Budget documents out of a mobile App or the government website to go through the fingerprint!

A train of woes

Finding the right balance between defending one's position and showing empathy towards those in Opposition can be a difficult task. Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw found himself in a similar awkward situation when protests from agitating candidates against the Indian Railways latest recruitment drive turned violent and a need was felt to handle the matter "sensitively".

The Minister assured that all concerns of the candidates will be

heard. However, simultaneously, the Railways went at length to also explain that the procedures followed while holding the recruitment tests were duly notified and above board. A ready solution to such tricky situations is of course setting up a scrutiny committee, but unfortunately it is a short-term one. The big question facing the government now is whether the committee's proposal, expected by March 4, satisfies the candidates or will it lead to further protests?

Fashion (mis)statement?

A leopard cannot change its spots as much as a dyed-in-the-cool Marxist, his sartorial tastes. But Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, now in Dubai on way back home after medical consultations in the US, set the tongues wagging after he appeared in spotless white full-sleeved shirt and jet-black pants as he emerged from the air-

craft. The patented white half-sleeved shirt and *mundu*, had been replaced with a attire that represented a capitalistic practice, and a bourgeois way of life. His political opponents are wondering if his latest style statement would reflect on governance after he returns to the State next week.

Chennai Connect

The connection between chief economic advisors and academic institutions in and around Chennai is getting stronger. V Anantha Nageswaran, who has been appointed as CEA a few days back, was the former Dean of IFMR Graduate School of Business and currently Distinguished Visiting Professor of Economics at Krea University. Former CEA and RBI governor Raghuram Rajan is a member of the Governing Council of Krea University. RM Honavar, who succeeded Manmohan Singh as CEA, was IFMR's second director.

HPCL's HaPpyShop

Interesting days are ahead for country's fuel marketing companies as they diversify from selling auto fuel to wate.

Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd has worked out an ambitious non-fuel retailing biz strategy. Recently it announced opening of two more convenience stores under its brand name 'HaPpyShop'.

These stores have been opened at Bandra West in Mumbai and Millennium Retail Outlet in Visakhapatnam.

Customers will be able to browse and shop the merchandise on HPCL's 'HP Pay App' (available on App Store & Play Store), and have goods delivered at home. HPCL has also started marketing branded packaged drinking water under the name 'Paani@Club HP' at its retail outlets.

Our Bureaus



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Nadal proves doubters wrong

The Australian Open win shows that tennis is the single biggest thing that continues to drive him

In many ways, this Australian Open (which he won), encapsulates everything that sets Rafael Nadal apart — the fight after the frailties, the undying hunger to play on at 35, instead of spending his days fishing on the island of Mallorca, the inspiring ability to find new ways to adapt to different surfaces and younger opponents, and, above all, finding joy in simply being able to play tennis to date. In the second half of last year, a chronic foot injury after failing to defend his French Open throne inflicted a crushing blow to Nadal. Injuries aren't a novelty for the Spaniard. He has had them on his knee, back, wrist, hip, hamstring and foot — each essential for an elite tennis player — through various points of his career and he believes this limited him from achieving further heights. And last year, as he went through another lengthy rehabilitation process, it emerges that Nadal wondered if the time had come. But like he so often does in a five-set slugfest that he so often wins — including the one on Sunday — Nadal pushed a little more in his quest to get back on court. This, at 35, an age by which most had predicted that his playing days would be long over from the wear and tear on the body due to his brutally taxing physical game style. But here was Nadal, back in Melbourne for his 17th appearance in the season-opening Grand Slam, proving all doubters wrong. More importantly, waving goodbye to his own goodbye thoughts from a few months ago.

And all through the ups and downs, the months spent recovering off court and the days battling on it, the injuries and titles, the doubts and the records, the one constant is the Spaniard's ability to remain grounded and controversy-free. It's something not many of his contemporaries, and indeed some of the next generation challengers, are able to do over a sustained period of time. After more than two decades on the professional tour, Nadal still talks about his gratitude for being able to play the sport, especially in times of a pandemic. At times, he says, some things are more important than tennis.

Yet, tennis is the single biggest thing that continues to drive the champion. He said that in his post-match speech that he hopes to be back in Australia next year so it is clear a record 21st Grand Slam title hasn't changed his hunger to play. And, of course, win.

Pegasus inquiry: Take note of the NYT report

A controversy over the alleged purchase and potential use of Pegasus spyware reignited last week after the *New York Times* (NYT) reported that India bought the sophisticated malware as part of a \$2-billion weapons package. With a Supreme Court (SC)-appointed panel probing the charges of hacking, the government officially remained silent on the report, though Union minister of state VK Singh hurled a barb at the newspaper, and the Opposition renewed its attacks on the administration. The issue is likely to roil the budget session of Parliament that begins on Monday.

Since a global investigative consortium reported in July last year that politicians, journalists and activists — including staff of this newspaper — were potentially targeted using Pegasus, the government has refused to clear its stance on whether the spyware was purchased. In Parliament and in the SC, the Centre has evaded questions on whether it either bought or authorised the use of Pegasus. This stand, coupled with Pegasus manufacturer NSO Group's statement that it only sells to vetted governments, has fuelled partisan political attacks.

The charges in the NYT report are serious. The three-member panel set up by the apex court should take note of it and include it in the scope of its ongoing inquiry. A fresh petition has already been filed in the top court on the basis of the report. If the Pegasus revelations are true, it represents a serious breach of fundamental rights and a violation of the compact between a State and its citizens. Technological tools often operate in a grey legal zone, but the right to personal liberty is one of the foundational principles of a modern democracy and cannot be compromised. The snooping charges deserve a thorough and impartial probe, and the people, the truth.

Budget 2022 should lend a helping hand

Give workers a two-year PF contribution holiday; extend the ₹5 lakh health insurance to the 'missing middle'; and make the buying of government securities under RBI's direct scheme tax free

The political view is that Budget 2022 will be an election budget as five states, including Uttar Pradesh, go to polls in the next two months. The economic view is that it is difficult to use the Union Budget to benefit the citizens of just five states, and there isn't enough money to give the pre-2009 election farm loan waiver-equivalent to everybody. The direction of the government spends and reliefs are a manifestation of the core idea that drives that year's budget. By all indications, Budget 2022 is going to be a helping hand budget — a budget that has proposals to stop the slide back into poverty of the newly non-poor population cohort and to help lower-income households in the organised sector find the money to spend.

India needs a consumption spend boost to continue the momentum to business created by the increased spend by the government in the pandemic years. The big push to capital expenditure by the Union govern-

ment in Budget 2021 will begin to show its multiplier impact in the next few months. The next round of investments must be done by the private sector to take the baton of growth forward. For that to happen, consumption must be buoyant. But deeply stressed household balance sheets, according to the ICE360 Survey 2021, and rising inflation is raising concerns about the slip back into poverty of a fifth of Indian households and for another fifth to cut down on consumption drastically.

But the policy question for a 1.3 billion heterogeneous population is this: How do you solve for a country that has a per capita income of \$2,000 (World Bank), but has more than 20% people below the poverty line (Reserve Bank of India), some of the world's richest people with over 100 dollar-billionaires and millions of mass affluent in the middle?

Those in the top 40% of households have increased their income and wealth. Revenge shopping by the rich has buoyed the luxury and high-end consumer goods markets. The mass affluent, most of who are in the organised sector, too, have largely kept their heads above the water. The middle 20% have suffered, but they have had some assets (gold holdings, for example) to fall back on. It is the next 40% that has suffered the deepest loss in income. For those below the poverty line, a mix of Mahatma Gandhi

National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and free or highly subsidised food, helped by the one-nation-one-card, have got them through the pandemic without starvation. It is the quintile of population that is just above the poor that will slip back into poverty without some intervention. Also called the missing middle, this comprises the first-generation migrant who is just at the edge of survival, the low-income earners in the organised sector and the vast army of unorganised workers who need the helping hand badly this year.

There are two things the Union Budget 2022 can do to extend targeted help to the vulnerable sections and to give an income boost to those whose purchasing power has gone down due to lower incomes, higher medical costs and inflation. And one way to get those with the money to secure their savings with the government, which needs it to fund its deficit.

One, for the organised sector workers who are a part of the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), give a two-year contribution holiday to those who want to avail it. EPFO contributions (12% of basic salary by the employee matched by the employer) are voluntary after a threshold of ₹15,000 a month of income. However, most offices make it a mandatory cut. The government can advise firms to offer this option to eligible employees. However, the



Monika Halan



India is just emerging out of a once-in-a-hundred-years catastrophic event. We need to just stay afloat rather than split hairs about pre-pandemic growth rate trend lines

SANJEEV VERMA/HT PHOTO

employer's contribution continues. If the annual employee contribution is about ₹62,000 crore, and even half the people take this option, it is almost ₹30,000 crore of additional purchasing power in the wallets of the organised sector workers. This might get deployed in a mix of debt repayment and consumption. In May 2021, the employee EPFO contribution reduction by two percentage points from 12% to 10% did not move the needle too much in terms of consumption. It will have to be a big announcement that will get the attention of the people who might then push their employers to give them this option.

Two, extend the ₹5 lakh health insurance benefit through the Ayushman Bharat scheme that is available to the poor to the "missing middle" — the unorganised sector (drivers, domestic workers, hawkers and delivery staff to name a just a few). The challenge for any policy intervention has been the transmission of State benefits to this "missing middle". To the 24 crore e-shram card holders, extend the benefit of this scheme. To

pay for it, allow the rich to also avail, but pay double of what it costs the government. There is market failure in the private health insurance market, the rich will pay for a cover that works, even if the benefit is just ₹5 lakh.

Three, how to get the rich to make available their savings to the government rather than punt on the crypto casino? Make buying government securities through RBI Retail direct tax-free for investors. Encourage RBI to use a better retail interface to attract the retail investor into zero-risk government bonds. If held to maturity, there is no risk on these bonds of price fluctuations.

And finally, as we decode Budget 2022, we need to remember that India is just emerging out of a once-in-a-hundred-years catastrophic event. We need to just stay afloat rather than split hairs about pre-pandemic growth rate trend lines.

Monika Halan is an author and adjunct professor at NISM

The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



UP polls: Which way will Dalits go this time?

Uttar Pradesh (UP)'s Karhal assembly seat is all over the news these days as Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav is going to contest the election from there.

An incident in this constituency from 1974 serves as an indicator of Dalit politics in the state. That year, the Congress ticket was given to a woman who had nothing to do with politics till then. The Congress had not won from there earlier, but the candidate thought that she was in with a chance if she could get the marginalised and women on her side.

During the campaign, she met a Dalit family and found that the head of the family was a good poet in the local language. Impressed with the candidate, the Dalit man offered to attend Congress rallies and public meetings to recite his poetry. Soon his melodious voice and verse began attracting large crowds. Since the poems were largely in praise of the party and candidate, casteist muscle men began to chafe at the bit. So, the Congress lost but managed to save its deposit in the constituency for the first time.

One evening, the candidate found the poet at her doorstep covered in blood. He had brought his frightened wife and small children there in the hope of shelter. The musclemen had beaten him and threatened to kill him. During polling, Dalits could not cast their votes in almost half the polling booths. He was beaten up as a warning to Dalits to not try and vote in the future as well. No one knew then that such incidents would prove a game changer.

Far from this scene, a man named Kanshi Ram was planning, in a systematic manner, to prevent such incidents. After much contemplation, in 1981, he laid the foundation of the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4). Encouraged by the support his organisation received, he founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984.



Mayawati will begin campaigning from February 2. In 2007, she was able to turn political equations on their head. Will she be able to do so this time?

DEEPAK GUPTA/HT

Within just six years, his movement gathered such strength that SP supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav joined hands with him to take on the Ram mandir issue in Ayodhya. He reached the Lok Sabha after winning from Etawah for the first time in 1991. After that, things moved quickly. Four years later, Kanshi Ram's chosen heir, Mayawati, was elected chief minister of UP in June 1995. No one could have predicted this seismic social change in the span of just 10 years.

Since then, the Dalit electorate has emerged as a major political force in UP. A total of 86 seats in UP is reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In the 2017 election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 70 of these seats. The SP, which won an absolute majority in 2012, came up trumps by winning 58 of these seats. When the BSP got a majority in 2007, its victory in 62 of these reserved seats was a major factor in its success. However, these reserved seats are just symbolic, SC and ST voters also influence the election results in general seats. Which way will these voters go this time?

Dalit voters have changed their preferences many times in India's most populous state. Earlier they threw in their lot with the Congress, later the BSP was their preferred party. After that, the BJP made inroads into this vote bank.

Broadly speaking, the Dalits supported the Congress and the BSP for about three decades each. Now, Dalit mindsets have changed. Young voters do not stick with one particular leader for too long. Will the BJP be able to make a deeper dent in the BSP vote bank this time? The saffron party is hard at work on this. The state government has provided poor Dalits numerous facilities including an increase in free food grain.

It is often said that Dalit and backward voters do not vote together. This is a half-truth. The SP and BSP formed a coalition government in the 1990s. This did not last long as the personal ambitions of the leaders got in the way. Mayawati went a step further in 2007 when she forged a Dalit-Brahmin alliance. Had she been able to keep this intact, she would not only have risen much further in politics but would also have become the architect of a unique social reform. She was not able to do that and the SP moved into that space.

Mayawati, who has been pretty quiet till now, will begin her formal election campaign from February 2. I recall that in 2007, she was able to, despite considerable odds, turn political equations on their head. Will she be able to do so this time?

There are many such questions that are up in the air as polling day draws near. But, we will only know what impact caste equations, social development and economic growth will have on these crucial polls once the results are out. But these elections are likely to throw up a few surprises.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan Times*
The views expressed are personal

{ NARENDRA MODI } PRIME MINISTER



Corruption is like a termite which makes the country hollow. Why wait for 2047 to get rid of it? This is work all countrymen and today's youth have to do together. we have to do it as soon as possible.



India and Israel are not just friends, but strategic partners

What Israel and India have achieved together since the establishment of formal diplomatic ties on January 29, 1992, is unprecedented. The relations between our two ancient civilisations date back thousands of years and the Jewish community in India is one of the cornerstones of these ties.

Jews have been living in India peacefully for generations. They never suffered persecution or anti-semitism. The welcoming Indian society is what allowed them to flourish and become an integral part of this amazing mosaic. During the last 30 years, bilateral ties have matured in several fields: Health and innovation, agriculture and water, trade and economic activities, science and technology, research and development, defence and homeland security, art and culture, tourism and space.

Our relationship with India is no longer only a close friendship, but a multi-faceted strategic partnership. This is evident from the many high-level visits, including reciprocal visits by presidents and prime ministers. More high-level visits are planned for the coming year.

India is one of our major partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The areas in which our cooperation focuses on are representative of Israel's continuing interests in the Indo-Pacific: Overcoming the global pandemic, fighting terrorism, expanding trade, and addressing the threat posed by climate change.

Since the onset of Covid-19, Israel has coordinated with India on research, organised medical delegations, exchanged medical equipment, and arranged free women's health clinics. Both countries have agreed to a mutual recognition of vaccine certificates.

We have witnessed a steady growth in every field of cooperation, including defence. Israel was among the first to "Make in India, Make With India" even before the "Make in India" campaign began. We have also seen many high-level visits by Indian military leaders to Israel as well as India's recent participation in the Blue Flag exercise hosted by the Israeli Air Force.

Both countries have understood that in order to be sustainable, this partnership must be nurtured from the roots and encouraged at

the stage of academic cooperation. Beginning by bringing students and academics together, we expand the horizons of our shared knowledge. Already, 10% of the foreign students in Israel are Indian and more cooperation is in the pipeline.

Israel is the start-up nation, and we have so much to share and learn from our friends in India. Already, we have seen a substantial increase in business ventures between start-ups and tech companies of both countries. Green energy is another sector where we are proud to deepen our cooperation. Recently

Israel joined the India-led International Solar Alliance. Together, our countries can play a major role in the global fight against the climate crisis.

Agriculture and water security are vital aspects of our partnership with India. What began over 30 years ago with the arrival of Israeli drip irrigation in India has evolved into 29 Centres of Excellence under the Indo-Israeli Agricultural Project with MASHAV. This is the biggest agriculture project in which the government of Israel is involved anywhere in the world, and it touches the livelihoods of millions of Indian farmers.

In the field of water, many Israeli-led projects have been implemented in India, the most recent being the flagship water project in Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh. To further strengthen our cooperation, we have appointed for the first time a special envoy - an expert in water resource management - to work with government officials and industry.

The task before us is to continue to strengthen and deepen our relationship and to tap the almost unlimited scope of our bilateral cooperation. Our young, fast-growing and knowledge-based societies and economies provide us with the human and material resources to achieve our bilateral goals. I can confidently say that the foundations of our relations are strong and will allow us to build upon them in taking our relations to new and unprecedented heights.

Naor Gilon is ambassador of Israel to India
The views expressed are personal

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



Deeper correction

Geo-politics & monetary policy have increased market risks

Investor sentiment has changed for the worse, leading to the end of a long bull run. Ironically, stock valuations are falling, even though an economic recovery is still in progress and the pandemic is easing its grip. India, which was among the best-performing markets of 2021, could experience one of the more extreme corrections as sentiment changes. Rupee equity valuations are the highest among emerging markets and the rupee itself may be under pressure, given heavy foreign portfolio investment (FPI) selling and a rising trade deficit. The downturn is partly due to geopolitical tensions in Ukraine. But investors have also turned cautious in the face of higher inflation, and threats of tightening liquidity. The Russia-Ukraine situation could affect crude oil and gas supply, even if it doesn't result in an armed conflict.

Sanctions targeting Russia would impact one of the world's largest energy exporters, and key gas pipelines supplying the European Union run through the potential conflict zone. Hence, fears of potential supply disruption have led to spiking energy prices, even though global supply is in surplus over demand. High energy costs are adding an impetus to global inflation. The Fed started making hawkish noises in September. It has since accelerated tapering off its bond-buying programme, reducing hard currency liquidity. In its latest policy, the Fed has signalled a series of rate hikes. Some investment advisors are betting there could be up to seven hikes of the Fed funds rates in calendar 2022. Any Fed hike will most likely induce tightening by the European Central Bank and other large central banks. The drop in liquidity has led to "risk-off" trading attitudes with global traders moving to safer hard-currency assets, such as government treasuries. Foreign portfolio investors have sold Indian stocks worth over ₹66,000 crore since September when the Fed started making hawkish noises and the Nifty is down by 8 per cent from its record highs. Even the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq 100 — America's premier stock indices — are down significantly, indicating high levels of caution on the part of investors.

Given India's own higher inflation rate, with the increase in the wholesale price index in double-digits and consumer price index at a five-month high, the Reserve Bank of India may also have to hasten the policy normalisation process. This would impact already fragile domestic sentiment, given the impending Assembly elections. The upcoming Budget will also have to walk a tightrope. It needs to encourage economic activity but cannot ignore massive increases in government debt and deficit. Corporate India is feeling the inflationary pressure. A look at the October-December 2021 quarterly results of a sample of 507 listed companies indicates that, while revenues are up 24 per cent year-on-year compared to October-December 2020, operating margins have fallen from 35 per cent to 31 per cent. Expenses have mounted sharply, with power and fuel costs up 67 per cent and raw material and component costs up 43 per cent. Investors would have to hope for the Ukraine crisis to end quickly without conflict or sanctions. In that case, inflation may moderate somewhat as energy prices normalise. However, lower liquidity and higher policy rates will mean a downgrade for risky assets and could lead to a deeper correction.

A historic moment

Air India privatisation is a milestone in India's reforms

Air India has officially been handed over to Tata Group, ending its decades of public ownership. The airline, before it was nationalised, had of course been one of the jewels of the Tata empire, and former Tata Group chairman Ratan Tata in particular never seemed to have given up the quest to regain the company that had been set up as Tata Airlines in 1932. The Tatas won the airline at an auction in October with a bid of about ₹18,000 crore as enterprise value, including taking on ₹15,300 crore of the airline's debt. The airline, by some estimates, lost ₹20 crore a day, and reforming it will require extraordinary effort. The Tatas are not new to the sector, given that they part-own the only other full-service airline left in India, Vistara, as well as the Indian arm of low-cost carrier AirAsia. Many Air India planes are relatively new, but they will need extensive refurbishment and it remains to be seen if the service experience can be raised to private-sector standards in the short term, given that the Tatas have committed to not fire any employees for a year.

Yet it is necessary to consider what a historic moment this is — one that many thought would never come. Air India has been a totemic example of mismanagement in the public sector and of the government retaining a hold on sectors in which it has no rational reason to participate. Air India provided dubious utility to the government, soaked up vast amounts of taxpayer cash, and distorted the entire civil aviation industry — but even so all suggestions and even actual attempts to end this state of affairs failed for decades. This privatisation may have come well into Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term, but it is nevertheless a signifier of how far the Indian leadership has come in terms of accepting privatisation in the past decade. It is to be hoped that Air India, in the private sector, demonstrates success and is turned around effectively by Tata Group, as the demonstration effect of a successful privatisation will be considerable. This is, unquestionably, a milestone for post-reform India.

This remarkable effort by the government must not be a one-off. While it deserves full credit for pulling off a successful sale, the government must not rest on its laurels. Much else in the public sector — including elements of the state-controlled banking sector — remains hopelessly inefficient and underperforming, with privatisation the only way out. The sale of Air India can give rise to hopes that other such long desired strategic moves might also be carried out in the coming years. Stake sales of the sort planned for the Life Insurance Corporation of India and others are naturally important, but there is no substitute for the actual transfer of control in the manner that has happened with Air India, since the effect is not just to raise revenue for the government but also to ensure that the assets are better managed and more productive. It might feel like a long shot to imagine a partial reversal of bank nationalisation. But after the nationalisation of Air India has finally been reversed, it does not seem out of the realms of possibility.

Game theories



BOOK REVIEW

PETER SAGAL

As an adolescent, I fancied myself a devotee of the ancient Chinese board game Go. I had never actually played it, but in one of my favourite novels *Shibumi*, by Trevanian — the super-assassin hero praised Go as a fitting pastime for the kind of warrior/poet/lover he was and that I hoped to become. "Go is to Western chess what philosophy is to double-entry accounting," he says, probably before killing someone with a toothpick. Sadly, when I actually tried to play Go, it turned out be... a board game, and a difficult one at that. I gave it up when I

realised that in return for the labour of truly learning Go, I would become not an enlightened international assassin, but just a guy who could play a game.

Oliver Roeder, a student of games and game theory, is deeply aware of the tension between what games are and what people project onto them. His "group biography" of seven classic games — checkers, chess, Go, backgammon, poker, Scrabble and bridge — is in many ways an interrogation of these questions: Are games more than their rules and playing pieces? Are they metaphors for deeper truths of the human experience? Is chess "life in miniature," as the former world champion Garry Kasparov once said? Or is it just a board game — risk with more rules and a boring map?

Mr Roeder is himself a player, and he structures much of his narrative around his entry in major competitions. He begins with the long history of games, going back 5,000 years, and asks: Why

does almost every society engage in games and why have certain games survived for centuries? His suggested answers range from the simple — because we're bored — to the complex, as presented by the aptly named philosopher of games Bernard Suits, who coined the phrase "lusory mind," that is, a mind freed from practical or real concerns and thus able to ponder immaterial problems.

But this book is not truly a philosophical inquiry. Nor is it a deep consideration of any of the games or their star players, though such people provide much of the joy of the book. There is Marion Tinsley, an abstemious Midwesterner of steady habits and deep religious faith, and the greatest checkers player who's ever lived; and Nigel Richards, an aloof ascetic who lives off the grid in Malaysia but emerges to dominate every Scrabble competition he enters. And while

backgammon's roots are buried in Egyptian tombs, it was a Russian expatriate named Prince Alexis Obolensky who popularised the game as a jet-setter's pastime in the 1960s. But none of these people are the book's central characters. Instead, this is the story of people like Jonathan Schaeffer (checkers), Gerald Tesauro (backgammon) and

Jason Katz-Brown (Scrabble). They are very good players. But they are here for their skill at programming computers.

Each of the primary sections of this book reads like a repeating myth of hubris told with different characters but the same ending. Every game has its history, its champions, its quirks and its community, and then comes the programmer who believes he can teach a computer to play it. Each time, devotees of the game stake their claim that their pastime is a pure expression of ineluctable human creativity, and then,

markets were bound to keep rising every quarter and every year, as though it's our birthright to expect this, they seem intent on fooling us again.

On October 19, the indices hit their all-time high and started to drop over the next two months. A strong upmove in late December and early January ignited hopes of another rally to an all-time high but this time, it was met with massive selling from January 18 onwards. The immediate cause is the sharp fall in the US markets, in turn caused by policy changes announced by the US Federal Reserve, which is worried by the steep rise in inflation. The US consumer price index climbed 7 per cent in 2021, the largest 12-month gain since June 1982, according to the data released on January 12. The US Fed has hinted it may raise rates this March, while Bank of America thinks there could be as many as seven hikes this year. In addition, it is likely to start shrinking the central bank's holding of over \$8 trillion in US government bonds and mortgage-

backed securities (MBS). These two moves would reduce liquidity and increase interest rates. The immediate fallout, according to conventional wisdom, is that money would move out of risky assets like stocks, with the riskiest stocks — small-cap, tech, and emerging markets — getting hit the most.

However, this is common knowledge among investors now, and the markets rarely do what is expected of them. Besides, the reality of the marketplace is far more complex than the simplified one offered up for public consumption by media headlines and opinion pieces. So, what could be the true impact of the major policy shift announced by the US Fed? We are already witnessing the initial



NITIN DESAI

The principal fiscal challenge that India faces is the stagnation in the tax-GDP ratio for several decades. The tax revenue of the Union government, after netting out the share of the states in collected taxes, was an average of 7 per cent in the five years ending in 1978-79 and also, four decades later, in the five years ending in 2019-20^[1]. There were two periods when the ratio went up by about 1 per cent — in the latter half of the eighties

and during the boom years in the first decade of the new millennium. But basically, the Union government's net tax revenue-to-GDP ratio is stuck at around 7 per cent. Adding the share of the states to this net revenue number raises the Union government's tax-GDP ratio by 3-4 per cent, but does not alter the assessment about stagnation.

This stagnation in the net tax-GDP ratio of the Union government has to be compared with the rise in the revenue expenditure-to-GDP ratio, which went up from an average of 8.5 per cent to 11 per cent in the same two five-year periods. This gap led to rising market borrowings and a doubling of the Union government's interest burden as a percentage of GDP from 1.5 per cent to 3 per cent between these two five-year periods. The burden was even higher, at 4 per cent, during the nineties and the first decade of this century, and rose during the two recent Covid years to 3.5 per cent of GDP.

At the same time, the ratio of the Union government's capital expenditure-to-GDP ratio declined from 6 per cent to 1.7 per cent. This meant that market borrowings were used to finance current expen-

ditures. This is why the ratio of assets-to-liabilities of the Union government fell sharply from over 70 per cent till the early nineties to an average of 44 per cent in the five-year period ending in 2019-20. One must also note that since the early nineties, the Union government has resorted to disinvestment of assets as a source of Budgetary finance and the amount so mobilised amounted to 12 per cent of the assets shown in the Budget in 2020-21.

The shift in the Union government's spending towards current expenditure is partly a product of the fact that public enterprises now finance their investment not through Budgetary support, but through their own savings and direct access to the capital market. Besides this, the public-private partnership strategy for infrastructure has raised the share of the private sector in this area of investment. That is why some reduction in the share of capital expenditure in public spending was inevitable.

In addition, there is also a shift in development strategy to direct benefit schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that involve revenue expenditure.

The real issue for fiscal policy is not the shift of spending to the revenue account but how this spending is financed. For some three decades now, the Union government has financed a substantial part of revenue expenditure by increasing its liabilities and selling its assets. That is what fiscal policy needs to correct.

A fair degree of progress has been made in widening the reach of the income tax system. In 2018-19, 55 million salaried individuals filed returns, which

seems a fair proportion of the 70-million non-agri cultural workers who are regular wage and salary earners. In the same year, around 25 million non-corporate assessee declared a business income which should be compared to the figure of 63 million micro, small and medium enterprises, the vast majority being micro enterprises. Though there could be some room for identifying evaders, judging by the increase in the number of non-corporate assessee from 40 million in 2015-16 to 64 million in 2019-20, it seems some progress has been made in extending the reach of the income tax system. The focus now should perhaps be on linking the income tax database and the 13 million who are in the goods and services tax database to identify evaders.

The real issue is not the number of assessee, but the coverage of the actual income received by the people liable to tax. Applying the available inequality data to non-agricultural income, one can infer that in 2018-19 about 75 per cent of this income was accrued to one-third of the earners in the non-agricultural sector, and this one-third must have had per earner income exceeding ₹5 lakh, which would put them all in the taxable bracket. Even allowing for various concessions and toning down the very high estimate of high-income group shares, it would appear that personal income tax collections, as a percentage of non-agricultural income, should be around 10 per cent. In practice, the income tax collection in 2018-19 amounted to just 3.3 per cent of non-agricultural income. This blatant under-reporting of income is what needs to be addressed.

We also need to reexamine the plethora of tax-relief concessions to companies and individuals that are offered today. In 2018-19 the revenue foregone by these concessions amounted to ₹2.1 trillion on corporate, and income tax collections of ₹11.4 trillion. The finance minister (FM) moved on this route when the alternative of foregoing concessions and benefiting from lower rates was offered both for corporate and personal tax. But the choice was left to each assessee who would clearly opt for the option that led to lower tax liability. Hence offering a choice does not help. It simply reduces tax collection. The FM should now move towards the removal of tax-relief concessions and lower rates for all assessee, if necessary phased over a few years.

The tax rates should be rationalised across different categories of income. One glaring anomaly is in the different rates applicable to dividend income and capital gains on equity holdings, even though both come from the same source which is corporate profits. Realised capital gains, suitably corrected for inflation and the costs of realisation, are as much a form of current income as salaries, business profits, interest, and dividend earnings and should be treated as such.

Rationalisation and simplification of the direct tax system and a determined drive to double the income tax-GDP ratio over a few years should be a clearly articulated goal for fiscal policy. Let us hope we see a move in this direction in this year's Budget.

^[1] Data for the Covid year 2020-21 has not been used in these calculations
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Markets: Fooling most people most of the time

knee-jerk reaction in the form of indiscriminate selling of stocks over the past 10 days. Even institutional investors tend to succumb to simplified correlations like: Fed hike, sell stocks. This will certainly take some froth out of the market since in the 18-month bull market too many stocks have been pushed far beyond reasonable valuations.

Cyclical stocks have been valued as growth stocks, while small-cap stocks with slightly improved earnings have relentlessly risen. Large-cap stocks, especially in consumer goods, with average growth prospects, have been pushed up to stratospheric heights. There are overvaluation and excesses in many pockets of the market. This is most obvious in the initial public offering (IPO) market, where loss-making companies like Paytm, CarTrade, Zomato, and Nykaa have inflicted large losses on investors. This is a cycle that plays repeats: A bull market induced by an easy money policy, indiscriminate valuations, excesses in adjacent markets (this time in new markets such as crypto-currencies, non-fungible tokens, private equity, and so on), and eventual big declines in asset values. This is playing out all over again.

Depending on how things unfold, stock prices could head too far in the opposite direction. This is not necessarily a given, as many market commentators are predicting, but is a possibility. Unfortunately, the markets today have millions of new investors with no investing experience and behavioral fortitude to separate the wheat from the chaff, to ride out the declines, and possibly buy quality stocks if they are available at lower prices. It is their actions, like that of newbie drivers on the road, that will determine the immediately trajectory of the markets, even as the markets try to fool the majority once again.

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one another with the help of computers; the computers are playing against other computers, using humans.

Oddly, the only game yet to be conquered by computers is contract bridge, and my sense of relief at this lone holdout from the onslaught of AI was extinguished when Roeder let us know that the game, a relatively recent addition to the pantheon of pastimes, is now dying out, its players trending older and smaller in number. That might not be a coincidence: Perhaps by now we're so used to playing against, or for, our digital masters that we've lost interest in something so messy and human that its strategies can't be simulated by an online bot.

To play a game is, Professor Suits said, to try to solve a voluntary problem. But it is also a voluntary engagement with another human, temporary but total, to create a shared narrative of attack, defence, stalemate, victory and loss. The one thing a computer can never do is enjoy another computer's company. Let us hope that no new genius arises to teach them how to do that.

OUR VIEW



V. Anantha Nageswaran: An apt choice as our CEA

As evident in his views as a Mint columnist for 15 years, he looks beyond the orthodoxies of economics. Nageswaran's appointment as chief economic advisor should serve India well

An effective economic advisor in government has to battle it out on two fronts at the same time. He has to work within the bounds of what is politically possible, while expanding the policy-possibility frontier with radical new ideas. The job thus requires not just the technical skills of a traditional economist, but also a fine sense of the political, social, institutional and historical context. This is both science and art. The Narendra Modi government has done well to appoint V. Anantha Nageswaran as our new chief economic advisor (CEA). His is a reasoned voice on economic policy matters and he is known for the attention he pays to facts on the ground rather than grandstanding in the cause of any particular school of thought in economics. He is truly heterodox in that sense. He is also a sharp observer of geopolitics, and blew the whistle on the China threat at least a decade before it was common knowledge in India. The bipartisan applause that has greeted his appointment as CEA also shows his ability to work with a diverse set of people.

Nageswaran joins the finance ministry just as India recovers its pre-pandemic level of output, but scars remain. These include persistent inflation, growing inequality, labour-market stress, a crisis in the informal economy, and the long-term costs from two years of school shut-downs. The risk to our balance of payments from a further increase in global crude oil prices is still modest, but not irrelevant. In the decade ahead, we must maintain a high rate of economic expansion to provide opportunities to our people. Much will depend on the quality of economic policy if India in the 2020s is to resemble India of the 2000s rather than of the

1970s on that score. The new CEA has been a prolific writer on the Indian economy, with his weekly column in *Mint* widely followed. Though Nageswaran is driven by what the data says, and has readjusted some of his views over the years, there are some common themes in his writing that are worth highlighting. First, he has consistently argued that the requirements of the real economy are more important than those of the financial one. Second, monetary policy should be used carefully to avoid blowing sequential asset bubbles that lead to the mis-allocation of capital. Third, any country should have ways to maintain policy independence, either through the tactical use of capital controls during episodes of global financial mania, or (unfortunately these days) via restrictions on global trade. Fourth, inequality is a risk for both sustainable economic growth as well as social stability; not just inequality in terms of the gap in household incomes, but also the split of national income between profits and wages.

Nageswaran has also written thoughtfully on the Indian economy's prospects over the long term. In a fine 2016 report that he wrote in collaboration with Gulzar Natarajan, Nageswaran argued that India should not take rapid economic growth for granted. The title of this report is telling: *Can India Grow?* The problems identified by the two authors included the end of a global economic boom, structural problems such as a large informal sector and premature deindustrialization, limited state capacity, a lack of robust federalism, and the costs of our transition to a low-carbon economy. They put forth a well-reasoned set of policy responses to these problems. We wish our columnist of 15 years the very best for his stint in government. The Centre has made a worthy choice.

GUEST VIEW

The budget must aim to provide an impetus to consumer demand

Much has been achieved but more can be done to spur local manufacturing and raise consumption



MANISH SHARMA is CEO, Panasonic India and South Asia; and chairperson of the FICCI Electronics and White Goods Committee

Last year's budget exhibited resilience and reflected a progressive vision of a roadmap to a faster economic recovery. Its structured approach sought to initiate growth via its focus on the six pillars of health and well-being, infrastructure, human capital, inclusive development, innovation and R&D, and 'minimum government and maximum governance'. This displayed the government's strategic commitment to the overall development of India. From a successful vaccination drive to ensure well-being and an emphasis on production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes to create and nurture global manufacturing champions for an Atmanirbhar Bharat, to enhancing opportunities for our youth through multiple schemes and strengthening the overall research ecosystem with a focus on innovation and R&D, there was a great deal of progress in the past year.

Despite the unprecedented setback caused by the pandemic in 2020 and second wave of covid in the first quarter of 2021-22, the year held out promise, with the entire economy showing green shoots in the second half. The upcoming quarters project an encouraging picture for industries across sectors, including consumer durables, electronics, energy, electricals and wiring devices. Together, the Centre's intent to reduce the compliance burden on businesses and the PLI scheme look set to propel the economy.

We expect the budget for 2022-23 to initiate reforms that would help raise consumption by increasing resources in the hands of consumers. Consider the impact: if consumers have higher spending power, sales go up, aiding local production, which in turn drives the Make in India agenda too, and leaves a positive impact on the overall economy. Plus, rising healthcare expenses call for an increased limit of deduction on health insurance premia—this will encourage the uptake of health policies. Optimizing tax slabs to aid salaried professionals will also help, be it a larger standard deduction, tax-off on housing-loan interest or the inclusion of a wider set of mutual funds under 80C deductions.

Against this backdrop, our efforts at enhancing the growth of consumer durables and the electronics industry are playing a key role in our economic revival. We hope the government will examine items that would stimulate domestic manufacturing and expect a hike in import tariffs on fully-assembled audio products. Audio technology is an emerging segment and with new players foraying into the market, demand and ways to meet it are at an all-time high. We expect some audio tariff barriers to encourage domestic manufacturing.

Additionally, GST rationalization could play a crucial role in raising market consumption. Consumer durables like ACs and TV sets need relief. Consumers prefer products that offer value propositions, and these are no longer 'luxuries' as they have become common household items. Lowering their GST burden to 18% from 28% would help offset price pressure, boost affordability, and thus spur the penetration level of ACs in India. Moreover, the energy efficiency of ACs has steadily increased and they now offer added features like air purification, which is important in urban markets. Similarly, while TV screens larger than 105cm are slotted as premium, they have become the most sought-after models now, and so we hope the government reduces GST on LED screens (above

105cm) to 18% from 28%. This will aid our efforts towards making premium technology products accessible to potential customers who are held back from upgrading by the high cost of adoption. Placing premium screens in a lower GST slab would be a progressive step towards democratizing such technology.

We also look forward to the Phased Manufacturing Programme (PMP) for TVs to drive up domestic production.

While the government has already approved investments under its PLI scheme as a step towards its goal of Atmanirbhar Bharat, we would urge policymakers to review the export incentive for ACs under its Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP) scheme, and consider raising it. This will encourage exports and ease supply-chain challenges that have led to a dramatic increase in logistical costs.

Given the government's agenda to encourage the manufacture and sale of electric vehicles (EVs), localization of EV charger manufacturing will help faster EV adoption. It is thus an expectation that the budget will help lessen the cost of component imports vis-a-vis imports of pre-assembled EV chargers.

To encourage exports and put locally made products on a globally competitive platform, we would expect more fiscal incentives, especially for products with 30-40% domestic value addition. This would help industrial development in the country.

The pandemic has increased the awareness and penetration of insurance to some extent. From the perspective of end consumers, a reduction of GST on insurance premiums and addressing double taxation would provide relief and allow people to save more, which would increase their purchasing power.

In conclusion, we are hopeful of a growth-supporting Union budget for 2022-23 and expect allocations that are balanced and thought-through, so that it not only gives an impetus to India's economic progress, but also enables direct benefits for end consumers.



JUST A THOUGHT

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

How an AAP win in Goa or Punjab could change India

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

According to my spurious taxi-driver journalism, elections in Goa on Valentine's Day will cause a massive shock. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will be replaced by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), say many taxi-drivers, who fleece everyone and call politicians corrupt. I do not all from such inner beauty that I take taxi-driver journalism seriously. But then these drivers, who are locals with a vote, unlike migrants in most Indian metros, are among a wide swathe of Goans who had backed BJP in the previous polls but are disenchanted with it today.

There has been no progress in the state. If anything, it looks uglier, like other parts of India cursed by something called 'development', which means delayed road projects, a lot of holes dug with good intentions, and piers that hold nothing. Covid has made Goa poorer, too, with high-spending tourists staying away. In any case, I do not know another state government more undeserving of tourism revenue than the Goan one.

I would like AAP to win Goa, or Punjab.

I am more curious than political. If AAP gets control of a region whose statehood is not ambiguous, unlike Delhi, and if the party can take full responsibility of the state, with the police and entire bureaucracy firmly under its authority, it would be the start of a great experiment in our democracy.

AAP's victory in Delhi demolished an old Indian hypothesis—that you cannot win an election without being corrupt. If AAP wins a proper state, we will get answers to several questions. Can a government in India be truly clean? What happens in the short term when a government is clean; can clean politicians at the top end corruption in every layer of governance below them; or is corruption the inescapable compensation for inefficiencies in the system? In effect, does the same force govern the corrupt bureaucrat and local Goan taxi-driver who fleeces because his legitimate wage is too little?

In the first place, are all types of corruption bad, or is there good corruption? In her book, *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption*, Yuen Yuen Ang says there are four types of corruption. Petty theft, grand theft, speed money and access money. Petty theft is the bribe extracted by minor politicians and bureaucrats. Speed money is the bribe citizens pay bureaucrats to

get access to services they have the right to get free. Grand theft, in the Indian context, is the large embezzlement of public funds by powerful or refined politicians. Ang says that these three forms of corruption stall economic growth and impoverish people. But the fourth type, "access money", is far more interesting. It refers to the massive bribes businesses pay to make things happen, or go away.

Ang says that China is a corrupt place but it has progressed as its predominant form of corruption is "access money". Typically, in economic evolution, societies suffer the more destructive forms of corruption; then they progress to the "access money" phase. One of the things it does is create new projects very fast. It could be an airport in a small town, or a monopoly online retail store. The lure of access money has locked China's powerful bureaucrats in a competition to promote massive and complex projects; and to kill competing forms corruption like petty theft, grand theft and speed money.

If AAP is true to its word, it will try to end all four broad types of corruption. It will find it easier to end the form of corruption that Ang says has helped China: access money. And the forms of corruption that AAP will find hardest to kill are the more lethal ones that lower the quality of Indian life and ruin businesses. But then the party has promised it would end all forms of corruption—the petty and the more sophisticated.

Also, AAP would be in a position to change one highly visible form of chaos—roads. The only thing rational on an Indian road is what has caused Indians to be so weird. Corruption and incompetence create poor and even comical road design, which encourages Indians to continue their callous ways of driving. Bad driving, like corruption, is a form of compensation. In a full-fledged state, the most visible evidence of AAP's effect would be on its roads.

AAP is idealistic about governance, but practical in some matters. It is a modern Hindu party that will not antagonize Hindus,

within reasonable limits. Also, it may not favour tourists over locals by, say, letting app-based taxis arrive. Also, I don't get the feeling that the party has respect for the news media. It won't waste its time trying to promote free speech and all that. It is not a naive organization anymore that tries to imitate some imagination of European liberalism and ends up in a whirlpool of chaos. So there is a lot going for the party to focus on taking on corruption.

If AAP wins and brings about more aesthetic classrooms in government schools, and cleaner and smarter public hospitals; makes life cheaper for the poor and middle class through generous subsidies, as it has done in Delhi; brings about orderly traffic, humane public transport; and it cleans up all layers of the government, the party would transform Indian politics forever, because then the older, larger and more conventional parties in other regions of India would have no choice but to transform.

If AAP takes full control of Goa or Punjab, and it is unable to end corruption, or becomes corrupt itself, or it is unable to transform the quality of roads or public transportation, we can then accept we are probably preordained to be doomed. There is peace in that. Hope is a form of unhappiness, but the certainty of doom is peace.

Full state power for a party that promises to end corruption could tell us if cleaning India is possible



*The Indian***EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Budgeting for farmers

Investment in research, efficiency in government spending can increase agricultural incomes



ASHOK GULATI

THE UNION BUDGET for 2022-23 to be presented by the finance minister is likely to talk much about macro-economic recovery, be it V-shaped or K-shaped. She may announce some measures to boost the MSME sector, greater investments in infrastructure, and so on. However, common people are more concerned with surging inflationary pressures, inflicting an “inflation tax” on their savings. Containing the fiscal deficit has always been a challenge. And it would be more so this year when economic recovery is still fragile. But what one hopes is that the FM will keep the budget accounts transparent.

Transparency in budgetary accounts is critical for the credibility of the budget. In this context, the FM deserves compliments for her last year’s Union budget, when revised numbers for food and fertiliser subsidies were put up way above the budgeted numbers, clearing almost all arrears of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the fertiliser industry. Think of revising the food subsidy budget estimate of Rs 1.15 lakh crore to Rs 4.22 lakh crore, and the fertiliser subsidy estimate of Rs 71,309 crore to about Rs 1.34 lakh crore. That was a bold move towards transparency. Even this year, the revised estimates of food and fertiliser subsidies are likely to be significantly higher than the budgeted estimates of Rs 2.43 lakh crore and Rs 79,530 crore respectively, and one hopes that the FM will keep them transparent and clear all the bills in the revised estimates.

Looking at the budget from the food and agriculture angle, I see the subsidies on food, fertilisers, and payments under the PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi will dominate, and easily cross Rs 4 lakh crore, and may even go towards Rs 5 lakh crore in total. As a percentage of net tax revenue of the Union government (after deducting the share of states), this subsidy amount may turn out to be around 30 per cent. This share of subsidies, which are basically doles, is multiple times the government’s expenditure on agri-R&D through its

Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), which hovers around Rs 8,000 crore. Interestingly, our research at ICRIR shows that investment in agri-R&D brings five to 10 times higher returns in terms of agri-GDP or even poverty alleviation than the same amount spent through, say, fertiliser subsidies (or even power subsidies by states).

The upshot of this is that if the Union government wants the biggest bang for its buck, the right approach is to double or even triple the amount on agri-R&D and extension, especially in the emerging areas of high-value agriculture (horticulture, medicinal plants, livestock, fishery, etc). This is not just to raise their productivity but also build efficient value chains to supply these to lucrative markets, so that farmers’ incomes can be significantly augmented. That’s where the role of the private sector becomes important. ICAR needs not only a big infusion of funds but also an overhaul to collaborate with the private sector and FPOs to make its research outcomes marketable.

On the food subsidy front, which is ballooning, we know it is the result of the high economic cost of rice and wheat to the Food Corporation of India (FCI), the low issue prices at which it has to supply grains for the public distribution system (PDS), and the large population (67 per cent) to be covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The economic cost of wheat and rice is almost 40 per cent higher than their MSP. Take, for example, rice, whose economic cost hovers around Rs 40/kg, but it has to be given at Rs 3/kg through PDS and almost free under the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana. Given our weak governance of the PDS, ground reports suggest there is not only massive leakage of rice in the open market but it also goes towards ramping up our rice exports, which may touch 20 million tonnes this year, the highest ever in history. It would have been a matter of pride if these exports were on its competitive strength. But the reality is that

the export unit value is much below the MSP of rice. And when India exports, say, 20 mmt of rice in a global market that hovers around 45-46 mmt, it brings down the global prices of rice. This means that India has to export more quantities of rice to get the same amount of dollars, a perfect case for imposing an optimal export tax on rice. Also, this amount of rice which is being produced through heavy subsidies on power for irrigation and extremely low urea prices, means that we are exporting at least 40 to 50 billion cubic metres of water.

We surely need better policies on grain management and fertiliser subsidy. NITI Aayog has come up with a Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) putting Indian poverty at 25 per cent for the year 2015-16 based on NFHS data. The 2019-20 data set would give an even lower poverty ratio. Poverty based on the international definition of \$1.9 per capita per day (PPP) is even lower (around 11 per cent) for 2017-18, as per the World Bank. The Economic Survey had earlier made a case for reducing the coverage of beneficiaries under NFSA from 67 per cent to 30 per cent, which makes ample sense for targeting the poor and bringing efficiency to the PDS. I would submit that beneficiaries also be given the option to receive the money in cash in their accounts, which could be equal to MSP plus, say, 20 percent, in lieu of physical grains. This would reduce leakages, and also save on the high economic costs of these grains. If the coverage of beneficiaries under NFSA cannot be reduced, at least those who are non-poor can be charged at half the price of the economic cost.

Similar moves are needed on the fertiliser subsidy front. Else, the budget documents remain a mere accounting exercise, without ensuring efficiency and inclusiveness in government expenditure. That’s not exciting.

The writer is Infosys Chair professor for Agriculture at ICRIR

BATTLE FOR MANIPUR

The BJP hopes to extend its run in Imphal, Congress wants to retake the state

IN FIVE YEARS, the roles have reversed for the Congress and the BJP in Manipur, where the first phase of elections is due on February 27. In 2017, the Congress was in pole position in state politics, having held office for three consecutive terms, and the BJP, the emerging challenger, was looking for allies. The Congress fell short of a majority by three seats, but it was the BJP, which had seven MLAs less than the Congress, that got to form the government, with some help from the Governor. A depleted Congress has now formed a pre-poll coalition with four Left parties and the Janata Dal (Secular) while the BJP, on Sunday, announced candidates for all 60 seats. The BJP’s erstwhile allies, the National People’s Party (NPP) and Naga People’s Front (NPF), seem to be on their own.

The Congress’s willingness to form a coalition and the BJP’s decision to contest all seats have been triggered by a churn that began even before the 2017 elections. The BJP’s extraordinary gains in that election was the outcome of many senior Congress leaders crossing over to the saffron party that had power at the Centre and funds at disposal. Biren Singh, who eventually became chief minister, was a member of the Ibobi Singh-led Congress government until a few months before elections. Over five years, many Congress, NPP and NPF MLAs and leaders joined the BJP, which while strengthening the party has also triggered factionalism within. In short, the BJP faces a problem of plenty but believes it now has enough leaders to fight battles in the Imphal Valley as well as Naga and Kuki-dominated hill seats. Also, with the leverage of office at the Centre, the BJP is well placed to negotiate post-poll deals if it falls short of a majority. The Congress, on the other hand, hopes to consolidate the anti-BJP by allying with the Left parties, which have a committed but shrinking vote base. But as in most northeastern states, elections in Manipur are influenced by kinship, proximity to power centres, etc. more than party or ideological affiliation.

To the BJP’s credit, or call it luck, its term in office has seen fewer incidents of insurgency-related violence, road blockades and so on, as compared to the Congress years, which allowed the government to focus on state-building. Yet, Manipur recorded the highest number of arrests under UAPA in 2020, behind UP and J&K, with the government wielding the sedition law against journalists at will. The killing of an Army colonel and six others last year has disrupted the narrative and revealed the precarious state of peace. Holding up that peace is a challenge for the political process.



T V PAUL

AS A YOUNG PhD student studying the Kashmir conflict at Yale University in the early 1950s, Michael Brecher had no idea that he would end up as a pioneering scholar of Indian foreign policy and its emerging position in the international system. Leaders of the Indian elite, including Jawaharlal Nehru, V K Krishna Menon, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Sheikh Abdullah, would confide in him, even though he wrote sympathetic yet somewhat critical essays about India’s policies on controversial topics like Kashmir and nonalignment.

Brecher, who retired as a distinguished professor at McGill University’s political science department last year after a nearly seven-decade-long stellar career, passed away at the age of 96 on January 16. He had made enormous scholarly contributions on topics such as Indian and Israeli foreign policies, Asia’s new states and, later, large-scale studies on crises in world politics. In his long career, he wrote more than 30 books, scores of articles, and book chapters.

From his early days as a scholar, Brecher developed a striking skill for interviewing top political leaders and bureaucrats. In his unpublished autobiography, he narrates how he was successful in conducting candid interviews with key figures associated with India’s independence and Partition. Louis Mountbatten, Clement Atlee, and other key figures spent several hours with him in the waning days of the Raj. Mountbatten’s introduction to Nehru opened a door to this young doctoral student and soon-to-be assistant professor from Canada. Born to Jewish parents, Brecher had seen discrimination in his early days in the academy and in Canadian

WINDOW TO INDIA

Michael Brecher was a pioneering scholar of Indian foreign policy

society and developed a sympathy and understanding for India and its struggles. Nehru was so impressed by him that he took him along during his gruelling electoral campaigns and offered him several hours of his time for comprehensive questioning. *Nehru: A Political Biography* (1959) was the end-product. It portrays not only Nehru’s politics, but also his personality and the extraordinary rapport he had with the masses.

Brecher’s dissertation-turned book, *The Struggle for Kashmir* (1953), is one of the first scholarly analyses of the conflict and its intractability. A series of books on India followed, including *Nehru’s Mantle: Political Succession in India* (1966) and *India and World Politics: Krishna Menon’s View of the World* (1968). These opened up scholarship on India to the West and the larger world. His works received much acclaim for being rigorous yet accessible to a wide array of readers. India’s elite found in him a committed scholar who would bring much-needed international attention to the young republic’s foreign and domestic policies.

Brecher was instrumental in the creation of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute in 1966, which is still in operation, with joint headquarters in Calgary and New Delhi. It enables hundreds of Indians and Canadians to visit each country for scholarship and academic exchanges. This initiative occurred to him during a visit to India in 1965 and when he proposed it to the then Finance Minister T T Krishnamachari, it was immediately embraced. The Indian External Affairs Ministry and Canadian foreign ministries as well as former Prime Minister Lester Pearson were very much in support and the institute was an-

nounced during Prime Minister Shastri’s visit to McGill in June 1965 by Shastri himself. The institute was named after Shastri following his untimely death in 1966 and began operations in 1968. It is a rare success story of ongoing inter-state academic exchanges.

In the late 1960s, Brecher moved on to studying Israel’s foreign policy after developing strong bonds with leaders such as Ben Gurion. From 1975, Brecher and a University of Maryland colleague, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, initiated the International Crisis Behaviour project, studying various forms of crises and their progression toward war, using a large dataset and quantitative and qualitative analyses.

As his colleague for the past three decades, I have witnessed Brecher’s immense productivity and feel fortunate that his family shared excerpts from his unpublished autobiography. His passing away occurs after the death last year of another pioneering scholar of South Asia, Baldev Raj Nayar, whom Brecher brought to McGill. Nayar and Brecher were great role models for scholars of India and South Asia globally. Both exhibited thoroughness in scholarship and were willing to face challenges in field research and personal lives. Their ability to approach and gain the trust of leading political figures of the day was unparalleled. Notable was the academic freedom that the founders of the Indian republic cherished and allowed, a far cry from today’s controlled environment and lack of access.

The writer is James McGill Professor of International Relations at McGill University, Montreal, Canada

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



JANUARY 31, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

PEACE WITH PAK

THE PRIME MINISTER has offered to sign a treaty of peace and friendship with Pakistan. Surprisingly, Mrs Gandhi made her offer at the end of her hour-long meeting with Pakistani journalists and not at the formal Indo-Pakistan talks that began on January 30. While Indian officials were attaching considerable importance to Mrs Gandhi’s remarks, the Pakistani delegation did not appear to be impressed by it. Pakistani journalists, who heard Mrs Gandhi, said her offer came too casually and in response to a question by journalist on the Indo-Soviet friendship treaty. It’s possible that Prime Minister Gandhi made the offer to see how the Pakistani side would

react to it. Perhaps, it was an attempt to recover lost ground after initial opposition to talks on Pakistan’s proposal for a no-war pact.

CPM’S LINE

AT THE END of the 11th party Congress, the pro-Moscow view of the central leadership of the CPM succeeded in reversing the pro-Chinese line that had been adopted after the 1964 split with the CPI. The Vijayawada Congress adopted a political resolution taking a strong pro-Soviet and anti-China stand. Even till the 10th Congress in Jullundur in 1978, the CPM had criticised and praised China and Soviet Union in equal measure.

BILLA, RANGA TO HANG

BARELY 18 HOURS before his execution, condemned prisoner Billa admitted to having murdered seven persons in Bombay but remained non-committal on his role in the murder of Sanjay and Gita Chopra. “It’s better that I am dying. What’s the purpose of living in a society that does not trust you,” he said. Meanwhile, Ranga “confessed” innocence and regretted he couldn’t get justice.

EX-CHOGYAL DEAD

FORMER CHOGYAL OF Sikkim, Paiden Thondup Namgyal has died of cancer. He was 59.



“Closing down schools is the absolute last decision that should be considered as a potential measure to mitigate any further spikes in the number of infections.”
THE DHAKA TRIBUNE

Case for a health booster

Budget can add momentum to transformation in healthcare system burdened by the pandemic. It needs to invest in cadre of skilled medical workers



A PRE-BUDGET assessment, just ahead of the presentation of the budget, is somewhat like a pitch and weather report by a cricket commentator before the start of play. It states how the match might be influenced by the prevailing conditions without showing any certitude that it will actually develop along those lines. So, this piece is more of a prayer than a prediction, hoping that the finance minister will provide the vulnerable health sector the protective “booster” it needs.

After decades of low government expenditure on health, the Covid pandemic created a societal consensus on the need to strengthen our health system. The recommended priorities varied, depending on whether they came from super-specialist doctors arguing for more hospitals and specialists or public health votaries pleading for the expansion and quality enhancement of primary healthcare services and disease surveillance systems. The Fifteenth Finance Commission accepted both viewpoints and recommended greater investment in rural and urban primary care, a nationwide disease surveillance system extending from the block-level to national institutes, a larger health workforce and the augmentation of critical care capacity of hospitals. The Union budget of 2021 reflected these priorities in a proposed Pradhan Mantri Aatmanirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana (PMASBY) to be made operational over six years, with a budget of Rs 64,180 crore. The Finance Minister also projected a broader vision of health beyond healthcare by merging allocations to water, sanitation, nutrition and air pollution control with the health budget. This resulted in a 137 per cent increase in the allocation to health, though the increase to the health ministry itself was a modest 11 per cent.

In the months that followed the budget, two major health missions were launched, under the Ayushman Bharat umbrella. The Digital Health Mission was launched in September 2021. The Health Infrastructure Mission, launched in October 2021, was a renamed and augmented version of the PMASBY. It aims to create a strong nationwide healthcare and disease surveillance infrastructure, ranging from health and wellness centres (HWCs) and block-level laboratories to more medical colleges and National Institutes of Virology.

These missions join the two other components of Ayushman Bharat launched in 2018. The Comprehensive Primary Health Care (CPHC) component is nested in the National Health Mission (NHM) while the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) is steered by the National Health Authority (NHA). Bringing these various missions together under the umbrella of Ayushman Bharat will help to create a coherent and connected healthcare delivery system. Primary healthcare services under the CPHC and linkage with water, sanitation, nutrition and pollution control programmes will strengthen the capacity of the health system for health promotion and disease prevention, going beyond disease management. The budget of 2022 must not only fund these missions adequately but indicate how they will link synergically while functioning under different administrative agencies. It will be appropriate for the Health Ministry to



C R Sasikumar

be the convening platform, even if the budget lines are separated.

The NHM received only a 9.6 per cent increase in the 2021 budget. Apart from the capital expenditure on new primary healthcare infrastructure, it needs an increase in its operational budget too, especially as long neglected urban primary healthcare needs urgent attention. PMJAY did not see an increase in allocation last year, because its utilisation for non-Covid care declined sharply in the previous year. The limited number of accredited healthcare facilities in tier-2 and tier-3 hospitals, in many states, is also a limiting factor for the scheme. More importantly, limiting cost coverage to hospitalised care reduces the PMJAY’s capacity to significantly lower out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) on health, which is driven mostly by outpatient care and expenditure on medicines. The promise of HWCs to provide essential drugs and diagnostic services — it has been stalled by Covid — needs to be delivered soon if primary care has to become an effective instrument for reducing OOPE.

The Digital Health Mission can enhance efficiency of the health systems in a variety of ways. These include better data collection and analysis, improved medical and health records, efficient supply chain management, tele-health services, support for health workforce training, implementation of health insurance programmes, real time monitoring and sharper evaluation of health programme performance along with effective multi-sectoral coordination. The financing of this mission will be a feature of interest in the budget.

While increased investment in infrastructure and digital health is needed and will be of high value for strengthening our health system, that capacity will be a carriage without wheels if we do not develop a multi-layered, multi-skilled health workforce. We need to increase the numbers and improve the skills of all categories of healthcare providers. While training specialist doctors could take time, the training of frontline workers like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) can be done in a shorter

District hospitals need to be upgraded, with greater investment in infrastructure, equipment and staffing. In underserved regions, such district hospitals should be upgraded to become training centres for students of medical, nursing and allied health professional courses. Medical college hospitals too should be strengthened. Public health cadres must be created in every state and training institutions must be established to infuse public health expertise into health programmes. While much of this needs to be done by the states, the Centre should incentivise and support such efforts by the states. Will the Union budget signal such an intent and commitment?

time. Every village should have two ASHAs and every sub-centre designated as a HWC should have two ANMs as a minimum. Similarly, urban HWCs too should be well staffed. Training and deployment of mid-level health workers in the HWCs too is a priority.

District hospitals need to be upgraded, with greater investment in infrastructure, equipment and staffing. In underserved regions, such district hospitals should be upgraded to become training centres for students of medical, nursing and allied health professional courses. Medical college hospitals too should be strengthened. Public health cadres must be created in every state and training institutions must be established to infuse public health expertise into health programmes. While much of this needs to be done by the states, the Centre should incentivise and support such efforts by the states. Will the Union budget signal such an intent and commitment?

With increased central investment in health, OOPE should continue the declining trend reported in the last reported National Health Accounts (2017-18). However, the decline should not be driven only by an increase in capital expenditure on infrastructure. An increase in current operational expenditure is also needed to improve service delivery and have an early impact on healthcare related financial burden of families. There may be some savings on Covid response this year, especially on the amount allocated to procure vaccines. Those savings must flow to improve non-Covid services which suffered neglect for the past two years. Research and innovation too must see greater investment. The expanded ambit of health, as defined in last year’s budget, must continue for aligning other sectors to public health objectives. The Union budget of 2022 can add further momentum to our health system transformation. I fervently hope it will.

The writer, a cardiologist and epidemiologist, is President, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI). The views expressed are personal.

Why FM must not cut taxes

Buoyancy in tax revenues next year is uncertain, exports boom caused by pandemic is likely to diminish. These will put constraints on GDP growth



RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

WITH THE UNION Budget to be presented in Parliament tomorrow, many people are hoping that taxes will be cut to boost private spending and growth. Ordinarily, this might be a good idea. However, there are four main reasons why tax cuts are not prudent now.

First, the strong revenue performance during 2021-22 gives a misleading impression of the government’s fiscal position. Revenues this year have benefitted from some exceptional factors. One, strong profit growth in the private corporate sector, led mostly by the large firms; two, robust collections from the goods and services tax (GST); and three, rapid GDP growth. The crucial question to ask is what might happen to these factors in 2022-23. Here we run into some difficulties.

It is risky to assume that corporate profits will continue to grow as rapidly going forward. This is because we do not yet fully understand what led to the growth in 2021-22. If we look at the data of listed non-financial, non-oil firms in the private sector, we find that by June 2021, their profit margins were higher than in the pre-pandemic period. This could have been the result of an increase in their market share, given that the smaller firms bore the brunt of the pandemic. The larger firms also took emergency measures to cut costs. It is not obvious that as the pandemic recedes, the same trend will continue in 2022-23. If it does not, then corporate tax growth would not be as high as in 2021-22.

In addition, GST growth is likely to slow down. In 2021-22, average monthly GST collections increased to Rs 1.2 trillion from Rs 0.94 trillion in 2020-21. This increase was mostly on account of the resumption of economic activity. GST on imports also played a big role, fuelled by an import boom and higher tariffs. It is unlikely that we will witness a similar import boom next year.

As the recovery period ends and the economy normalises, GDP growth will slow down too. The main engine of growth for an emerging economy like India is private sector investment, which is still not showing any signs of acceleration, even as the broader economy recovers. Another engine of growth is exports. India has experienced an export boom in 2021-22. However, as the developed countries normalise their macro-policies, the global exports boom will diminish, and this will impact India as well. Hence, it is not certain where high GDP growth will come from in the next fiscal year. All these factors lead to uncertainty

about tax revenues.

Second, the fiscal deficit, targeted at 6.8 per cent of GDP for 2021-22, continues to be very high. There is little room to cut spending since demands for social spending such as on MGNREGA remain high, interest payments continue to be a big component of expenditure, and given the mounting pressure on the government to increase capital expenditure. There is consequently no room to provide tax relief without imposing further pressure on the deficit. Nor is it a good idea to allow the deficit to increase. The government’s total debt has already reached 90 per cent of GDP, the highest ever, and there is significant pressure on the bond yields to go up. This could make it costlier for everyone to borrow.

Third, the pandemic has caused supply shortages the world over. India too has been experiencing supply chain bottlenecks. In a supply-constrained environment, any attempt to boost demand by increasing households’ after-tax income would lead to inflation. This is exactly what has been happening in the US and other developed economies. In India, retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, has been running at 5-6 per cent, close to the upper limit of the RBI’s target band. And, already there are pressures for inflation to go up as a result of rising oil and commodity prices. Tax cuts and the resultant increase in spending might push inflation beyond the limit, forcing the RBI into an uncomfortable choice: Raise interest rates sharply at a time when the recovery is beginning or allow inflation to tax the country’s poor.

Finally, we are entering a period of global macroeconomic uncertainty. The US economy is experiencing its highest inflation in 40 years. The US Fed will consequently raise interest rates this year. When the developed world pulls back its expansionary policies, emerging economies like India need to display strong macroeconomic fundamentals, and the government must come across as credible.

One of the key reasons India was badly affected by the taper tantrum episode of 2013 was because it was doing poorly on macro fundamentals. In a way, the situation now is not very different. Once again, we are running a high fiscal deficit and the real interest rate is negative because inflation is higher than the policy rate. True, inflation is lower than it was in 2013, but the government debt ratio is substantially higher. Hence, the government needs to be somewhat careful about its fiscal math.

With state elections coming up, it might be tempting for the government to slash taxes and win votes. But given its own fiscal limitations and the uncertainty surrounding India’s growth and inflation trajectories in the next fiscal year, this would not be a prudent call.

The writer is Associate Professor of Economics, IGIDR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OLD & NEW FRIENDS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Making connections’ (IE, January 29). The importance given to the five Central Asian Republics (CARS) is evident from the invites sent to their heads to grace India’s Republic Day function as chief guests. Though the pandemic played the spoiler, India earnestly wants to buttress its trade ties with CARS. This is also in keeping with India’s Connect Central Asia policy of 2012. Recent developments in the region with the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan have also made CARS warm up to India. Moreover, China’s ambitions to bring smaller nations under its political and economic ambit are making CARS diversify its business dealings and look beyond China. India must seize the initiative and play a bigger role in Central Asia.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

THIS REFERS TO the editorial ‘Making connections’ (IE, January 29). The government’s reaching out to five central Asian nation’s may be good optics. However, India’s relations with immediate neighbouring countries — Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh — are at all time low. These nations were considered to be all-weather friends. The much touted Chabahar port in Iran is also proving a non-starter

Deepak Singhal, Noida

REGRESSIVE MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Weakening the watchdog’ (IE, January 28). The Kerala government’s proposed move to bring an ordinance to snip the powers of the Lokayukta is highly questionable. The haste with

which the move is taken through the route of ordinance speaks volumes of the government’s intent. The decision is not likely to pass the muster of judicial scrutiny, if challenged in the courts. The move goes against CPM’s much touted credo of purging corruption from public life.

Ravi Kumar Mathur, Ghaziabad

BURDENING COURT

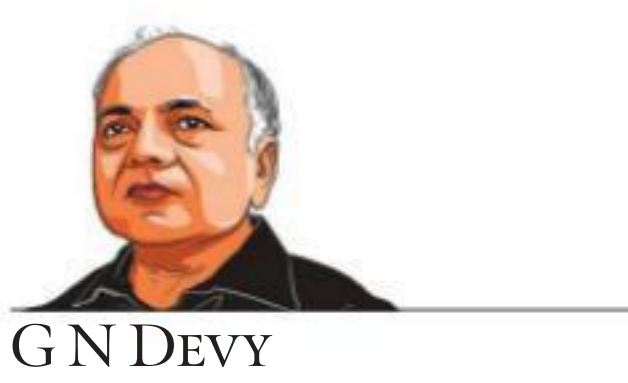
THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Misreading jurisdiction’ (IE, January 28). A corollary to the issues raised in the article about the Supreme Court’s decision in the Alapan Bandyopadhyay case is the steep increase of the workload of the Delhi High Court. For a number of reasons, the DHC already has a lot on its plate. Because of this judgment, the cases that would have otherwise been dealt with by other High Courts, will now be filed before the DHC.

Ayush Baheti, Jaipur

STEROID OVERDOSE

THIS REFERS TO the report ‘Steroid use, blood clots: AIIMS seeks nod to study Covid impact on bones’ (IE, January 28). It is heartening that the AIIMS had submitted a proposal to Indian Council of Medical Research, seeking approval to conduct a study to probe cases of Avascular Necrosis (AVN) or death of bone tissue among Covid patients due to steroid use and blood clots. The study could throw light on the adverse effect of widespread use of steroids during the pandemic’s second wave. It could also suggest remedial measures to overcome this problem among the affected persons.

Rethesh Balakrishnan, Delhi



G N DEVY

The conscience keeper

J S Bandukwala fought for human dignity and equality all his life

VADODARA WAS known as a cosmopolitan city in the 20th century. I moved there in 1980, and was surprised to see two striking instances of communal boycott and to read about a third instance that had occurred decades before my time in the city. The one before my time involved the young B R Ambedkar, who had returned from the US after completing his studies at Columbia. He had to take shelter in the house of a Parsi as no Hindu was willing to let out his house to the young lawyer despite being summoned by the Maharaja of Baroda as the Law Officer of Baroda state. Pained by the attitude, Ambedkar decided to leave the city in less than two weeks. The one instance I saw closely relates to the legendary theatre director Habib Tanvir who arrived in Baroda in 1985 for a year-long stay leading to the production of a new play. Like Ambedkar, Tanvir had to wind up his planned stay in Baroda as Hindus were not willing to rent a house to a Muslim, and the Muslims did not want a Leftist anywhere near them. In the 1980s, the RSS had already started making Gujarat its social laboratory. Its full scale erupted before the public eye later.

The third instance of social boycott that I know relates to J S Bandukwala. A nuclear physicist, he had come to Vadodara in the early 1970s to teach at MS University. He was

ostracised by his own community, not so much for who he was but for what he thought. In an interview with Ajaz Ashraf, Bandukwala narrates: “After completing my studies in the United States, I returned to India in 1972. I chanced upon the Bohra Syedna [spiritual head of the Bohra sect of Muslims] in Vadodara. He was praying in a garden. I stopped to pay my respect to him, and started talking to two of his family members. I was dressed in pants and a shirt. When they heard that I was a Bohra, they aggressively asked me how I could come to meet the Syedna in the clothes I was in. When a Bohra meets the Syedna, he is supposed to wear the traditional Bohra dress, stand and approach him in a particular way. They said, ‘You are supposed to be Abde Syedna,’ which means the slave of Syedna. My response was that it was not possible for me to be the slave of anyone but Allah. They tried to put pressure on me but I was not willing to compromise.”

During the 1980s, I used to teach at the English department of MS University. It was but natural for me to get drawn to Bandukwala who was in the science faculty. I have seen his amazing journey in life over these decades and have felt impressed and inspired by his quiet courage and his ability to speak out fearlessly even in the face of the

worst threats to his life. During the last 50 years, till he passed away on Saturday, the professor continued to speak simple truth to power and paid a heavy price for it.

When he was a young lecturer and the warden of a boy’s hostel on the Baroda University campus, his house was vandalised by students. When he decided to contest elections, the university authorities refused to sanction his leave. As a rare case in the history of the university, Bandukwala decided to forfeit his salary for his work on the campus. He started teaching children from poor families without taking fees from them, as well as some students from affluent families to keep his finances going. After the small residential flat he occupied as a lecturer was vandalised by goons on the campus, the university authorities shifted him to a slightly larger flat meant for professors. After spending some time there, he quietly shifted to a house he had built in Sama. That house was attacked by a large mob during the 2002 Gujarat riots. I remember him telling me how the most precious things, such as his family albums and personal letters, were burnt before his eyes. Friends helped him to escape the mob of rioters which would have killed him that day.

After the riots, he sent his children away from Vadodara; and after the death of his wife, he lived the life of a lonely but unflinch-

ing crusader. He continued to work with the community, funded the education of innumerable children, wrote and published articles on issues of vital interest for social harmony and, most of all, refused to be intimidated. Throughout his life, he continued to face fatwas from Muslim clerics and threats and harassment from Hindu fanatics. Besides, given his identity, thoughts and social engagement, he remained outside the social circles that make up the hugely materialistic and somewhat bohemian society of Vadodara. For most of the time, the who’s who of Vadodara pretended to have forgotten that J S Bandukwala continues to live in a small flat in Pratapgunj until they were forced to acknowledge his presence when important thinkers and social leaders from all parts of the world came to visit him. A conscience keeper, neglected by his own city and applauded by the world, an inspiring friend and a courageous crusader for human dignity and equality, JSB left this world on January 29. He left a large gap in Vadodara’s moral core and a big imprint on the collective memory of an India caught in communal strife.

The writer is a cultural activist and a former colleague of J S Bandukwala at the MS University of Baroda



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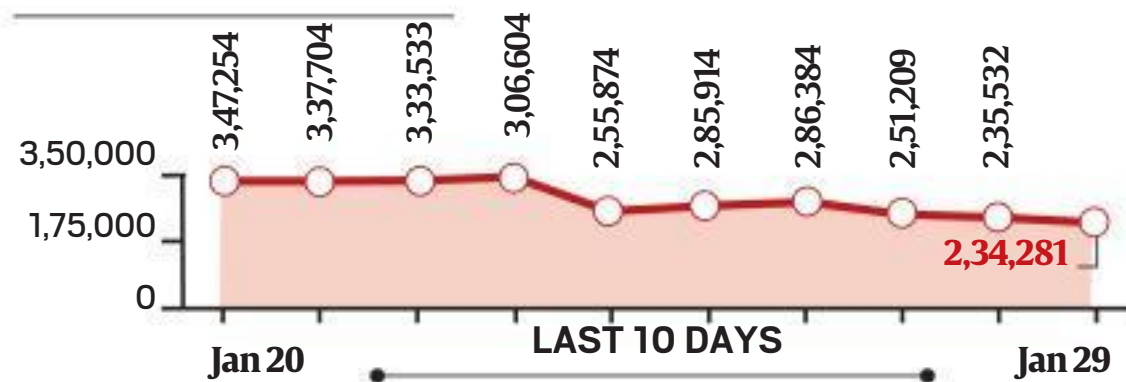
If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

DASHBOARD, AS ON JAN 29

699 DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN	New cases 2,34,281	Active cases 18,84,937	Deaths 893
Weekly CFR: 0.29% Overall CFR: 1.33% Total deaths: 4,94,091			

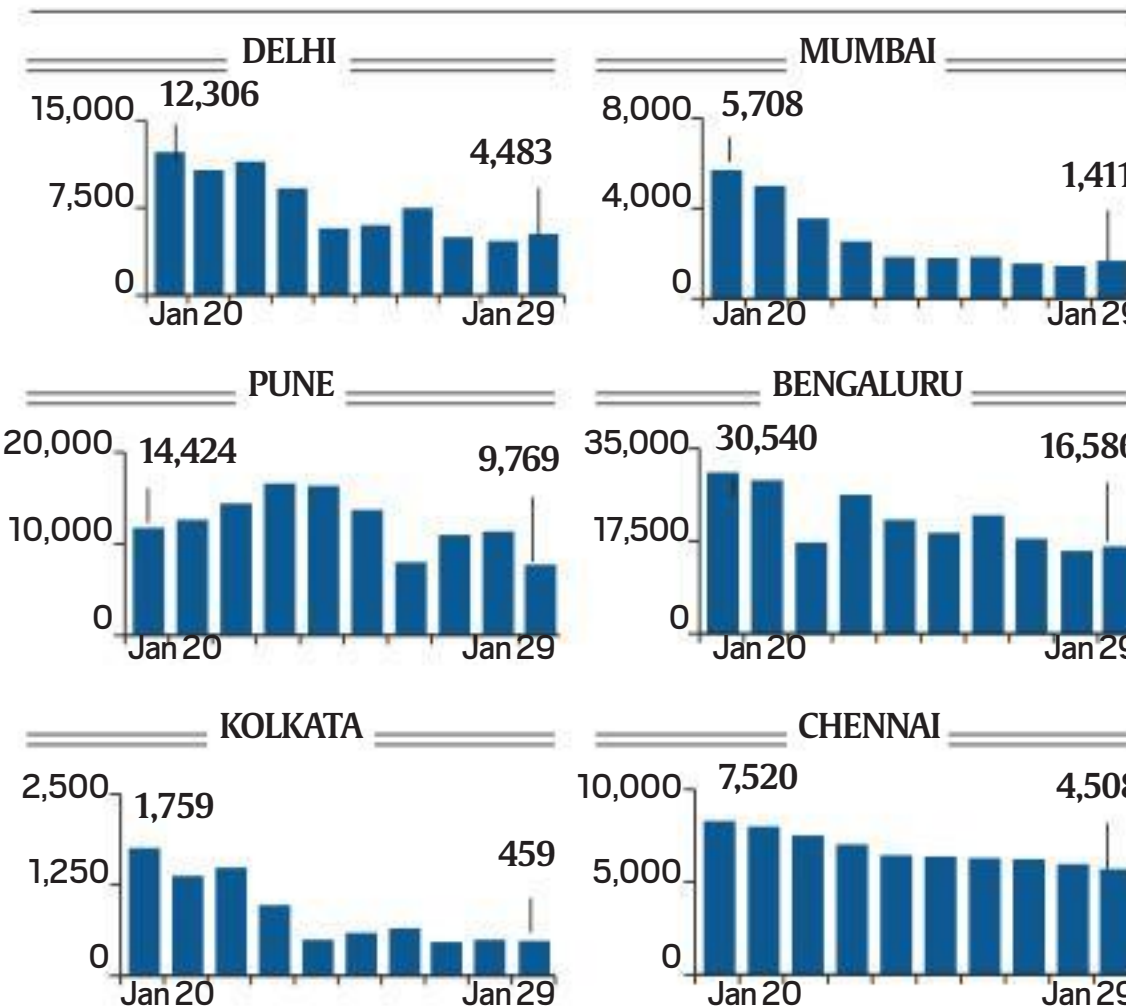
NEW CASES, DAILY



SURGE IN THE STATES

State	ON JANUARY 27			Weekly positivity
	New Cases	Active Cases	Deaths	
Kerala	50812	3,36,920	405	46.83%
Karnataka	33337	2,52,162	70	23.33%
Maharashtra	27971	2,44,344	71	18.73%
Tamil Nadu	24418	2,08,350	46	19.23%
Gujarat	11794	98021	33	11.33%

CASES IN THE CITIES, LAST 10 DAYS

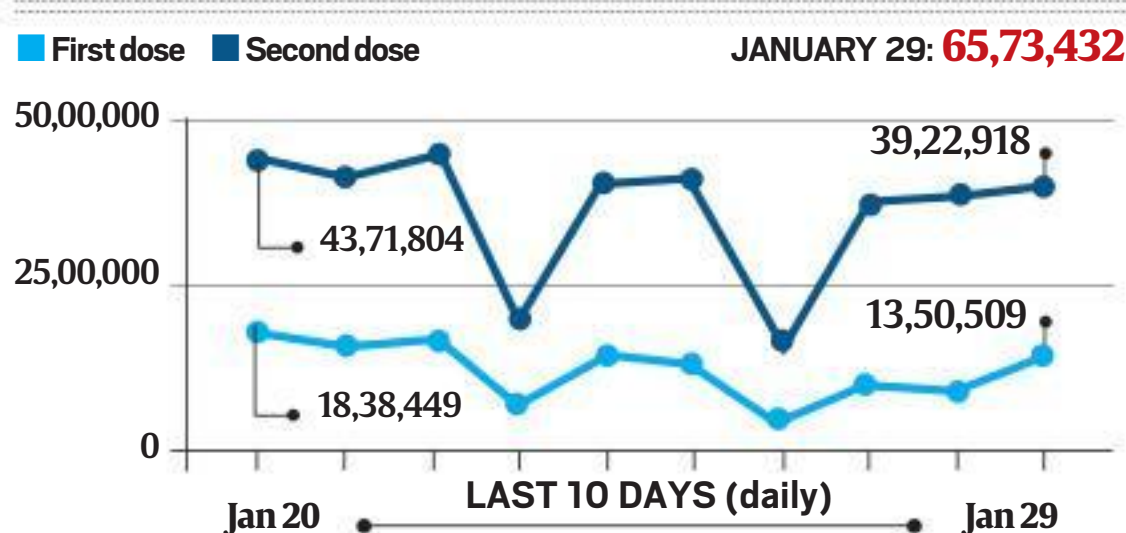


TOTAL TESTS 72,73,90,698

TESTS ON JAN 29	WEEKLY POSITIVITY	OVERALL POSITIVITY
16,15,993	15.63%	5.65%

INDIA TOTAL DOSES 165,70,60,692

(Adults 1st dose: **89,33,70,213**; adults second dose: **70,63,48,368**;
15-18 age group first dose: **4,56,48,949**; precautionary doses: **1,16,93,162**)



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In India visit by Oman's Al Zaabi, old friendship and strategic ties

SHUBHAJITROY

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 30

INDIA IS laying out the red carpet for Mohammed Nasser Al Zaabi, the top defence official of Oman, who is in the country on an official visit.

Why is the visit important?

Al Zaabi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence of the Sultanate of Oman, is the executive head of the Omani defence establishment. The charge of Minister is held by Deputy Prime Minister Sayyid Shihab. Zaabi will co-chair the Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC), the highest forum of defence engagement between the two countries, with Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar. This will be the first meeting of the JMCC since 2018, and it is expected to make a comprehensive evaluation of ongoing defence exchanges, and provide a roadmap of ties for the future.

Oman is India's closest defence partner in the Gulf region and an important anchor

for India's defence and strategic interests. Defence cooperation has emerged as a key pillar for the robust India-Oman strategic partnership. Defence exchanges are guided by a Framework MoU, renewed last year.

Oman is the only Gulf country with which all three services of the Indian armed forces carry out regular bilateral exercises and staff talks, enabling close professional cooperation and trust. Oman also provides operational support to the Indian Navy's anti-piracy missions in the Arabian Sea.

What has been the trajectory of India-Oman ties over the years?

For almost 50 years until January 2020, Oman was ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who was a friend of India. The Sultan's father was an alumnus of Mayo College, Ajmer, and the Sultan himself studied in Pune, where his teacher was Shankar Dayal Sharma, the future President of India.

Sultan Qaboos died at age 79. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had met him in February 2018 when the two countries signed an agreement for the use of Oman's



strategically-located Duqm port, described the late leader as a beacon of peace for the region. The Government of India announced a day of national mourning on January 13, 2020 in the Sultan's honour, and in March 2021, conferred on him the Gandhi Peace Prize for 2019.

Sultan Qaboos had played a vital role in the release of Father Tom Uzhunnalil, the

Catholic priest who was abducted in Yemen in March 2016 and held captive for a year and a half. The Sultan had also intervened to ensure the release of three Americans and a Canadian held by Iran, and of German and Australian hostages in Yemen.

His successor, his cousin Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, has been a generous benefactor of the Indian community in Oman. About 6.2 lakh people of Indian origin live in the country, of whom about 4.8 lakh are workers and professionals such as doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, teachers, managers, and nurses. Some Indian families have been living in Oman for 150-200 years.

What is the strategic imperative in India's relationship with Oman?

Access to the Duqm port is important for India to counter Chinese influence and activities in the Gulf region. This was a key take-away from Modi's visit to Oman in February 2018. Duqm overlooks the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, and close to Chabahar port in Iran. Along with Assumption Island that is being developed in the Seychelles and

Agalega in Mauritius, Duqm fits into India's proactive maritime security roadmap.

Following the signing of the military co-operation agreement, Duqm port and dry dock are available for the maintenance of Indian military vessels. In recent years, India has deployed an attack submarine, a warship and two P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft to the port.

Following Modi's visit to Oman, the joint statement said the two sides noted that the MoU on Military Cooperation, signed in 2005 and renewed in 2016, provided the general framework to strengthen bilateral defence ties. "Recognising their common responsibility towards promoting regional peace and security, the two sides underlined the importance of further cementing bilateral strategic engagement, especially in the areas of security and defence," it said.

Is there scope for cooperation beyond the military partnership as well?

Duqm port also has a special economic zone, where Indian companies have made investments of about \$1.8 billion. The Adani

group has signed an MoU with the Duqm port authorities.

In the context of strategic oil reserves near Duqm, India had invited Oman to participate in building strategic oil reserves in India.

What else is on Zaabi's agenda in India?

On the sidelines of the JMCC, Zaabi is expected to call on Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and receive exposure to the Indian defence production industry to explore possibilities of procurement and joint production.

A series of high-profile defence engagements is lined up in February, including visits to India by the Chiefs of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force of Oman, staff talks between the two navies, and a bilateral Air Force exercise in Jodhpur, which will see the participation of over 150 Omani personnel.

The visits of the Omani Naval and Air Force Chiefs will take place after a gap of five years, and will enable high-level re-engagement between the forces of the two sides.

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SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Ukraine, Russia and India

India has broken its silence on the crisis arising out of Russia's military build-up on Ukraine's border. What are Russia's intentions, why is the West concerned, and what are India's stakes in its ties with each side?

SHUBHAJITROY

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 30

INDIA THIS week gave its first official statement amid the tension between Russia and the West — led by the US — over Ukraine. It's been a tense one-and-a-half months, with the possibility of war looming large.

What's happening?

Ukraine has become a bone of contention in Moscow's relations with the West, with Russian troops massed near its border and NATO's forces on standby in case Russia attacks its neighbour. Ukrainian forces have been patrolling the border in the east and the north, including in Chernobyl in Ukraine, which falls on the shortest route between Russia and Kyiv, Ukraine's capital.

The crisis began in mid-December when Russia told Western powers that it had a list of demands. It wanted a guarantee from the West "in writing" to stop further eastward expansion of NATO, the removal of NATO troops from Poland and the Baltic states, and the possible withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe. Among the most important demands was that Ukraine should never be allowed to join NATO. The US and the West have ruled this out. The two sides are negotiating in Paris, in the presence of interlocutors from France, Germany, US and Russia. French President Emmanuel Macron and US President have separately spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin in a bid to resolve the crisis.

Why is Russia doing this?

The *New Yorker's* editor David Remnick, the *Washington Post* correspondent in Russia between 1987 and 1991, has written a book, *Lenin's Tomb: Last Days of the Soviet Empire*, in which he quotes Vladimir Lenin as saying: "For us, to lose Ukraine would be to lose our head."

This has been the attitude of rulers in Moscow over the centuries, from the Tsar and the Bolsheviks to Putin. Throughout his 22-year rule so far, Putin has sought to restore Russia's influence in the countries that were part of erstwhile Soviet Union. Ukraine was the most crucial of the 14 then republics whose control Russia lost when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. It was the second largest economy, and second-most populous.

In an article on the Kremlin's website in July 2021, Putin wrote that Russians and Ukrainians were one people who shared a single "historic and spiritual space" and that the emergence of a "wall" between them in recent years was tragic. Ukraine disputes Putin's version of history.

What are the historical connections?

Historians say that Russia and Ukraine had been linked since the 9th century when Kyiv became the capital of the ancient state of Rus. From 1654, the two were united by treaty under the rule of the Russian tsar. They speak closely related languages and later formed, with Belarus, the Slav core of the Soviet Union.

When the Tsar's empire collapsed after the revolution led by Lenin, the Ukrainians created a state of their own and declared independence in January 1918. Although it turned out to be short-lived as the Bolsheviks took control over most of Russian Ukraine in 1920, that two-year period planted the seeds of independence among the Ukrainian people.

"The Bolsheviks were forced to recognise Ukraine as a separate nation and even grant a pro forma independence to the Ukrainian Soviet republic," historian Serhii Plokhy, a professor of Ukrainian history in Harvard University, wrote in *The Financial Times*.

The Ukrainian referendum of December 1 1991, in which over 90% of participants voted to leave the USSR, spelt the end of the Cold War superpower. Economics too played a role: Russia could not bear the burden of the Union

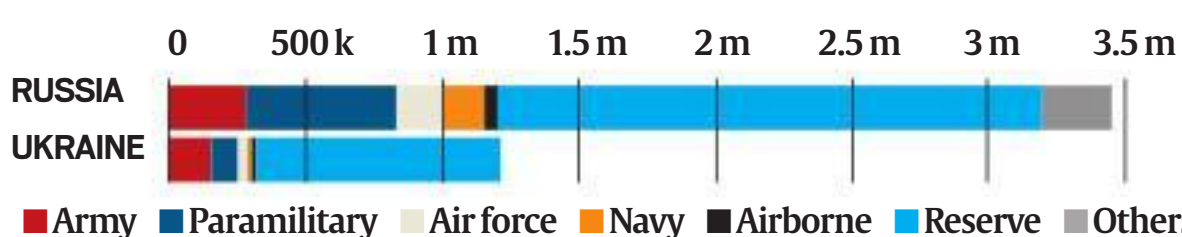
WAR CLOUDS OVER UKRAINE

US President Joe Biden believes his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin could 'move in' to Ukraine. How could that scenario unfold, according to the American think tank CSIS?



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies

MILITARY SIZES IN 2020



Source: The International Institute for Strategic Studies

Graphic: Reuters

YEARS OF CONFLICT

2004: ORANGE REVOLUTION

Allegations of widespread fraud in presidential election led to mass protests. Top court voided election; fresh vote was held; pro-Europe Viktor Yushchenko became President.

2013-14: MAIDAN PROTESTS

President Viktor Yanukovich said he was suspending EU talks to revive Moscow ties; huge street protests broke out. Maidan Square uprising forced Yanukovich from power in Feb 2014.

2014: RUSSIA INVADES

In Feb and March 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea. In April, pro-Russian separatists declared independence in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine; fighting broke out.

AIRLINER IS DOWNED

In July 2014, a missile brought down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 above Donbass, killing 298 aboard. Buk surface-to-air missile was traced to Russia; Moscow rejected allegation.

2018: KERCH CRISIS

In Nov 2018, Russian border guards clashed with Ukrainian ships in Kerch Strait connecting Black Sea and Sea of Azov; pro-West President Petro Poroshenko declared martial law.

CONTINUING CONFLICT

Ceasefires with Russian-backed separatists have not lasted. Violence has continued in Donbass, which has a large ethnic Russian population.

Reuters

without its second-largest economy.

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe too. It has major ports on the Black Sea and shares borders with four NATO countries. Europe depends on Russia for a third of its natural gas — providing enormous leverage to Putin in any dispute with the West — and one of the main pipelines passes through Ukraine.

How did the West come into the picture?

Since the Cold War ended, NATO has expanded eastward by taking in 14 new countries, including some from the former Soviet Union. Russia views this as a threat, and feels the West is not respecting the non-threatening commitments made in the early 1990s.

Ukraine is not a NATO member but has an assurance made in 2008 that it will eventually be able to join. After a pro-Russian president was removed in 2014, Ukraine has come closer politically to the West. It has done joint military exercises with NATO and been delivered weapons including US anti-tank missiles. This, according to Kyiv, has been done to boost Ukraine's defence after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and reportedly provided support to separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Putin says NATO may use Ukraine as a launchpad for missiles targeted at Russia.

Where does India stand on this?

India made its first statement on the crisis on Friday. Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi, responding to questions at the weekly briefing, said, "We have been closely following the developments relating to Ukraine, including the ongoing high level discussions between Russia and the US. Our Embassy in Kyiv is also monitoring local developments. We call for a peaceful resolution of the situation through sustained diplomatic efforts for long term peace and stability in the region and beyond."

Why now?

On January 19, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman called up Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and discussed "Russia's concerning military build-up on Ukraine's borders". New Delhi did not issue an official statement then, but has now finally broke its silence.

With key strategic partners on both sides, India can't afford any hasty moves. While there is concern about Russia's "muscle-flexing", India does not want to jeopardise its close military ties with Moscow, particularly amid the stand-off with China on the eastern border.

What's at stake in these ties?

The relationship with Russia goes back seven decades. While it has stagnated in some areas and atrophied in others, the strongest pillar is defence. Although New Delhi has consciously diversified its new purchases from other countries, the bulk of its defence supplies — estimates say 60%-70% is from Russia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held informal summits with the heads of only two countries — Putin and China's Xi Jinping. Russia has now emerged as a key diplomatic player amid the tension between India and China: Indian and Chinese foreign and defence ministers have negotiated in Russia. Russia is also key to India's engagements in Afghanistan, after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

And, what about ties with the West?

The US and Europe are both important partners from India's strategic calculus. Many American platforms have been used for reconnaissance along the India-China border. Winter clothing for 50,000 troops has been sourced from Western partners.

Isn't the Russia-China axis a concern?

India is indeed conscious that the hostile-

ity between the West and Russia may push Moscow in the direction of Beijing.

The West's approach towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea brought Moscow closer to China. India has always felt that it was the West that enabled this with Washington's anti-Chinese rhetoric and the collapse of oil prices, making Russia increasingly dependent on Chinese consumption. Western analysts see this as a "friendship of convenience" between two countries led by strongmen.

Are there other concerns for India?

There is an Indian community in Ukraine, mostly medical students. The Indian Embassy in capital Kyiv has started collating information on them, as part of preparations for possible hostilities. As per government estimates, 18,000 Indian students were in Ukraine in 2020, but the numbers may have dipped due to lockdowns and classes moving online.

So, where does India stand now, after the statement?

When Russia had annexed Crimea, India had expressed "concern" but also qualified it by talking of "legitimate Russian interests". Putin had thanked India for taking a "restrained and objective" stand, and called up then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to express his gratitude.

Keeping in mind its ties with Russia, sources said, India hasn't issued any condemnatory statements as the Western powers are doing. For now, New Delhi is hoping that the situation will be resolved by skilled negotiators on both sides. CIA chief William Burns has handled several such tough talks in his previous diplomatic roles, while on the other side is Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

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NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL, PRESIDENT, SHIROMANI AKALI DAL

“The Centre has taken away all our powers. States are like municipalities... beggars... ED, NIA can walk in anywhere”

Sukhbir Singh Badal on the Akali Dal’s chances in the polls, the newly-minted farmers’ party, the challenge from AAP and the Centre’s stranglehold over states. The session was moderated by MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA, Resident Editor, *The Indian Express*, Punjab

Manraj Grewal Sharma: Most pollsters are making it out to be a contest only between the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) with Akali Dal in the background. What do you have to say about that?

I think this election will mark the end of pollsters because earlier there used to be ‘paid news’, now it is ‘paid polls’. Arvind Kejriwal has misused Delhi’s publicity funds of over Rs 800 crore to get this service. These channels approached me too for a poll, I said no, I don’t have Rs 20 crore to give you.

Last time, the same pollster said AAP will get 100 seats, but they got 20. That too when there was an AAP wave and everyone was against the Akali Dal. We still got 31 per cent vote share, Congress got 36 per cent and AAP 21 per cent. Two years later in Parliament elections, AAP (seat share) went from 21 per cent to six per cent while the Akali seat share went up, and the difference between the Congress and Akali Dal was reduced to half a per cent. Six to eight months back, there were 13 corporation committee elections in Punjab. Out of 1,300 committees, AAP only got 25, we got 400.

You mark my words. We are going to form the government. Congress will not cross more than 15 seats. There is a complete rebellion in Congress. AAP is limited to pockets. There is no AAP in Majha and Doaba areas. And this time there’s no AAP wave. Secondly, Kejriwal has indirectly started projecting himself as the main face, which the Punjabis do not want at all.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: But AAP has projected Bhagwant Mann as the CM face.

No, have you seen the new slogan, ‘Kejriwal *aur* Bhagwant Mann *ko mauka do*. Why Kejriwal? Has the Congress ever said, Rahul Gandhi *aur* Navjot Singh Sidhu *ko do*? Has the BJP said, “So and so *aur* Modi *ko do*”? Punjab CM is a constitutional post. How can people say Kejriwal *ko mauka do*? Are we voting for Kejriwal or Bhagwant Mann? AAP is controlled entirely by Kejriwal. None of the AAP leaders in Punjab are allowed to hold a press conference; they are held by their spokesman Raghav Chadha. What was the philosophy of AAP? That an *aam aadmi* will be their candidate, like a milkman, or a workshop man, or a doctor. Where are those candidates now? Sixty per cent of the candidates fielded by AAP are defectors from Akali Dal and Congress. Their basic philosophy has completely vanished, that’s why people have started moving away from them.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: What makes you so confident? Because even now, the sacrilege issue is alive and more recently, there is a drugs case against Bikram Majithia (president, Akali Dal youth wing).

These are all false cases and everyone knows it. For five years, they tried their best to blame us, but they could not get a single proof. I’m confident because of the strength of our cadre. We have a strong cadre base; we are a 100-year-old traditional party, and in every village, every town, we have a base. And even with a storm like in the last polls, we got 30 per cent.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: What about Akali leaders like Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa who say Akali Dal has become a family party?

And what has Dhindsa done? Fielded his son, his son-in-law. Today I am the president of Akali Dal, next it can be somebody else. It’s a 100-year-old traditional party.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: Do you think you should have come out more strongly against the farm laws when they were tabled?

We told the BJP that if you implement the laws without approval of the farmers, we will not be part of you. So the day they forced the Bill in Parliament, we left them. Ninety per cent of the farmers’ base is with the Akali Dal. Most of the unions are one of the subunits of the Communist Party. The ones who are fighting the elections here are mostly from the Communist Party.

Sunny Verma: You withdrew support from the NDA primarily due to the farm laws. Now that the government has repealed those laws, will you be open to aligning again with the NDA or the BJP?



WHY SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL

Sukhbir Singh Badal is president of Shiromani Akali Dal, the oldest regional party of the country, which has formed government in the state seven times. The party, which broke away from long-term ally BJP over the farm laws in 2020, is now fighting hard to stage a comeback in a contentious five-cornered poll contest this February



We, at the moment, have now aligned with the BSP. We are not the types to switch sides. Now we are with the BSP, there’s no question of going with the BJP.

Vandita Mishra: You sort of tried to say that the farmers’ agitation was basically a Left union-led movement. But all of us who went to the ground could see how deeply it had

percolated and that there was popular cynicism towards established parties like yours.

I think you did not take my answer in the right spirit. I said this agitation was led by farm unions, but the movement was of the people of Punjab. Now the unions have come back to fight elections, they will lose security deposit in at least 90 per cent of the seats they fight. During the agitation, maybe the farm unions were the frontmen. Now our cadre has come back

to us, the Congress cadre has gone back to them. Even Balbir Singh Rajewal, who’s supposed to be their CM face, will not even be the second runners-up at Samrala.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: What about the charge that Captain Amarinder was in cahoots with the Badals and their work did not stop despite the change of the government?

After Charanjit Singh Channi came, Navjot Singh Sidhu said Channi is in cahoots with us. Earlier, he was accusing Amarinder of being involved with us. Why are they so scared of us? As you said, we are written off. They have been trying their best to find something on us, but they failed. Amarinder registered a case against my family. We were acquitted by the courts. So these



Illustration: Suvajit Dey

are political statements to cover up their misdeeds.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: What about the charge that Jat Sikhs have had a hegemony over the CMship despite being only 25 per cent of the population and that Akali Dal is a Jat Sikh party?

Akali Dal is an all-inclusive party. Akali Dal has the maximum Hindu candidates. Most of the time, Akalis win all the Dalit seats as well.

Vandita Mishra: In 2010, you had gone very strong on development issues like the Saanjh Kendra, the self-certification push, in your campaign. Today what we are hearing is the Majithia case, the Bargari issue. Do you think this election campaign is now not leaving you space for those kinds of issues anymore?

Travel anywhere in Punjab and you’ll see the road network created by the Akali Dal. We made Punjab power-surplus, we’ve created an airport network. In the last five years, you cannot find even one example of such development. The reason they are sticking to Bargari and Majithia case is because they want to cover up the incompetent five years. Congress shut down the Seva Kendras.

Vandita Mishra: What about the issue of whether a Hindu can be chief minister of Punjab?

I think anybody can be chief minister, he has to be competent. He has to have leadership qualities. Why should there be a difference between Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims?

Manraj Grewal Sharma: Have you met the Prime Minister after the farm laws, after this break? He has been calling up your father.

No, I have not met the Prime Minister. There are certain courtesies that are extended at that level of leadership, so you cannot read too much into it. We left them because they stabbed us in the back. It is not that we wanted to leave.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: So there is no

going back to the BJP? Never?

Never, I can’t say. But at the moment, no.

Sukhbir Siwach: Are the issues of farmers and the three farm laws still central in the upcoming election?

Agriculture as a whole is a Central issue, farm laws not anymore because they have been withdrawn. Now other issues have come up.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: Sidhu has been saying the state government should encourage diversification by giving MSP for vegetables etc.

Why didn’t they give it in the last five years? I challenge Congress to name one new school they built, one new road, one new bridge, one new sewage treatment plant. They cannot even name one. This is the worst government Punjab has ever had. They have just ruined the state, fighting with each other.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: The last time, sacrilege and drugs were the two issues that led to Akali Dal’s defeat.

No, sacrilege was one small part. At that time Capt Amarinder Singh swore on *Gutka Sahib* that he would waive off all the loans, be it from banks, arhtiyas or any moneylenders, and people believed him. But they were defrauded. If sacrilege was a major issue, the Akali Dal wouldn’t have got 31 per cent. There were at least 30 seats on which we lost by less than 1,000 votes.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: It’s alleged that Akali Dal did not collect revenue for the government but for its own leaders.

Please look at the revenue generation during the time of Congress and Akali Dal. Liquor revenue in 2002 was Rs 2,000 crore a year. In 2007, when Captain Amarinder left, it was Rs 2,000 crore a year; no increase in five years. We took it from Rs 2,000 crore to Rs 5,500 crore a year. Even in this tenure, the Congress government has failed to increase its liquor revenue. When we took over, VAT was Rs 5,000 crore, we took it up to Rs 70,000 crore a year.

Navjeevan Gopal: Coming to this

drugs case against Majithia, the Congress is claiming that it is the first step towards justice.

How many DGPs did they have to change who said we cannot register a case because it’s false. Two DGPs of the state had to be removed. Two Bureau of Investigation chiefs had to be removed. Then finally, they had to get Siddharth Chattopadhyaya. They made him (the DGP) just for those 20 days to register a case. In those 20 days, there was a bomb blast in Ludhiana, sacrilege in Darbar Sahib, and security lapse during Prime Minister’s visit. Then, he filed an FIR, not in any police station of the state but in a temporary *thana* in his office. They used non-bailable sections, they planned out everything (against Majithia).

Vandita Mishra: You say that the AAP is not a Punjabi party; it is from

depends on when we get the funds from the Centre. Earlier, every day, money used to come into our accounts. So we could play with our own finances. Now dues are not cleared for months. So we have become beggars. Today, wherever the Centre

wants, it sends the ED there. NIA walks in from anywhere. Look at the new rule for IAS officers. They can transfer them, so all instructions will come from them. You’re creating a dictatorship in stead of a democracy.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: What about politics itself? Do you see politics itself becoming very vitriolic, very bitter?

I think it is. The cordial relationships which used to be commonplace during my father’s time have vanished. It’s become more personal, vindictive, abusive.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: What would you attribute that to?

I think the new generation. In my father’s time, the leader, the statesman, never went beyond a limit. Now, everyone has become a street fighter. Media also loves interviewing these kind of people.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: What is your vision for taking forward Punjab’s industrial growth and economy?

First of all, Punjab needs to elect a strong CM who is decisive, who has a vision and who has performed. Everything depends on a CM. The CM is the engine, the rest are all coaches. In the last five years, the engine was stuck in a farmhouse. You don’t need money, you need ideas, money follows.

Manraj Grewal Sharma: If you come to power in Punjab, what are the three challenges that you face? And how do you plan to resolve them?

Last time, my priorities were the road network and power. I challenge any state to have the infrastructure we have. This time, my priority is education and health care. Education means government education. I want to change from quantity education to quality education. I’m going to have a 500-bed medical college in every district. It solves two purposes. One, you’re going to educate your children to become doctors. Second, a 500-bed hospital facility is created in the district.

Rahul Sabharwal: AAP pitches the success of its healthcare and education in Delhi as two of its main planks.

How many *mohalla* clinics are working? Is anybody saying that 250 *mohalla* clinics are doing well? How many New Delhi schools have been upgraded out of the 2,000? You do one, two or 10 schools and show that you’ve done everything there. Majority of the *mohalla* clinics are shut.

Anant Goenka: Punjab is an agrarian economy, but why is climate change not an election issue despite the falling water table? And when do you think climate change will become an election issue in your state?

It is a very important issue, but everyone is brushing it under the carpet. In fact, it is the most important issue. The way the water level is dipping, in another 20 years, Punjab will be a desert. I have a plan for it. We are going to do groundwater recharging in our rivers – Sutlej, Beas. Second, my whole thrust now is going to be on solar power. I’m going to allow industries to set up their own solar power plants. As for power subsidies, instead of giving cash to the electricity department, we will set up a parallel solar plant and we will transfer that much power to the power company. And this will be a self-financing model.

Kanchan Vasdev: If the Akali Dal is voted to power, what would be the fate of the Majithia case?

What happens in false cases? What do you do? Same thing will happen.





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

— Rammath Goenka

WRECKING BALL OF CHIEF MINISTERIAL FACE IN PUNJAB CONG

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi may have stepped on a landmine during his recent visit to Punjab by agreeing to announce the chief ministerial candidate of the state. The party has only two faces with any big traction left. The first is Jat Sikh Navjot Singh Sidhu, who came in like a wrecking ball with the approval of the Gandhi family to replace Amarinder Singh as chief minister and demolished every party edifice, but fell short of the final target. The beneficiary was the accidental Dalit Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi, who Sidhu thought would be an easily replaceable rolling stone but has surprisingly gathered moss and become an alternative power centre. Both Sidhu and Channi cater to different intra-party vote banks. Choosing one over the other as the chief ministerial face has the potential to switch off Jat Sikhs or Dalits barely weeks before polling. Yet, both pressed Rahul to commit harakiri by abandoning the middle ground of joint leadership.

It was the fledgling AAP that rolled the dice by selecting comedian Bhagwant Mann as the chief ministerial face through crowdsourcing. That his managers would have used every trick, including buying off professional trolls not just in Punjab but across cyberspace to saturate the AAP app and helpline with likes for him is a safe guess. While the AAP's decision forced Rahul's hand, the modus of his cherry-picking is not clear. But the Dalit empowerment card would blow up in his face if Rahul were to opt for Sidhu. Anyway, Sidhu is a motormouth with an image more suitable for comedy than serious politics. His brief stint in power in Amarinder's ministry found him wary of taking hard decisions. As for Channi, he may not find it easy to shake off the stigma of alleged sand smuggling his nephew is involved in. The Congress mess and the entry of a section of farmers into the poll fray is said to be helping the Shiromani Akali Dal recover some lost ground. Also the powerful deras may have pitched their tents away from the ruling party.

Punjab seems to have an assembly line of comedians, one of whom runs a highly successful TV show. Will comedy have the last laugh this election season?

DEAL WITH START-UP MISGOVERNANCE

The recent events in fintech company BharatPe are a stark reminder of the underbelly of the start-up ecosystem. Amid the euphoria around big dollars coming into start-ups in India and, consequently, valuations going through the roof, it should not be lost on regulators as well as investors that corporate governance remains sacrosanct. The BharatPe saga, which began with Co-Founder and Managing Director Ashneer Grover entering into an ugly spat with a Kotak Wealth executive over the latter's inability to make available ₹500 crore for applying in an initial public offering (IPO) of a company has now become an issue of corporate governance.

All kinds of allegations—including that of fraud and favouritism in recruitment—are flying thick and fast. While Grover has been sent on voluntary leave after an audio clip of him and his wife abusing a Kotak Wealth executive went viral, there are reports that the co-founder may be in for bigger trouble and even face termination along with a few others. While the firm has maintained that no one has been sacked till now, it looks like there could be many heads rolling in the company. Whatever the fate of the BharatPe MD, one thing is clear: not everything is kosher as far as corporate governance in start-ups is concerned.

There have been stories of blackmailing, betrayal, frauds and fund diversions in start-ups that are manned by young tech entrepreneurs. They could easily acquire a God complex given the kind of money and attention they get at a very early age. Big egos and a lot of money could prove to be a heady cocktail for these entrepreneurs, who could end up on the wrong side of corporate laws. What complicates the equation is large investors with high expectations, putting these entrepreneurs under severe pressure to show results. India has a very vibrant start-up culture and a dynamic young population of entrepreneurs. However, regulators need to be vigilant lest these promising start-ups end in messy corporate litigation and frauds.

EDITORIAL

HYDERABAD

MONDAY 31.01.2022

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS



We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn

newindianexpress.com

History has witnessed that whenever the state and ecclesiastical authorities acted in unison, it led to violent outcomes. That is what we are witnessing today

THE DANGERS OF POLITICS OF ORGANISED RELIGION

KAPIL SIBAL



Senior lawyer, Congress leader and member of Rajya Sabha

Trade is for profit. Organised religion has also become a 'for profit' enterprise. This is because organised religion and political agendas feed on each other. The religion of politics thrives when it has a symbiotic relationship with the politics of religion.

The politics of organised religion aims at increasing its footprint, not necessarily by propagating its moral tenets but by appealing to a person's baser instincts, especially fear of alleged threats to one's faith. This makes the votaries of that religion fall prey to causes divorced from reality. Such emotive appeals make people insecure and vulnerable to propaganda. The religion of politics, for electoral advantage, supports this narrative. This helps unite the community of a particular creed across caste and other fault lines. Those belonging to the minority community cannot take advantage of any such symbiotic relationship because those in power cannot derive an electoral advantage from such presumed threats.

Organised religious majorities have much to gain when those in power fuel that faith's agendas. They then get access to the corridors of power and start, first by participating and then setting national agendas. Such a parasitical relationship is corrosive of democratic structures.

In India, organised majoritarian

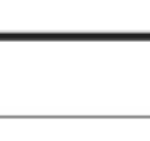
undercurrents were on display even prior to 1947. They sought to assert themselves during our struggle for freedom. After Independence, these forces suffered a setback when Gandhiji was assassinated in January 1948. The RSS was banned thereafter, for, contrary to its principles, it allegedly exhorted people to violence and indulged in violent activities. The ban imposed in February 1948 was lifted in July 1949. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh, which was formed in October 1951, passionately espoused the cause of the Hindu right but without much electoral success. It got assimilated into the BJP that was formed in April 1980. With the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984 and fresh elections to the Lok Sabha, the presence of the BJP in the Lok Sabha was a meagre two members of Parliament. It is thereafter that fresh seeds of the unholy alliance between organised majoritarian faith and politics in India were sown when a BJP supremo launched a Rath Yatra in September 1990 to educate the people about the Ayodhya movement. This resulted in spectacular dividends for the BJP.

Having tasted blood, the contours between state and religion became somewhat blurred under a BJP dispensation. With Narendra Modi coming to power, the state unabashedly started propagating majoritarian religious agendas, with several government initiatives aligning

themselves to such plans. Courts too gave priority to issues like 'triple talaq' over those that were far more pressing. Lynch mobs had a field day with little to fear from those responsible for maintaining law and order. Police were reluctant to take action against the accused. Instead, they occasionally foisted cases on the victims. Outfits like the ABVP, Bajrang Dal and a host of others ran amuck with the confidence that they will get the protection of the state for their provocative and often illegal actions. From baiting members of the minority community to acts of open violence, with the state reluctant to prosecute, these disruptive elements believed that they could act with impunity. The leadership of the BJP too has been openly taunting the minority community. From 'abba jaan' to references to 'sham-shaan and kabristan' and 'goli maro...', all these barbs became reference points of public discourse.



The Hindutva agenda is slowly but surely being realised. School textbooks are being changed reflecting the political priorities of the establishment. Historical monuments are being whitewashed with a coat of modernity or effaced by stripping the past of its heritage



Significant players in mainstream media and social media platforms said to be financed and armed by savvy technocrats and 'bhakts' give impetus to such divisive state-ments that vitiate the atmosphere. The objective is to communalise matters of faith.

Having succeeded in its evangelical zeal, the Modi government has been strategically appointing pliable bureaucrats to key positions to do the government's bidding, thus helping it to carry forward its divisive agenda. Key constitutional positions are slotted for either the "like-minded" or those committed to its agenda. The RSS has found its place in the sun as its core objectives continue to be translated into action. The Hindutva agenda is slowly but surely being realised. School textbooks are being changed reflecting the political priorities of the establishment. The heroes of the past are being buried and historical facts reinterpreted to serve the establishment's political priorities. Historical monuments are being whitewashed with a coat of modernity or effaced by stripping the past of its heritage.

This has also catered to the rise of a culture, the architecture of which is to dominate, to fuel nationalism as the embodiment of virtue, a nationalism that encapsulates elements of the majoritarian cultural agenda that seeks obedience. From this narrative emerges the concept

of 'us vs them'. This in turn feeds into the nationalist fervour of conformity. Thus, the refrain is that the only way to make the nation strong is to make the majoritarian culture prevail, become exclusive. Violence through speech and occasionally action becomes a legitimate instrument to ensure the nation's unity and forward march, for dissent, they say, has the tendency of stalling progress. Asking questions and holding peaceful protests to seek answers are perceived as anti-national activities.

Organised religion working in tandem with the state results in concentration of power in the hands of a few, as they are seen to represent the collective wisdom of the majority. Distribution of largesse to the favoured few becomes the norm with none to question it. When state power and national wealth are enjoyed by the chosen few, we then witness the emergence of totalitarian structures.

Organised religion pays scant respect to the values of religion. It enjoys the trappings of power and all else that comes with it.

History has witnessed that whenever the state and ecclesiastical authorities acted in unison, it led to violent outcomes. The state's hunger for territories and wealth worked in tandem with religion's fervour to expand its footprint. That is what we are witnessing today.

(*Tweets @KapilSibal*)

NEED TO REVISIT GLOBAL HEALTH AGENDA RIGHT NOW

SURJITH KARTHIKEYAN



Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Finance

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on economies, placing millions of people at risk. This is the time to think of initiating reforms in the global health agenda. The WHO has faced serious criticism from across the spectrum on the management of Covid and could not do much in facilitating provision of vaccines to the needy populations.

The activities of international health agencies like the WHO are targeted across two different health approaches, one focused on vertical campaign against management of specific diseases (e.g. smallpox, malaria, etc.), and the other one having a social perspective or a horizontal approach targeting poverty, inequality, ... (e.g. Alma-Ata declaration with the objective of health for all people). These may be termed as biomedical and social medicine approaches respectively. The biomedical or the vertical approach, being a specialised one, is executed by health workers and may not be successful unless there are permanent health services in specific regions for monitoring. The horizontal approach, like a mass campaign, involves a significant proportion of the population. The resource allocation by economies plays a key role in both these

cases and thus these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and require coordination and combination in various ways. Thus, the WHO may need to draw a clear line on where the mass campaigns are successful, taking into consideration the disease being targeted and the resource availability.

Another serious constraint on the achievement of health and development goals is the shortage of health workers and their vital role especially in fighting communicable diseases. The WHO in its 2006 health report highlighted the shortage of four million health workers with critical paucity reported in 57 countries, mostly in Africa. It also estimated a requirement of 18 million more health workers by 2030, primarily in low- and middle-income countries. The imbalance is more severe in rural areas compared to urban places. The high salary for these professionals in advanced countries makes them go abroad. Unfavourable working conditions, climate change impacts and ageing population adversely contribute to this issue.

Unclear priorities among a multitude of programmes is another major challenge. The priority-setting process involves selecting the best option for addressing the most

important health need. The WHO has identified "universal health coverage" as the single-most powerful concept that public health has to offer. Studies conducted across the world estimate that out-of-pocket payments push 100 million people into poverty every year and the most effective way to provide universal coverage is to share the costs across the population. Globally, 12.67% of the people spend more than 10% of income (out of their pocket) as health expenditure. One of the areas where this rate is higher than the average is the South East Asian region (India included), where it is 16%. The Western Pacific region comes second in this list. This means that these regions don't have universal health coverage. A strong, efficient and well-run system that meets priority health needs through people-centred integrated care is the need of the hour. Sustainable health systems that promote universal access to care can be facilitated through appropriate application of digital technologies.



A diverse set of players including philanthropies are involved in global health funding and they have much more resources than the WHO. There is lack of coordination and duplication with top-down and donor-driven approaches, leading to a negative impact on nations with fragile health systems

The Covid crisis had exposed the risks of corruption prevalent in the health sector as also its fragile systems that threaten its sustainability. The Office of Internal Audit and Oversight report submitted to the World Health Assembly in 2019 reveals that a total of 81% of overall conclusions on audits were assessed as either "satisfactory" or "partially satisfactory" suggesting improvements. Compared to 478 cases of fraud, corruption and misconduct reported in the year 2014, 520 were reported in 2019. The priority areas identified for improvement include strengthening implementation, robust vendor management, addressing human resource needs and improving resources for key underfunded programmes. Thus, it is high time that good governance practices get incorporated into this organisation.

Recently, multilateralism has been in a state of crisis. There is declining commitment to multilateral action/UN after the end of the Cold War and in the current geopolitical climate of rising nationalism. The UN and its agencies are being criticised for lack of efficiency and a whole lot of other issues. The WHO has also shown its limits and shortcomings in containing the virus spread during the pandemic, and the world too witnessed political pressure exerted by powerful member states and corporate interests. There are also growing calls for social justice amid accelerating economic globalisation.

Global health governance en-

compasses formal and informal institutions along with norms and processes that govern or directly influence international health policy and outcomes. A diverse plethora of players are involved in global health funding and they have much more resources than the WHO. In addition to international organisations like the World Bank and WHO, there are multilateral entities (e.g. G8, G20), multilateral global health initiatives (e.g. GFATM, GAVI), international development agencies (e.g. USAID, DFID), bilateral initiatives (e.g. PEPFAR, GHSA), philanthropies (e.g. Gates, Carso, Clinton), global public-private partnerships, private sector-industry initiatives, and civil society (e.g. MSF, Oxfam) undertaking a whole lot of health funding activities.

Thus, there are diverse funding players, fragmented due to lack of coordination and duplication with top-down and donor-driven approaches, leading to a negative impact on countries with fragile health systems. There are plenty of funds flowing into the health sector but the same is imbalanced in allocation to "big" diseases (vertical) but not to the health system for strengthening (horizontal). There is also lack of evaluation, accountability and sustainability, which necessitates the need for major overhaul and shifts with regard to traditional donors and models of funding for optimisation of the existing health resources.

(*Views are personal*)
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All eyes on panel's report

The Pegasus issue, which was lying dormant after the Supreme Court-ordered enquiry, has come into the limelight again (Jan 30). The Central government has rubbished the report. In a way, the matter is subjudice. All eyes are now on the report of the panel set up by the top court.

Capt Raju Mathai (Retd), Kochi

Justify your acts

The government's refusal to give an ironclad assurance that it did not use Pegasus has cast aspersions on its integrity. It is sad that the Centre would

even think of stooping to such a level for political mileage. The government ought to justify its acts.

Aanya Singhal, Noida

Watergate moment?

The US newspaper report that India purchased the spyware in 2017 from Israel has come as a big embarrassment to the Union government on the eve of the Budget Session of Parliament. It is time for the Centre to reveal the truth and apologise. Otherwise Pegasus could become its Watergate.

SV Venkatkrishnan, Bengaluru

Nadal bounces back

Challenges make life interesting and overcoming them is what makes it meaningful. Rafael Nadal bounced back in Melbourne in his indomitable style. After being down two sets, he scripted history with his 21st Major win.

R Sampath, Chennai

Why make a U-turn?

This is with reference to *Young wine in old bottles to revive Congress* (Jan 30). Even young wine in old bottles does not seem to have the required fizz. Otherwise, why would Priyanka make a U-turn within hours after

saying she is the CM face of her party in UP? She perhaps doesn't realise that her dilemma would be infectious. She should know that there is nothing to lose and it is always worth taking a calculated risk. She can sit in the opposition benches and be an effective leader. As rightly said by the writer, old is no more gold in the Congress, but the young too have no spring in them.

D Nagarjuna, Hyderabad

Don't privatise the hotel

The Centre's move to give Hotel Ashok on a long lease is not good. Just like AIIMS in the health sector, this hotel is

a prestigious government institution. Profit alone should not be the criterion.

Dharmarajan A K, Thalassery

Manipur on Railway map

This is with reference to *First train chugs into Manipur* (Jan 30). The placement of Manipur on the Indian Railways map is a historic step in developing connectivity to the Northeast. The new Jiribam-Agartala Janshatabdi Express will connect two important places in that region. The train services will give a boost to trade, tourism and the overall economy of the Northeast.

N Rama Rao, Chennai

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

Chairman of the Board: **Manoj Kumar Sonthalia** Editor: **G S Vasu** Resident Editor (Telangana): **Ch V M Krishna Rao** Published by **R K Jhunjhunwala** on behalf of Express Publications (Madurai) Private Limited., at: H.No.6-3-1113/1, B.S.Makta Lane, Somajiguda, Near Grand Kakatiya Hotel, Punjagutta, **Hyderabad** – 500 016 and printed by him at Sakshi Press, Plot No.D-75 & E-52, Industrial Estate (APIE), Balanagar, Medchal-Malkajgiri District, Telangana. **Hyderabad:** Vol. 46, No. 26 RNI Reg. No. 32179/77. **Phone:** 040-23413908. * Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act **Copyright:** Express Publications (Madurai) Private Limited., All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.

Time for India to Set Up a Fiscal Council

Will make budgetary process transparent

GoI is expected to chart a fiscal glide path in Tuesday's budget announcement. The pandemic makes forecasts of growth and fiscal variables challenging. So, it is the right time to create a fiscal council that will provide independent forecasts on macro-variables such as GDP growth and tax buoyancy, oversee compliance with debt targets and indicate a path of return. The assessment will help GoI evaluate macroeconomic conditions better and articulate the reason for where the fiscal deficit should be, keeping investors and bond markets informed. Successive finance commissions, and the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Review Committee recommended the creation of a fiscal council, in line with global practice. It will also bring transparency in the budget process.

About 50 countries have fiscal councils. A January IMF research paper, 'Fiscal Rules and Fiscal Councils: Recent Trends and Performance During the Covid-19 Pandemic' (bit.ly/3KXuQVC), lauds their role in providing oversight that includes monitoring the use of the so-called 'escape clauses' that validates any breach in fiscal deficit. Almost all countries with deficit rules exceeded the limits, by an average of 4% of GDP in 2020. Debt deviations reached unprecedented levels. But countries with a good track record on fiscal rules responded more aggressively during the crisis.

India's fiscal rules, adopted from July 2004, targeted a fiscal deficit of 3% of GDP. Gross fiscal deficit touched 6% of GDP in 2008-09, after the stimulus packages during the global financial crisis. Growth contracted after the pandemic, and the revised fiscal deficit widened to 9.8% of GDP in 2020-21. The economy is forecast to grow by 9.2% in 2021-22, and the budgeted fiscal deficit is lower at 6.8% of GDP. Some analysts worry that an abrupt fiscal consolidation may stifle recovery. But GoI cannot totally overlook the FRBM targets. A fiscal council, comprising of professionals experienced in public finance, to keep tabs on public debt will help bring government finances to a better shape.

Use Budget to Sync Climate and Growth

India's ambitious 2030 climate targets and goals of achieving net-zero emissions by 2070 will need mobilising investments, developing technologies and scaling up manufacturing capacities. It will require transforming the economy. Budget 2022 must lay the foundation for this transition, with restoring growth as its cornerstone. This growth must be restorative and sustainable. The energy sector is key to this.

The finance minister must build on last year's call for the retirement of inefficient coal power plants — fiscal signals that will move the investment away from coal plants to clean energy and even consider a moratorium on new coal power plants. Investment in critical energy storage technologies will be key to the transition. Energy storage alone will require an investment of \$35 billion to meet 2030 climate goals. The budget must provide incentives and risk guarantees to attract investment in battery storage, green hydrogen and smart grids. It must also put in the fiscal incentives to fulfil the full potential of rooftop solar and offshore wind. The budget should provide signals and incentives that will direct investment towards the environmentally sustainable.

Adapting to climate change and improving climate resilience must be as important as economic growth. The budget must guide investment away from high-emission unsustainable options towards green, low-waste and sustainable ones across sectors. It must recognise natural capital as an asset, building in fiscal and incentive structures that preserve and conserve it. The shift away from a linear to a circular economy must begin with Budget 2022. The budget should begin creating the structures that will sustain and accelerate this transition.

JUST IN JEST
Critiquing government Covid policy doesn't breach national security. Wow

Hong Kong Feels China's Benevolence

Meanwhile, in the special administrative region of the People's Republic of China that is Hong Kong where they do democracy differently, authorities have announced that making 'general remarks' about Hong Kong's Covid-mitigation strategy does not violate its national security law. This magnanimous response comes after a local legislator had earlier said that those who suggested 'like the West' that people should prepare to start 'living with the virus' may have broken the national security law. Being branded an anti-national or a member of a crispy tukde-tukde Sichuan chicken gang for criticising government policy was a worry in many living rooms. But with the announcement comes relief — Beijing's foot soldiers in Hong Kong aren't that authoritarian as foreigners make them out to be, after all.

But what constitutes 'general remarks'? Is it asking questions about the 'zero-Covid policy' that many outsiders deem draconian? Or, is it, in the middle of a general gupshup, critiquing certain aspects of it? What happens when someone, perhaps after too many mai tais, makes 'specific remarks'? Fortunately, Hong Kong's social media is strict enough to not be a feeding ground for anti-national utterings. Even with the reassuring word from the authorities, Hong Kong would do well to remember that the Great Wall has ears.

Economics has become too important for the citizens of India to be left to economists alone

Widen Level Playing Fields



Arun Maira

Based on a survey of members of the American Economic Association over four decades, the December 2021 study 'Consensus Among Economists 2020: A Sharpening of the Picture' (bit.ly/3rcSJAN) by Doris Geide-Stevenson and Alvaro La Parra-Perez of Weber State University, US, investigates 'an increased consensus on many economic propositions, specifically the appropriate role of fiscal policy in macroeconomics and issues surrounding income distribution'. What economists are agreeing about, at last, is that there should be more equality. Also, that anti-trust should be more rigorously enforced.

Till recently, many said the problem of inequality was being exaggerated by the likes of Oxfam and Thomas Piketty, adding that inequality is a stimulant for growth to spur those left behind to catch up. Many economists continue to say government regulation of business is an interference with business competition and innovation. Sharp differences about regulation of the technology industry highlight their contradictions. Again, till recently, the consensus of mainstream economists was that governments should leave economics to the market. Now, disagreements about levels of inflation and government fiscal activism have increased a lot, the study reveals.

A matter economists remain split

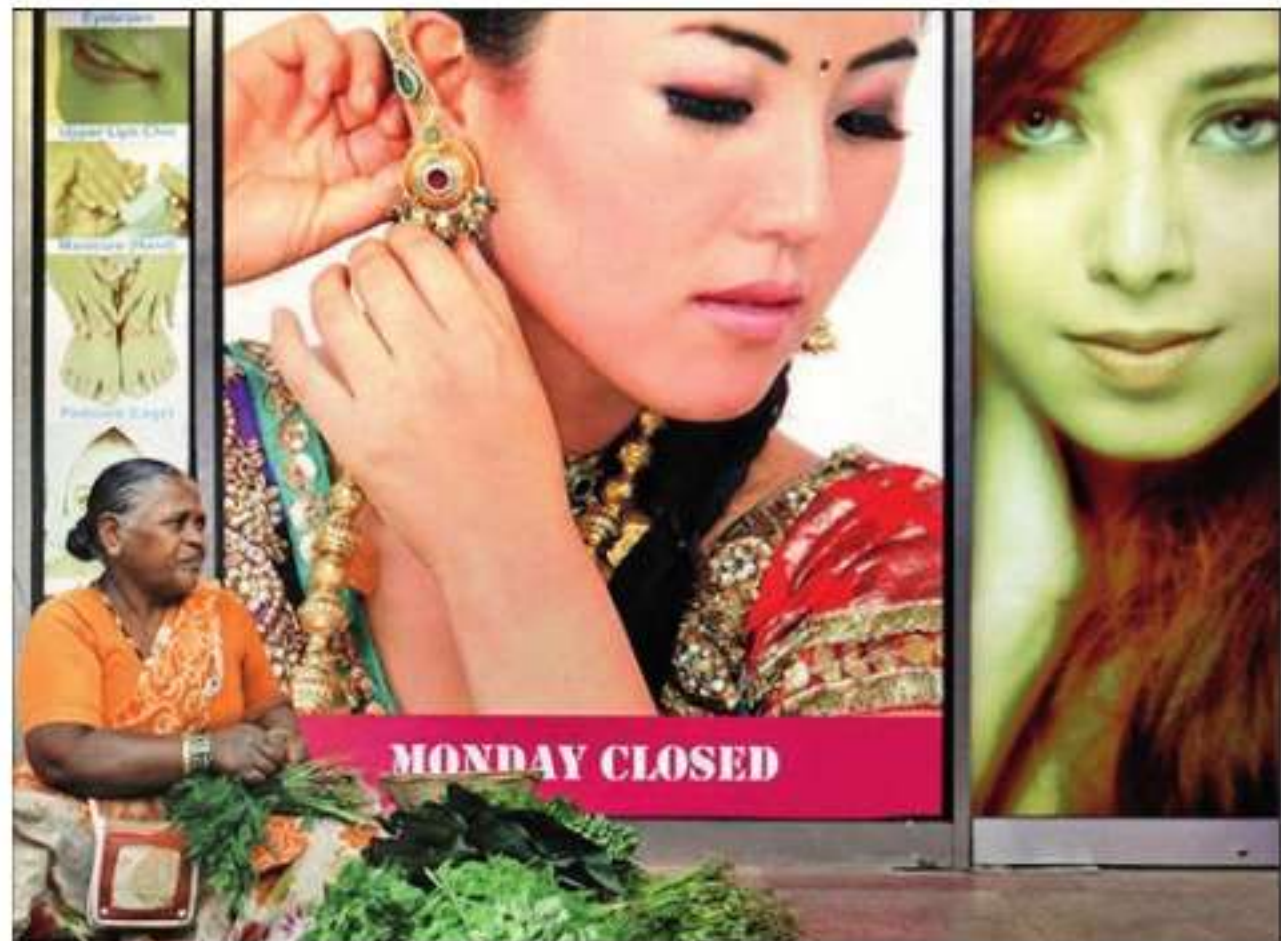
on is the question of increasing income and wealth taxes. Here, the divisions are becoming sharper. Some are beginning to defect from the side of neo-capitalists to socialists, admitting that higher taxes will not only reduce wealth inequality, but they are also necessary to provide governments with resources for public provisions of health and education to level the playing field, and to enable those left behind to catch up.

The Price of the Pudding

One wonders what a similar survey of Indian economists will reveal. India has become one of the most unequal countries in the world. The latest ICE 360° household survey conducted by the People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) released last week reveals that the income of the poorest fifth has plunged 53% in five years, while the income of the richest fifth increased 39%. Moreover, hardships have increased for a majority of Indians. Incomes of the lower 60% of the economic pyramid have declined,

while the wealth of billionaires has multiplied. GoI's celebration of the emergence of unicorns, rather than the rise of more enterprises that provide employment and incomes for more people, in this context, is rather lopsided.

India's economic problems can no longer be papered over by simply increasing the size of the economy, and higher GDP. The problem lies in the shape of the economy, and the distribution of opportunities within it. India's working-age population has increased from 96 crore to 108 crore in the last five years. Young people who have been getting educated in larger numbers than ever before — even those learning vocational skills — cannot find jobs. People are dropping out of the employment market seeing no hope in it.



Look beyond the bling

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimates that in Uttar Pradesh, the number of persons of working age who have a job has decreased in the last five years from 43% to 33%. In Uttarakhand, another relatively poor state, the decline is from 40% to 30%. Even skilled workers and educated youth are unable to get stable jobs with social security and decent incomes. The problem is not confined to only poor states. In Goa, one of India's richest states, numbers have declined from 49% to 32%, and in Punjab from 42% to 37%. The problem is nationwide.

Nirmala Sitharaman will be announcing the national budget tomorrow. One wonders who are the economists whose opinions GoI relies on and their economic ideology. 'Official' economists are spread around the finance ministry, which now has a new chief economic adviser in V Anantha Nageswaran, the NITI (National Institution for Transforming India) Aayog, the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM), and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Other economists with strong views about India's economic policies speak loudly in public fora. Perhaps the government listens to them, too. Several of them living abroad have advised GoI earlier and can credibly claim knowledge of Indian economic and political realities. Others, whose views

the media provide space for, are advisers to large international financial firms or large Indian business houses.

A Democratic Economy

How will the circle of increasing inequality and under-funded public services be squared? What are the real views now of economists who advise private sector firms, especially on matters of taxation and the balance of government budgets? Publicly, they support their employers' interests and are generally hawkish about lower wealth and income taxes and low government deficits.

Economics has become too important for the citizens of India to be left to economists alone. It is time for wider deliberations about India's development trajectory. 'Non-economists' — according to economists — must be listened to. Economic policies focused on only increasing the topline of GDP are not the solution. Policies must also focus on the bottomline — on increasing incomes at the bottom faster for all. Politics is not just about Hindu vs Hindutva, etc. It is about people left economically behind and coming together to provide economic justice for all.

The writer is former member, Planning Commission, and author of 'A Billion Fireflies: Critical Conversations to Shape a New Post-Pandemic World'

India cannot just increase the size of the economy, and add to GDP. The problem lies in the shape of the economy, and the distribution of opportunities within it

UP No Semi-Final, Polls No Cricket



Atanu Biswas

The next time an Op-ed or a news programme refers to the upcoming assembly election in Uttar Pradesh as 'semi-final' to the final of the 2024 Lok Sabha election, it should consider the overused expression as also being incorrect, if setting the tone is what it is supposed to denote.

Both the UP assembly and parliamentary elections took place in 1980, 1989, 1993 and 1996. So, the hypothesis that a 'semi-final' will shape the contours of a 'final' two years later is not verifiable from the data of these elections. Instead, let's look at more recent times when the state polls took place two years before the national election — keeping in mind that two years is a long time in politics.

In 2017, the BJP won 312 seats out of 403. At the Centre, the BJP retained power in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections with a huge majority. But what happened in the previous three elections? In the 2012 assembly election, the Samajwadi Party (SP) swept UP with 224 seats, with the BJP a distant third with 47 seats. But that couldn't prevent the triumph of the Narendra Modi-led BJP in the 2014 general elections.

In 2014, the BJP got 71 Lok Sabha seats in UP while the SP managed only five. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which claimed second position in the 2012 UP assembly polls with 80 seats, drew a blank in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. The 'semi-final' theory is certainly contradicted by these data.

The 2007 UP assembly polls were swept by Mayawati's BSP, which won 206 seats. The Congress won a meagre 22 seats. This didn't stop a Congress victory in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections with 206 seats. Interestingly, BSP came third after the SP and Congress in UP in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. In the 2002 assembly elections in UP,



Gate to 2024?

SP BSP and BJP got 143, 96 and 98 seats respectively, while the Congress could win only 25 seats. Mayawati became chief minister with the BJP's support in 2002. If it was a 'semi-final', then the 'final' was completely counter-intuitive. In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress won 145 seats, the BJP 138. Interestingly, the former could bag only 9 out of the 80 seats in UP. But that didn't stop the formation of the Congress-led UPA government of Manmohan Singh.

Since 2002, UP assembly elections were held somewhat in the middle of two Lok Sabha elections. Did the 2017 UP assembly results influence the 2019 Lok Sabha election? Or did the 2014

Lok Sabha influence the 2017 UP assembly? Or both, in different ways? Electorates are smart enough to distinguish between a civic poll and an assembly election, an assembly poll and a general election.

Take the 2019 Odisha assembly elections that were simultaneously held with the Lok Sabha elections. The Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal (BJD) won 12% more votes than the BJP in the Odisha assembly, but the BJD's lead over BJP in vote share was only 4.4% in Odisha's Lok Sabha seats. Thus, Odisha's voters had overwhelmingly favoured BJD in the state election, with the support in Lok Sabha not so overwhelming.

With 80 Lok Sabha seats — about 15% of the total in India — UP certainly is an important state for the 'road to Delhi'. But let's not assume a simple linear correlation between winning 2022 UP and 2024 India. Democracy is trickier and more robust than a cricket tournament.

The writer is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Clarity on Covid Drug Use, Please



Shreya Shrivastava

In December 2021, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) had given its nod for the emergency use of a variety of drugs against Covid-19. So far, we have witnessed terms like 'emergency use authorisation' (EUA), 'restricted emergency use', 'restricted use in emergency situation in public interest as an abundant precaution in clinical trial mode', 'restricted emergency use of an experimental drug', and 'off-label use' of a drug. On January 27, DCGI has introduced another term, 'conditional market approval' for Covishield and Covaxin. The problem is that not even DCGI is clear what these terms and conditions attached to the vaccines mean. This has worrying consequences for monitoring their use post-approval.

None of these different terms is defined under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. Neither is there a defined framework for the emergency approval of drugs. The New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019, introduced in March 2019, only provide for accelerated approval of drugs under special circumstances, without any conditions regarding their administration post-approval.

This should translate to greater responsibility for DCGI in prescribing conditions for approval and monitoring their use. While the role of DCGI and state drug authorities in

holding manufacturers accountable for drug quality and the generation of post-marketing data is better understood now, the accountability of those actually administering drugs to patients and those monitoring their usage is often ignored. This regulatory gap is evident through the rampant prescription and usage of certain experimental drugs against Covid, so much so that, recently, more than 30 medical professionals felt compelled to write to central and state governments about unwarranted medications based on limited evidence and misinformation.

Unlike the US, where the detailed conditions of the use of these drugs under EUA are prescribed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), India relies on the Clinical Management Protocol for Covid-19, jointly issued by the Covid-19 National Task Force and Directorate General of Health Services' Joint Monitoring Group. Although the protocol was

revised this month, it continues to recommend the use of 'investigational therapies' like 'Remdesivir under EUA' and 'Off-label use of Tocilizumab' despite their limited evidence and indiscriminate use during the second wave of Covid.

Investigational or experimental drugs are treatments that have not yet been proven to be beneficial but are being studied for their effect on a disease. Precisely because these drugs are flagged as 'experimental' or 'investigational', it is up to doctors to decide whether to use them, but with the informed consent of patients. Only very few medical institutions have strict protocols prohibiting the use of such drugs because they are expensive and there is limited evidence of their effectiveness. For the most part, however, medical professionals use them indiscriminately not always following the conditions in the Clinical Management Protocol, which, in any case, is not legally enforceable.

Additionally, there has often been no consonance between the decisions of DCGI and the Clinical Management Protocol. For instance, DCGI has given approval to Molnupiravir for restricted emergency use against Covid, while the Covid-19 National Task Force has decided against its inclusion in the protocol because of limited benefits and major safety concerns. Despite repeated warnings by the task force, it is still being prescribed by doctors since it has already received DCGI's nod for emergency use.

In the backdrop of such irrational use, it is even more incumbent on DCGI to follow clinical evidence, consistently review its decisions and update the conditions of approval accordingly.



Over and above the counter?

Since drugs like Remdesivir and Molnupiravir have been approved for marketing for restricted emergency use while still 'experimental' or 'investigational' drugs, there is confusion about the nature of their approval and the monitoring mechanism for their use. Since they have technically received marketing approval — although with conditions — should their post-marketing surveillance and adverse event reporting be carried out through the Pharmacovigilance Programme of India (bit.ly/3Gcw1qa), as is the case for other approved drugs?

But if they are investigational drugs, should they be treated as in clinical trial mode and reviewed accordingly? And if they are experimental drugs, shouldn't their use be reviewed by an ethics committee under the National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving Human Participants (bit.ly/3u8XCwE), which allow the monitored emergency use of unregistered and experimental interventions (MEURI) during the outbreak of an infectious disease?

These questions will remain unanswered until India defines a clear regulatory framework for the emergency approval of drugs. The proposed modernisation of the drug regulatory architecture should be used to set this emergency framework, a gap that the pandemic has glaringly exposed. Until then, DCGI must use terms of approval cautiously and consistently with clear conditions regarding their administration and post-approval review.

The writer is research fellow, health, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy



THE SPEAKING TREE

A Still Mind Is Divine

EKNATH EASWARAN

There is a popular misconception that to still the mind is to become a zombie or robot. It is just the opposite. The calmer and stiller the mind becomes, the more we can realise in our daily lives our true birthright of security, joy and tireless energy to work for the welfare of those around us. Meher Baba, a well-known saint of modern India, used to say that a mind that is fast is sick, a mind that is slow is sound, and a mind that is still is divine. 'This is what the Bible means when it says, 'Be still and know that I am God.'

In comparing the mind to the sea, I... recall those walks my wife and I used to take every day around Lake Merritt in Oakland, California. Usually, the wind ruffled the water, and all we could see was the surface. But on rare mornings when there was no wind and the lake was absolutely calm, we could see right down to the bottom.

Similarly, when the mind is stilled, we become aware of the divine presence, the Lord of Love, who is enshrined in the very depths of our consciousness. This does not mean seeing visions or hearing voices; it means that we have had direct, immediate experience that all life is one.

When we have had this experience, we will be incapable of doing anything that violates this unity of life, and we will live for the welfare of all.

Chat Room

A Dignified Life For Our Seniors

Apropos 'Thrusters for 8% Growth' by Rajeev Dimri (Citings, Jan 29), social security in India needs urgent attention. The steep fall in the interest rates on fixed deposits, which is the only source of income for most senior citizens, has made it difficult for them to manage their routine expenses. Medical and hospitalisation expenses are always a cause of worry. As a first step, the rate of interest on term deposits for senior citizens should be frozen preferably at 8.5%, with no cap on deposits placed so long as they declare that it is their money. Tomorrow's Union budget can, indeed, be the stepping stone for formal social security.

SRINIVASAN UMASHANKAR
Nagpur

Lend Me Your Ears, Lenders

This refers to 'How You Will Be Served' by Aditya Puri (Jan 28). The banking industry, despite contributing to the largest pie of the IT spends, is just an infrastructure provider, while leaving the highly profitable application space to fintech. This reflects poorly on the



banks' ability to understand customer expectations, for they do not lack technological capabilities. Rather, they are constrained by lack of innovation, poor response times and regulatory mandates. The banks should partner the nimble fintech companies while anticipating the next wave of customer needs and drafting solutions to meet them.

PRASAD AMBADAS KULKARNI
Mumbai

Let's Educate Edtech First

Apropos 'Spare the Stick & Spoil Edtech?' by Debleena Majumdar (Jan 30), the lack of regulatory framework could impinge on the privacy of students who now use edtech apps for learning. GoI must regulate the edtech companies through the active participation of educators, researchers, parents, learners and industry experts. Such a policy draft should be circulated both online and offline for discussions. Issues of fairness, safety, confidentiality and anonymity of the user would have to be dealt with. Edtech companies would need to comply in the interest of a healthier learning ecosystem.

PRADEEP KUMAR
Surat

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
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A thought for today

Politics is the art of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

Only Jats, Not Jobs

Intense west UP campaign by all parties is on many things, just not on economic problems

Beginning February 10, the first batch of 690 assembly seats across five states will record polling. Attention is largely focussed on UP, where the assembly has 403 seats, or 58% of the total. The first two rounds of polling in UP will have a predominant focus on western UP, the state's relatively less poor agricultural region, which contributes about 73 seats. While it doesn't provide the bulk of representation in the assembly, the campaign themes here encapsulate the full spectrum of both identity and economic issues that have captured public attention.

The highlight of the current phase of campaigning for western UP is the pitch made to attract Jat voters. They have been integral to BJP's social alliance in UP that has delivered in three successive elections since 2014. However, passage of three farm laws in Parliament in 2020 undermined this coalition as Jat farmers were a part of the agitation against the reform. True, farm laws were withdrawn last November. However, the agitation brought out larger problems in west UP's agrarian economy, which is dependent on the government price support system for two key crops, wheat and sugarcane.



The presence of a significant Muslim population in many constituencies has introduced a big element of polarisation in the campaigning. The critical question is will BJP's winning social coalition hold or will the other pole, the SP and RLD alliance, create a successful grouping. In this mix, perennial issues such as outstanding sugarcane dues to farmers owed by sugar mills and disbursement over ticket distribution will affect the dynamics. West UP has often set the tone for elections in other regions of the state and BJP has pulled out all stops in this tight contest, with home minister Amit Shah embarking on door-to-door campaigns.

But, and unsurprisingly, solutions offered by political parties to agrarian challenges suggest no poll outcome will have a meaningful economic impact. Promises revolve around free electricity and creation of a corpus for sugarcane payments. UP's poverty ratio is 38%, with only Jharkhand and Bihar trailing. For millions of young job seekers in UP, elections don't offer much.

Wait For SC

Let the court's committee find answers on Pegasus. Broader point: we need a national security law

Pegasus is back again as a political controversy, and given how these things play out, there will be plenty of sound and no light. The best and the logical choice to shine a light is the Supreme Court, which has the matter before it. As of now, SC has constituted a committee mandated to identify those surveilled, establish if any government agency acquired the spyware, and whether lawful procedures were followed for operating it. Therefore, whether Israel sold Pegasus to India, as reported by the *New York Times*, is a question the committee should be able to answer. The opposition is expected to demand a discussion in Parliament, but disrupting the Budget session over the issue may do it little good, even in an election season, since the issue is not one that's easily saleable in the rough and tumble of a campaign. The government, on its part, should cooperate fully with the committee. It's obvious now that some answer is necessary on whether and how Pegasus was bought by official agencies.



On a broader scale, and as argued previously by this newspaper, just as there's no doubt that some national security imperatives require covert surveillance, there's also no doubt that in a democracy opposition leaders, judges, journalists and activists cannot be spied on. As SC had said, a government cannot get a free pass every time it mentions national security. The court had also specifically observed that spying on journalists reduces their professional ability to gather facts and is, therefore, antithetical to democracy.

What India needs, and no government, whether Congress or BJP, has paid notice to this, is a national security law – a set of rules that will govern surveillance. Most well-functioning democracies have such laws. It's the lack of rules that allow surveillance far beyond the scope of what can be reasonably thought as national security concerns, because no party involved in covert information gathering feels constrained. Intelligence gathering in a democracy cannot be via ad hoc decisions, and neither can citizens' privacy be violated in similar fashion. That's the key learning from Pegasus.

Going into grid

Wordle mania has its ups and downs, depending on how good are your vowel movements

Kannan.Somasundaram@timesgroup.com



A word game involving five letters and six tries has philosophers, psychologists and other multi-syllabled experts surrendering, in their very first attempt, to excitement described by a four-lettered F-word: fuss. Some rave about the cognitive ecstasies Wordle provides. Others who solve the puzzle find their text appeal heightened – phonemes are the new pheromones.

With several analyses confirming the game's grid as a status enhancer when it lights up in the right colours, these hues can be considered analogous to the moods signalled by status updates on travel.

Grey indicates that the player has got nothing, it is like the commute to office. Yellow says the letter is right but in a wrong position. That corresponds to a hard-won leave but a trip to the least-favourite relative's town and the resultant posts that induce shock and awe. Green is the tint of success: The right letter in the right place, like flying into Paris. Five greens and the player displays behaviour defined by a word that has more than double the letters permitted by the game, 'braggadocio'.

The all-green tracks with 1) selfie with Mona Lisa; 2) a picture of a croissant being held in front of the Eiffel Tower; 3) images of shopping bags from Avenue des Champs-Élysées boutiques; 4) boasting that the purchase of the first-ever book on 'existentialism' will give tips on hedonistic existence, because it is Paris after all; and 5) uploading a video which shows a five-letter word, 'merci', being tried on a flummoxed fellow Indian traveller.

No wonder then that social media is congested with photos of the Wordle grid. However, preliminary research suggests that this game does not significantly sharpen cerebral capacities. Researchers have not come to a decisive verdict on the benefits of challenges such as crosswords in general. Still, while this new game may not make you a better person, say by turning your habits blazing green in relation to corona hygiene, it can streamline your vowel movements.

Some puzzle champions apparently start the game with a word suffused with vowels. That strategy is said to smoothly progress down the grid towards the good word. Shakespeare could have invented new words for every blank array. But then he would have been confronted by five shades of grey, making him wonder if he should go with 'lend me your pinna' because 'ears' has only four letters.

Good News Before Budget

Exports are at record high. Big reasons are shift out of China & smart policies by Centre, states

Neelkanth Mishra



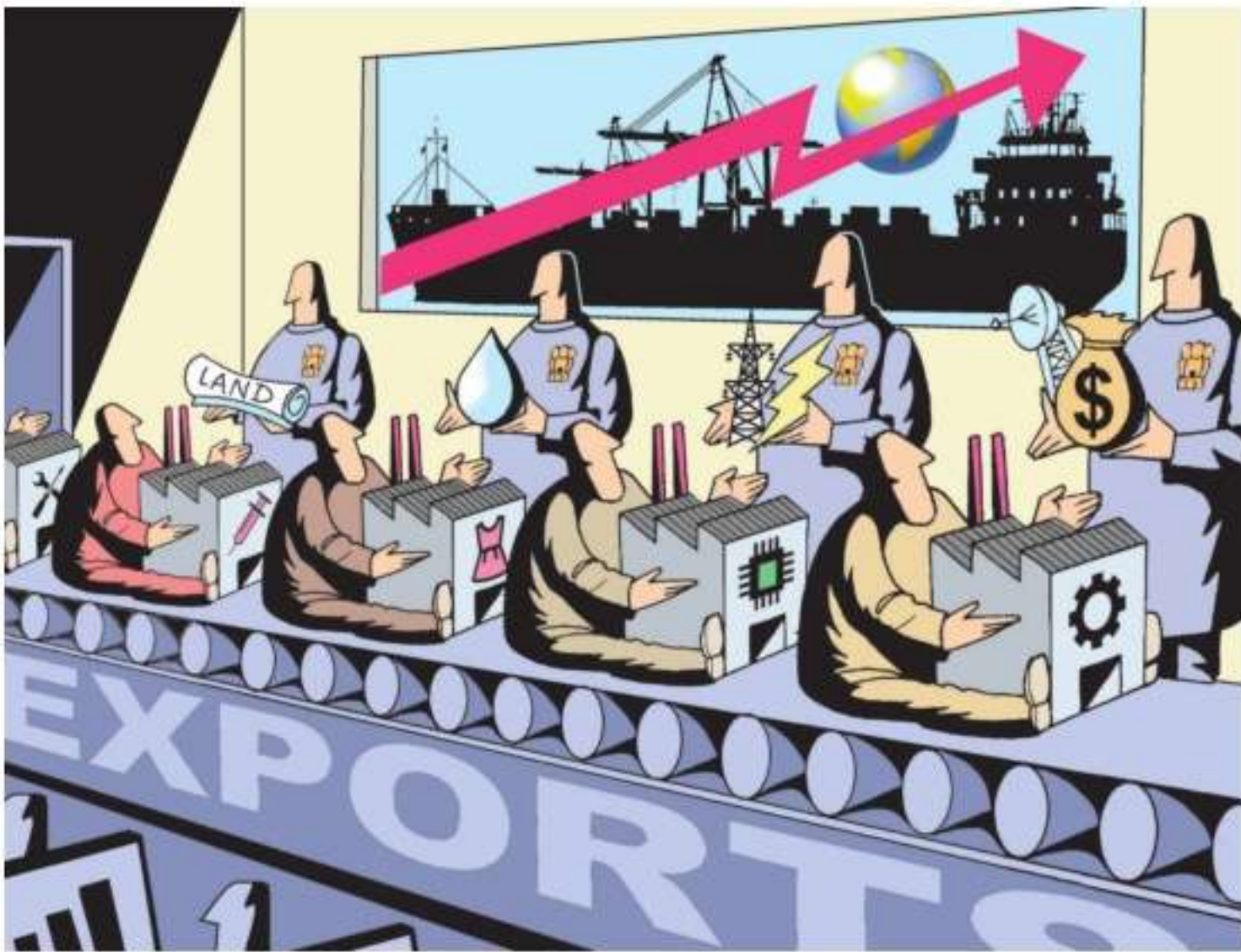
There's something to cheer before the budget – India's goods exports are a record high \$393 billion, after having stagnated in the \$250-330 billion annual range for a decade. A robust revival in global goods trade helped, of course, but India's global share of exports also rose to an all-time high, and in the last quarter likely crossed 2%. While higher commodity prices contributed, which could reverse, too, trends in several large sectors seem sustainable.

Take electronics, the largest sector by value in global goods trade, where India has been noticeably absent so far. In 2021, India exported \$16 billion, a fraction of a percent of global trade but double the level of 2018. While the government's target of \$100 billion in four years seems ambitious, a multifold increase from current levels is likely.

Thirty firms are now assembling handsets in India: Only 10 of them benefit from production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes, implying handset assembly is now competitive in India. Other electronics assembly is picking up too, and component firms are also setting up factories in India, which should add to the domestic value-add in these exports.

Another segment growing in size is fine chemicals, where India's global share has doubled to 3% over the past decade. India has few competitive advantages in bulk chemicals, but it does in fine chemicals (including pharmaceuticals): abundant chemistry and process engineering skills and a complex ecosystem. Pharmaceutical exports continue to grow, and after two decades of steady compounding, growth in the specialty chemicals industry is now beginning to matter as well.

Textiles and apparel exports also hit a record high \$38 billion in 2021, after being stagnant in the \$32-33 billion annual range since 2013. So far, yarns and fabrics, which are benefiting from price increases, have driven the improvement, but there is good momentum building up in garments too. Some garment manufacturers have customers asking for a 50% rise in output on top of record



output last year.

There are several generic and some sector-specific drivers behind this change in India's export trajectory.

An important change is manufacturing beginning to move out of China in several sectors, even though over the last two years China's exports have grown. A big factor is demographics: A shrinking industrial workforce is pushing labour-intensive work out of China. This can continue for at least the next decade, and India is emerging as one of the alternatives. Separately, stronger enforcement of environmental norms is also eroding the arbitrage that Chinese firms benefited from earlier in chemicals.

Government policies help: Central and state incentives offer capex subsidy, provide land, speedy permissions, electricity and skilling reimbursement and tax deferrals. Progress on some PLI schemes has been slower than expected, like in autos and apparel, mainly due to the need to recalibrate and refocus incentives, but further meaningful delays appear unlikely as most are in the execution phase now. As these schemes ramp up, they can add substantially to exports going forward.

Some anecdotes are striking: A large

A large handset component manufacturer is only weeks away from starting commercial production at a plant where ground-breaking occurred less than 15 months back. Land allocation took less than a week, and work on highway connectivity for the site started within weeks

handset component manufacturer is only weeks away from starting commercial production at a plant where ground-breaking occurred less than 15 months back. Land allocation took less than a week, and work on highway connectivity for the site started within weeks. Similarly, allocation of land, construction and production scale up of electric two-wheeler manufacturing by a firm that is new to the business, occurred in surprisingly fast time.

There are some sector-specific factors as well, like the specialty chemicals industry gaining scale. That there are

Critiquing Hamid Ansari's Civic Nationalism Thesis

That India abounds in plurality does not mean there's no thread of cultural continuity

Najmul Hoda



India is being taken over by a "new and imaginary practice of cultural nationalism" as against the "well-established principle of civic nationalism, which seeks to present electoral majority in the guise of a religious majority, and monopolise political power". Thus spake Hamid Ansari, Vice-president of India for two consecutive terms (2007-17), in an online address to a Special Congressional Briefing on Protecting India's Pluralist Constitution, organised by the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC).

It would be pertinent to ask whether having been the occupant of the country's second highest office – ceremonially higher than Prime Minister's – Ansari should have participated in a programme organised by an outfit with pronounced ideological angularity.

But let's concentrate on critiquing the discourse from which narratives such as Ansari's emerge.

Is nationalism cultural or civic?

So, is Indian nationalism, in its nature, cultural or civic? Has the nation been created by the Constitution, or the nation adopted, enacted and gave itself the Constitution? In other words, is the emotional charge of nationalism a result of the euphoria created by a consensus over liberal values like liberty, equality and fraternity, or did the nation resolve to live by these ideals in its corporate life? To predicate nationhood on civic rather than cultural values is putting the cart before the horse.

To say that India's nationalism is not cultural is to deny the very nationhood of India, and regard it as little more than a geographical expression. The British did so, but with the express purpose of belying India's national reawakening. Today, India's cultural nationalism is negated in order to remove the nation from the



nation state, and leave the state as a bare political entity without any national and cultural base.

Coexistence of contradictory ideas

That India abounds in plurality of languages, social customs and religious practices does not mean that the thread of cultural continuity has not been running through these diversities from the Himalayas to the oceans, and from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the India today.

The question is why some people find it so difficult to recognise the inherent cultural unity of India through its apparent diversity? Beside the imperative of motivated narrative, is it because the coexistence of not only divergent but seemingly contradictory ideas on life and religious practices in India, is beyond the ken of monotheistic thinking?

This coexistence is most vividly present in the vibrant multiplicity of ways in which the divine is apprehended and approached, pithily summarised in the Upanishadic wisdom, 'Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti' (the truth is one, but the wise call it by different names).

There is a deeper reason for negating the cultural

nationalism of India. Muslim conquerors premised their entitlement to rule on the dyad of religious and racial superiority. The two were mutually reinforcing.

Any mingling with the local culture was seen as contamination that would not only debilitate conquerors' powers but also compromise the purity of Islam. Thus, even Indian converts to Islam were expected to renounce their ancestral culture if they wanted to be truly religious.

Binary between belief & belonging

This leads to the important question: Would Muslims still be uncomfortable with India's cultural nationalism and see it as Hindu nationalism had they identified with India's culture beyond the courtly superficiality of Ganga Jamuni tehzeeb?

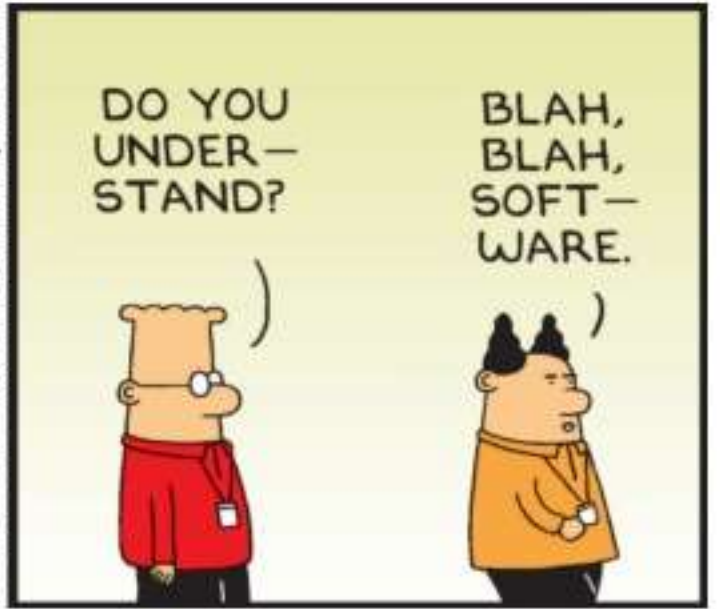
India deserves to be viewed in its own paradigm, and not through any exogenous theological prism. The insistence on civic nationalism, instead of cultural, is a reflection of the concept of Darul Ahd (abode of covenant) or Darul Aman (abode of peace) – a country where Muslims live in peace, with full civic rights, according to a covenant. It's however forgotten that such an existence has to be necessarily apolitical, with no group-claim on political power.

It was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who, working within the framework of two mutually antagonistic religious groups, postulated an inevitable electoral majority for the religious majority since, in his view, a voter would necessarily vote on religiously partisan lines. Thus began the demand for special rights for the religio-electoral minority which, in turn, created a religio-electoral majority.

For Muslims to be fully at home in India, they would have to abandon the self-created binary between belief and belonging. The fetishisation of identity, phobia of assimilation and drift into self-alienation have to end for their cultural roots in the land to revive. If not, they shall continue to have a problem with everything from Bharat Mata and Vande Mataram to the lighting of lamps and breaking of coconuts.

The writer is an IPS officer. Views are personal

dilbert



Narayani Ganesh

Many are in the habit of making 'to do' lists, when we begin our day. At day's end, or in between, we may review the list and tick off what has been done. Some are carried forward to the next day. Why do we need to make a list? 'To do' lists and jottings are basically aids to memory retention, for, in the hurly burly of life, with the trend being to multi-task, we tend to do many things. If this is true for young adults and those in their middle years, how much more useful could such notes be for the elderly, whose memory tends to fade with age?

Notes and reminders are helpful when the brain is under stress, but why do we assume that only the brain is the repository of all our memories? Human biology is multi-dimensional, and

various organs work together to make an individual function – the senses, motor skills, gut, muscles, reproductive and excretory systems and other organs are all designed to aid human survival either by deliberation or instinct. It is inconceivable that such a sophisticated package would not have a built-in plan B, C or D in case the brain is under pressure due to an ailment or trauma.

Apart from the brain, the human gut, muscles and the five senses are all part of an individual's memory bank, in varying degrees, and memory thus dispersed throughout the body is here to stay, even if one begins to suffer from Alzheimer's, dementia or amnesia. Which is why learnt skills that are acquired after long periods of diligent practise and passion

are mostly never really forgotten – a dancer will remember her movements; a craftsman may retain his skill at craft-making; a cyclist is unlikely to forget how to ride a bicycle.

Acquired skills that involve body movement like dancing, driving, climbing, swimming, gymnastics and other such, become part of what is called one's 'muscle memory' – so even if you cannot remember who you are or your loved ones and friends, you may still know how to engage your body in any of the above activity that you were once skilled at.

Your sense of smell plays a significant role in joggling your memory; food aromas and tastes tell stories of shared lunches and dinners with friends and relatives; a favourite

Sacred space

Find Out For Yourself

What would happen if you were never to repeat what somebody has said, never to say something that you yourself do not know... you know what would happen to your mind? Then you would begin to observe for yourself, find out for yourself, and not live on the past memories.

J Krishnamurti

Memory Is Not The Preserve Of Your Brain



THE SPEAKING TREE

piece of music brings back its associations and the experiences that played out while you were listening to it; caressing an old shawl or sari floods you with precious memories and watching a film or visiting an art gallery could take you back in time.

If there is an afterlife, and the dead are reborn, would the previous life's memories be carried forward by the soul when it transmigrates from its old body to a new one? Most often the reborn do not remember their past life; some do, when part of that memory is jogged by one or more of the five senses or even a sixth sense. Where is past life memory (karmas)? stored, why and how? As we grapple with these mysteries, sci-fi has figured out how to download brain memory and upload it at will at a later time, in another reincarnated body. (ganeshnarayani@yahoo.com)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Pegasus row

Govt needs to come clean on damning revelations

THE Modi government needs to come clean on the latest media revelations that it bought Israeli spyware Pegasus in 2017 as part of a \$2-billion package for sophisticated weapons and intelligence gear. It also needs to set the record straight on insinuations linking the deal with India voting in June 2019 in support of Israel at the UN's Economic and Social Council to deny observer status to a Palestinian human rights organisation. Sidestepping the issue, expected to feature prominently in the Budget Session of Parliament that begins today, would only add to the speculation and provide ammunition to the Opposition. The massive political row over invasion of privacy was triggered by a report released by a global consortium of media groups in July last year, claiming that the spyware had been used by several governments to snoop on politicians, opponents and journalists, among others.

The government has, in the past, dismissed allegations of any kind of surveillance, saying there is 'no concrete basis or truth associated with it whatsoever'. While setting up a three-member independent panel in October to probe the alleged targeted and unlawful surveillance, however, the Supreme Court's observations were terse, as it deemed unacceptable the Centre's refusal to shed any light on the controversy. The court said the State could not get a 'free pass' every time the spectre of national security was raised and that its mere invocation could not render the judiciary a 'mute spectator'.

Under fire for providing the means for nations to spy on their own people, Pegasus maker NSO Group claims that it only sells the technology to foreign governments and has no role in or responsibility for targeting specific individuals. Various instances have been given of how the spyware has been quietly used the world over to thwart terrorist plots and fight organised crime through technology that can decrypt communications. However, it is the abuse of Pegasus that is at the centre of the row. If India has established robust protocols when it comes to surveillance, as the government claims, stonewalling the damning revelations only adds fuel to the fire.

Go-ahead for 'bad bank'

Tackling stressed assets a formidable task

THE government's decision to set up a 'bad bank' ahead of the Union Budget for the resolution of stressed assets, besides help in lending to productive sectors, is an innovative step subject to its smooth and non-partisan implementation. Banks in the country have seen their capital held up by way of NPAs and defaulting on loans has occurred with regularity, putting pressure on the functioning of banks and hindering their operations. As of now, the newly created bank will commence operations with only 15 cases to be transferred by March 31 and their number is expected to go up gradually in the days ahead.

Banks and NBFCs have had a number of reasons for the increase in cases of loan default. The liberal lending to the individual borrowers and corporates to accelerate development without adequate assessment in any case is fraught with risks. Bank runs and big borrowers defaulting on loan repayment have not brought credit to the banking sector either. The loss of income and livelihoods amid the pandemic only worsened the situation with moratoriums and write-offs being resorted to in order to improve the situation. The banking sector has seen major changes, including the merger of public sector banks which was aimed at increasing capitalisation and competitiveness.

The proposed 'bad bank' will have a structure for asset reconstruction and debt resolution in which both public sector and private sector banks will have a role to play. Banks cannot do away with lending for without that economic activity and entrepreneurial spirit will suffer. But the onus of managing their own capital and making the lender accountable also lies on them. Loan recovery should not slacken due to the lure of higher interests. While checks are performed, loan defaults point to the fact that proper credit rating and risk assessment are required. Lending in the aftermath of the pandemic will be required to boost economic activities but safeguarding the capital and assets of banks, individuals and companies will also be a must for the economy to flourish without hitches.

Speaking out of turn

German naval chief steps down following comments on Putin



KP NAYAR

STRATEGIC ANALYST

IT will never be known for certain if Germany's naval chief Kay-Achim Schönbach would have had to resign 10 days ago if he had spoken respectfully about Russian President Vladimir Putin in Berlin, Brussels or Paris, instead of in New Delhi.

Vice-Admiral Schönbach said at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) in New Delhi that Putin needed to be treated as an equal by the West. 'It is easy to give him the respect he really demands — and also probably deserves.' His comments created a storm in the western world and he put in his papers to 'avert further damage' as he put it.

It is reminiscent of the military governor of the American Occupation Zone in Germany, General Dwight D Eisenhower's famous remarks at a post-World War II mass rally in Paris, where he spoke in glowing and respectful terms about the 'great people' without naming them. Charles de Gaulle, then chairman of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, who was present, assumed — as did the huge crowd — that the US army's Chief of Staff was speaking of the French people. The crowd clapped in delirious delight and de Gaulle beamed proudly.

No, Eisenhower clarified later. He was speaking of the German people, what a great people they were, as they are today too, without doubt. It is tempting to think what fate would have befallen Eisenhower if there was Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp in 1945 when he had spoken in praise of the defeated Germans. Would Eisenhower have got the marching orders from President Harry Truman, like the German naval chief?



SLIP-UP: Vice-Admiral Schönbach's assertion that the Russian President needed to be treated as an equal by the West has created a storm. REUTERS

When Schönbach talked about Russia's ability to divide Europe, he appeared to confirm worries in the US that Germany was the stumbling block to a unified EU stand against Moscow's policies.

Perhaps. But instead, Eisenhower went on to become the first Supreme Allied Commander in Europe and then the 34th US President.

It is an understatement to say that Germany has been less than enthusiastic about helping Ukraine in that country's ongoing war of nerves with Russia. While the US and a host of NATO countries have been supplying deadly weaponry to Kyiv, Germany has balked at doing anything of that kind.

Ukraine's government was livid last week when Germany responded to pleas for help with little more than 5,000 helmets to be used in the eventuality of a combat with Russia. To add insult to injury, as it were, Germany's defence minister, Christine Lambrecht, told Ukrainians that they should see this farcical German contribution to war efforts as proof that 'we are on your side'.

Are Ukrainian soldiers supposed to head-butt the well-trained, well-equipped Russian forces with these helmets if Putin sends in his troops across the border, a German political figure of Ukrainian descent

asked on Twitter. It was one of many such sarcastic responses to the German defence minister's military aid announcement.

Schönbach said in New Delhi that Putin was not 'interested in having a tiny strip of Ukrainian soil' and that he knew he could split the European Union over Ukraine. It may be this last part of his statement which cost the Vice-Admiral his job because it hit home. Germany is the stand out within the EU on getting Putin to back down on his opposition to letting Ukraine join the western alliance.

So when Schönbach talked about Russia's ability to divide Europe, he appeared to confirm worries in the US that Germany was, in fact, the stumbling block to a unified EU stand against Moscow's policies. That is the truth which Germany's ruling politicians have been trying to paper over. Lambrecht, therefore, was left with no option but to let her Chief of Navy go.

Many of the things the Vice-Admiral said at the MP-IDSA would not have to be said at all anywhere in Europe. Here are some examples. Schönbach described himself as 'a

very radical Roman Catholic'. Such an explanation of identity is not called for in interactions at high levels within Germany or elsewhere in Europe. A statement of that kind has relevance only in a non-Christian country and while addressing people who are not of any Abrahamic faith. Yet, hearing such a statement from a European military professional can be jarring, especially when the wounds left by the ethno-religious conflicts in former Yugoslavia continue to impact the continent.

In worse taste was his assertion that Russia was also a 'Christian country, even if Putin is an atheist, it doesn't matter.' The inference it left behind was that in any quarrel between Christian and non-Christian societies, Germany would cast its lot with the Christians. It is possible that was not what Schönbach had in mind. As he explained, he was talking about China and its emergence. But China is not a Christian country, nor is India. Given Germany's pre-World War II history, such statements can be disconcerting.

Its impact was amplified because he said those things in New Delhi. Such statements would not be made in Europe because these truths are self-evident there. Not so in India and the naval chief paid a price for not following the adage that there is a time and place for everything.

That Germany is coming to terms with the post-Angela Merkel era in its domestic politics also took its toll. Merkel's successor as Chancellor for less than two months, Olaf Scholz, is still finding his feet on the job. It is not for nothing that his government is known as the 'traffic light coalition'. Originally it got this name because the coalition comprises three political parties whose colours are red, yellow and green. Traffic lights are not static, they change from one colour to another.

If Merkel had been Chancellor today, heading a similar traffic light coalition, Schönbach may have got away through the green light of her stature and experience. Not so with Scholz, who has to frequently stop at red lights.

An exhaustive exercise in vanity

RAMA KASHYAP

ONE are the days when accomplishments were kept under wraps, away from public gaze. The common refrain used to be 'nazar lag jayegi'. Hence, sharing of good news was discouraged. Not true any longer.

In the age of social media, everyone seems to be flaunting achievements and crowing about one's accomplishments on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Not only is there a generous oversharing of good news, but every activity, even a visit to a mall, is to be announced on social media. Every moment must be clicked and uploaded instantly to get likes and comments.

These and many more trends I have observed ever since I joined Facebook a couple of years ago. I am horrified to see everything from a hook-up to a break-up being flashed on social media. Public display of affection may not be a part of Indian culture but privacy doesn't seem to be a hallmark of romantic relationships for the youngsters. It is another matter that some of them may be having a rough ride in a relationship but they are head over heels in love with each other on social media.

Social media gives a sneak peek into people's lives and their public persona but you won't know how much of it is real. The fact is social media is deceptive, giving an impression that everything is hunky-dory in

the lives of others — which may be a pretence. Online spaces are often oriented towards exaggeration. Everything on social media platforms is glamorous, from people to places to food. It is here you find stunning beauties, the most exotic locations and the happiest people having an awesome time.

Seeing everyone having a perfect life, you wonder if you are the only one experiencing the drudgery of an ordinary life. Theodore Roosevelt said, 'Comparison is the thief of joy.' Social media sites prove to be a killjoy. By triggering comparisons, these are quite capable of creating self-doubt and anxiety over illusions. Especially damaging is the comparison in the battle of likes and comments, which are more

often than not based on the principle of reciprocity, responding to another's action with an equivalent action, like for like, and comment for comment. The more you give, the more you get.

Most of us do understand the reality, yet continue to be trapped in the web. A WhatsApp joke sums up the predicament of many like me. 'Not so young a woman is contemplating exiting from Facebook but she can't. The reason: A person of her age will not be able get anywhere else the compliments like "beautiful", "gorgeous" and "elegant" that she garners on Facebook!'

Jokes apart, social media has proved to be a blessing by helping us stay connected in these challenging times. Of course, it's up to us to steer clear of the superfluties.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I have often regretted my speech, never my silence. — Xenocrates

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 1972

Exit by two Chief Ministers

TWO controversial Chief Ministers have staged an inglorious exit in 48 hours for identical reasons. Though both were imbued with a sincere desire to serve their State and accomplish what their predecessors could not, they forgot that for political survival solid party backing and a rapport with the various groups of politicians was far more important than economic development, both have been the victims of factional rivalries and party infighting. Mr. S.C. Shukla in particular has paid the price for becoming dictatorial in his methods and crossing swords with leaders, including Mr. D.P. Mishra, who has for years commanded the goodwill of the highest in the land. Right since the day he backed the wrong candidate in the Presidential election and thus incurred Mrs. Gandhi's displeasure, he should have known what was in store for him when the day of reckoning came. Though he had the initial advantages of a truly nationalist family background, a distinctive personality and unbounded energy, he created many political enemies in crucial regions of Madhya Pradesh. Persistent defiance of the Congress high command in respect of his ministerial team and the strange spectacle of the State Election Committee denying him a ticket from his own constituency virtually clinched the issue. His refusal to dismiss five Ministers against whom serious charges of corruption had repeatedly been levelled was indefensible. When finally he did agree to drop some colleagues in view of the Central leadership's censure, it was too late. He lost all claim to public sympathy by his actions. And then he sought to penalise a few innocent junior Ministers — a step that caused much frustration and disillusionment among the rank and file of the party.

About political power

Refer to 'Delicious ironies' (*Nous Indica*); the Right is trying to distort or manipulate historical facts, icons, events or ideals. Religionism, casteism and aggression suit ignorant minds. The tirade against Gandhi and Nehru is aimed at undermining truth, non-violence, democracy and secularism and creating new narratives of violence and falsehood to appease the majority of the voters and divert attention from the epidemic of unemployment, illiteracy and poverty. It is all a game for political power.

ABHIMANYU MALIK, JIND

Secular Bose

Apropos of 'Delicious ironies' (*Nous Indica*); Bose was a firm believer in action. Once during an informal talk, an officer of the Azad Hind Fauj suggested that they write the history of the Fauj. The reply sums up Bose's views and personality. 'Let us first make it, someone else will write it.' He never intended to use one community against the other for insular designs, but ironically, post Independence, the Congress abandoned him. He did not approve of the Gandhian method to free India. And now the BJP has adopted him to exploit his name for political gains. The Hindutva forces are trying to prove that he

was one of their clan. In a republic, the supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives. But it seems that the supreme power lies with politicians who can make or mar the destiny of the people in accordance with their whims. People are remembered only during elections. Bose was a proponent of secularism and should be treated so without giving him any political colour.

TARSEM S BUMRAH, BATALA

Give diplomacy a chance

Refer to 'Prefer diplomacy, says Blinken as Russia-Ukraine row escalates'; the Ukraine standoff is keeping Europe and the world on tenterhooks when the continent is facing major issues like the pandemic. It could get serious if Russia is bent upon invading Ukraine. Mindful of the consequences of the war, Russian President Putin is playing his cards close to his chest and keeping his foes guessing. The US President is more concerned about China's increasing prowess and is more determined to contain it than to enter the Russia-Ukraine standoff. The Ukrainians see a bright future with Europe and the West. Diplomacy despite the sabre-rattling is the only way out of this impasse. They must start from scratch and involve all parties.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

President's appeal

Refer to the appeal of the President to all Indians, whether they are living in India or abroad, for doing some work for their birthplace. We all, especially those who have got some success in their life and are financially and otherwise capable to contribute, should definitely try to do some good work for our birthplace, particularly if it is in rural areas, where we can sponsor drinking water and toilet facilities, etc., along with ensuring their proper upkeep of schools, where we had taken our primary education.

NK SINGHAL, PANCHKULA

Need new narrative

With reference to 'A letter for Lata from Pakistan'; it's wonderful to observe the power of music, words, verse, sports, songs, contemporary writings and artists creating a positive effect on relations between two countries. Such efforts lead to a better future in which we respect, understand, connect and empathise with one another. Popular acceptance of literary endeavours on both sides is a testimony that the rift between the two neighbours is manmade. Despite wars, borders, LoC and hostility, love across borders provides the vision of a future governed by heart. Let

the collective energies of people be harnessed to create new narratives about modern India and Pakistan.

ANITA KATARIA, PATIALA

Love from Pakistan

'A letter for Lata from Pakistan' portrays the love of common Pakistanis for Indian artistes. Indians and Pakistanis share the same climate, language, food habits, sports and even music, then why this hatred? When we explore our inner self, we will find true and pious love. The day the common man realises that hatred has been implanted in us by our politicians for their political gains, it will be the beginning of a new era of understanding, peace and friendship.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Open to turncoats

Apropos of 'Turncoats dominate BJP's second list too', it is quite evident that the BJP did not learn a lesson from the results of the West Bengal Assembly polls. In the two lists for the Punjab Assembly polls, it has preferred turncoats over tested loyalists of the saffron party. Jagdish Kumar Jagga has been preferred over Harjit Singh Grewal, who mediated between the Centre and farmers on the three laws.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSES

One nation, one election: Time for the idea has come

OPINION

SANJU VERMA



It is election season yet again, with Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa, and Manipur, going to the polls in the next few days. The entire polling process will be phased out over the next few weeks, with results slated for March 10, 2022. India's Leftist media and some self-styled academicians raised a hue and cry about how it is not advisable to hold polls, given the rising Omicron cases. Well, public health should always be accorded top priority and that is precisely what the Modi government has always done, with PM Modi himself reiterating about how "Jaan Bhi Jahaan Bhi", is the best way to move forward. The Election Commission (EC) has prohibited mass rallies for the upcoming assembly polls and has laid down COVID protocol related strictures, that need to be adhered to. So far, so good. But amidst all this, the key question that merits a response is this—Is it time to now seriously think about and implement, the "one nation, one election", dictum? Prime Minister Narendra Modi has advocated and spoken about this on umpteen occasions and for good reason.

The idea of "one nation, one election" made its debut in the first annual report of the Election Commission in 1983. It had supported holding simultaneous elections to reduce expenditure, for effective use of manpower and human resource, and also because frequent elections

affected the day-to-day functioning of the government, both at the state level and the Centre, creating hardship for common people.

The topic was revived by the 170th Report of the Law Commission, submitted in 1999. The Report underlined the desirability of holding elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies once in five years but admitted that it could not be achieved overnight in the prevailing circumstances. The proposal however, gained momentum with the manifesto of the BJP for the 2014 Lok Sabha election, which stated that the party would seek to evolve a method of holding elections to assemblies and the Lok Sabha simultaneously. In 2020, an array of webinars were organised by the National Spokespersons of the BJP, to discuss, dissect and debate this issue, with one such webinar organised on December 27, 2020, by the author of this piece herself, which received an excellent response and was widely attended.

There was a flurry of activities, post-1999, post a long hiatus. The 79th Report of the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, submitted in 2015, was devoted to studying the feasibility of holding these simultaneous elections. It recommended an alternative and practicable method of holding simultaneous elections, which involved holding them in two phases twice in every five-year cycle. NITI Aayog issued a Working Paper on the subject in 2017 titled, "Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The What, Why and How". It broadly recommended a gradual move to synchronisation of elections between Parliament

and state legislative assemblies between 2019 and 2024.

This was followed by a Draft Report of the Law Commission in 2018, which also recommended holding of simultaneous elections, with some exceptions. The Commission noted that for holding simultaneous elections, amendments to the Constitution, the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the Rules of Procedure of Lok Sabha and state assemblies would be required. Such an exercise would save public money, reduce the burden on the administrative set-up and security forces and lead to concentration on developmental activities rather than election duties, the Commission said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, addressing the All India Presiding Officers Conference via video conference, on November 26, 2020, raised the pitch for "One Nation, One Election" and a single voter list for all polls, to prevent the impact of the model code of conduct on development works every few months due to frequent spread-out polls.

'One Nation, One Election' isn't just an issue of deliberation but also a need of the country. Elections are held at different places every few months and it hampers the developmental work and all of you know about it. Therefore, it's a must to have a deep study and deliberation on one nation, one election, said Modi. On one voter list, the PM observed, "Only one voter list should be used for Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha, and other elections. Why are we wasting time and money?" Emphasising the need for coordination between all three wings of the state -- Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary, PM Modi stated that everything, from their role to their decorum, was described in the Constitution itself.

"In the 1970s, we saw how there was an attempt to breach the dignity of separation of power, but the country got the answer only from the Constitution. After that period of Emergency, the system of checks and balances became stronger and

stronger. The legislature, the executive and the judiciary, all three, learned a lot from that period and moved forward," said Prime Minister Modi at the conference.

While "one nation, one poll" will result in huge savings in expenditure, it cannot be achieved without dramatic changes to our Constitution. India has adopted a quasi-federal set-up and is neither unitary like Britain nor fully federal like the US. Members are elected for the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly. Impartiality of the election process requires strict vigil on the part of the Election Commission (EC). Modi has repeatedly asked the presiding officers of elected bodies to ponder over the idea of having one election and one voters' list, to do away with the "Aaya Ram" and "Gaya Ram" style of politics.

The anti-defection law is special to India. It has, however, not been fool-proof. Splits and mergers in political parties over the years gave room for conflict between the Speaker's jurisdiction and the Court's role. The prime cause for the instability of elected governments in India in the last few decades must be traced to the decision of the Congress party which misused power that it enjoyed at the Centre, to dismiss State governments and declare the President's rule on flimsy grounds.

At one stage, nine State governments were dissolved at one stroke under Article 356 of the Constitution, by the erstwhile Congress regime. The practice would have continued unabated but for the Supreme Court ruling in the S. R. Bommai case. Destabilisation of elected State governments and 'resort' politics deployed by the Congress in the last few years, be it Karnataka, Gujarat or Rajasthan, are a nasty reminder of how frequent elections can be harmful. Ours is a quasi-federal structure. In England, the king reigns but does not govern. In the US, the President, both reigns and governs. The Indian President neither governs nor reigns, though he is con-

stitutionally a very important figure and not a mere figure-head, as most would like to believe.

In the US, the State Governor, like the President, is elected directly. We chose to emulate the British cabinet system, restrained by the spirit of collective responsibility. Morality is sacrificed at the altar of expediency, due to frequent elections. The Charan Singh government, decades back, was overthrown within just four months. Russian President Vladimir Putin altered the law to enable himself to be the President of Russia till 2036. China went through the one candidate election in an election that had no candidate other than Xi Jinping, making a mockery out of what was anyways a farce, to start with. Xi won the elections with 99.86 per cent of the votes. India in sharp contrast, stands out as a country with full allegiance to democratic conventions and "one nation, one election" will further strengthen democratic institutions and our socio-economic fabric. This theme has been an abiding one for Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. While critics say it is against the principle of cooperative federalism, such criticism is unfounded. An option often suggested by some constitutional experts is that, if it is not possible to conduct simultaneous elections, then at least all elections falling in one calendar year should be conducted together.

Historically, elections during the first two decades after Independence for the House of the People and state legislative assemblies were held simultaneously, i.e., during 1951-52, 1957, 1962, and 1967. Dissolution of certain assemblies in 1968 and 1969, followed by the dissolution of the House of the People in 1970 and subsequent general elections in 1971, disturbed the cycle of simultaneous elections. Indiscriminate use of Article 356 (President's Rule) of the Constitution, by the Nehru-Gandhi establishment, also disrupted the schedule of simultaneous elections.

Various studies of the in-

ternational scenario found that a system to ensure simultaneous election does exist in certain countries. In Germany, Bundestag (i.e. the Lower House) cannot simply remove the Chancellor with a vote of no-confidence, as the opponents must not only disagree with the governance but also agree on a replacement, by way of a "constructive vote of no-confidence". In some countries including India, in the event of a hung House/ assembly, it is mandated that all efforts must be made by the president / governor, as the case may be, to install a government that will enjoy the support of the House/assembly. This would give an opportunity to the largest party, along with its pre-poll or post-poll alliance(s). If, however, mid-term poll becomes inevitable, the duration of the House/assembly so constituted should be only for the remainder of the term.

In the UK, the Parliament of Westminster introduced a fixed term by enacting the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, 2011, which provides a term of five years for general elections. The Act of 2011 specifies that early elections can be held only if a motion for it is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the whole House or without division, or if a motion of no-confidence is passed and no alternative government is confirmed by the Commons, within 14 days thereof.

The biggest argument in favour of holding simultaneous elections is therefore the fact that governments do not have to be in election mode all the time, thereby making governance and policy-making, more seamless. The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) prevents governments from announcing new schemes and making appointments. Deputing government employees frequently on election duty hinders public services, including school education, as well as maintenance of law and order and national security. Simultaneous elections will, therefore, reduce the time and cost involved in the conduct of elections and will curb corruption and il-

licit financing of elections. Those who allege that "one nation, one election" will be the harbinger of a unitary State, are clearly, misguided. Again, there are concerns that simultaneous elections will impact the behaviour of voters, as national and local issues may get mixed up and distort priorities, giving an unfair advantage to national parties, at the expense of regional parties. Such concerns are, however, overdone, with no logical basis. Voters today, are very aware of both local and national issues and to assume that they will get confused if elections are held simultaneously, is an insult to the intelligence of the electorate. True, it may be a tad difficult to find a suitable time slot, given the geographical and administrative diversity relating to weather, agricultural cycle, exam schedule, religious festivals and public holidays, in a country as vast as India. However, the positives of simultaneous elections far outweigh any perceived negatives. The sheer logistics involved in holding simultaneous elections, in terms of requisitioning and movement of men, women and material, may make the exercise a mammoth one, but it is manageable.

Also, accusations that simultaneous elections may result in misuse of Article 356 or early dissolution of the Lok Sabha or any of the State assemblies, are simply a figment of imagination of those who do not want "One Nation, One Election". True, a large number of amendments to laws, rules and regulations would need to be carried out, making the task very arduous, but it is certainly worth the trouble. Amendments to the Constitution would encompass Articles 83 (Duration of Houses), 85 (Dissolution of the Lok Sabha), 172 (Duration of state legislatures), 174 (Dissolution of state legislatures), 356 (Failure of constitutional machinery) and the Tenth Schedule (to ensure that all disqualification issues arising from defection are decided by the presiding officer within six months). Ratification of the amendments by not less than

one-half of the State legislatures may also be required to be taken as a matter of abundant precaution.

Amendments to laws would inter alia require changes in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, such as Section 2 (adding a definition of "simultaneous elections"), and Sections 14 and 15 (Notification of general and assembly elections). The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business of the Lok Sabha and assemblies would need to be amended to replace "Motion of No-Confidence" with "Motion of Constructive Vote of No-Confidence".

In the final analysis, meeting of minds may be a good beginning in the pursuit of the goal of "One Nation, One Election". But to take the idea to fruition, will require not only the meeting of minds and a political consensus, but also a resolute determination to act, in the larger national interest. And certainly, courage of conviction, the ability to visualise and the will to execute and successfully implement, even the most seemingly difficult initiatives, is something that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has in abundance. Be it 'one nation, one tax', 'one nation, one mobility card', or for that matter, 'one nation, one ombudsman' or even 'one nation, one ration card', the Modi government has repeatedly showcased its ability to think big and ensure that those big ideas are effectively implemented on the ground. Larry J. Sabato famously said-- "An election is always determined by the people who show up". Clearly, for the democratic process to retain its sanctity and not suffer from any fatigue, it is important to see those eligible for voting, participate in large numbers. That in turn makes it essential to make elections into an exercise, that is not too frequent. 'one nation, one election', is clearly, therefore, an idea whose time has come.

The writer is an Economist, National Spokesperson of the BJP, and Bestselling Author of "The Modi Gambit". Views expressed are the writer's personal.

PERSPECTIVE
AHEAD OF POLLS

CAPTAIN, BJP AND AKALIS LAY TRAP TO AMBUSH SIDHU IN AMRITSAR

Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee president, Navjot Singh Sidhu faces a stiff challenge from the Shiromani Akali Dal and its former ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party, in the Assembly polls from Amritsar East. It is evident that the well-planned strategy, possibly with inputs from Sidhu's bête noire, Captain Amarinder Singh, seeks to lay a political Chakravayuh to trap the former Cricketer, who for the past few months has been batting from outside his crease on several occasions. The Akalis and the BJP may no longer be together but they would both want that the Congress leader is somehow defeated. The fourth angle to this nail-biting contest would be from the Aam Aadmi Party whose

objective also is Congress Mukht Bharat. Sidhu has never lost an election till now but has to overcome this huge impediment that has pitted him against his political foes in an arena where to become the man of the match, he shall have to vanquish the combined opposition to him. On the face of it, his opponents are contesting the polls separately but they are all geared up to give Congress a beating in this region. The role of the Kisan Union headed by Balbir Singh Rajewal would also have to be viewed closely as it could impact the outcome if the fight becomes extremely close. Sidhu's rivals attempt to tie him down to one area and also malign him through propaganda that is primarily being used

to psychologically weaken him.

The situation in cricketering terms is similar to when the swashbuckling Opening batsman encountered ferocious bowling in the Caribbean from some of the most dangerous players of his era. The Akalis have declared Bikram Singh Majithia, brother-in-law of Sukhbir Singh Badal as their nominee from the constituency, besides from Majithia which is his own Assembly segment. Majithia has been accused by Sidhu and many other Congress leaders of being the kingpin of the drugs and narcotics trade in the border state. He now wants to settle the issue electorally by preventing the Congress leader from winning. The BJP has fielded Jag-

mohan Singh Raju, a 1985 batch IAS officer who recently quit the bureaucracy to join the electoral fray. He is a Dalit and has a distinguished service and academic record. Born in Faridkot, his father was a well known civil servant of Punjab. The idea of fielding him is to offset the Dalit votes, which as per projections would largely go to the Congress after Charanjit Singh Channi was made the Chief Minister of the State. In addition, he would be hoping to garner a section of Hindu votes, which are aligned with the BJP. Majithia is expected to cut in to the Jat Sikh votes which in the past elections that Sidhu, contested had overwhelmingly gone in his favour, given his iconic status. The Aam Aadmi

Party would also be certainly making inroads in the vote share. Rajewal, who is believed to be close to the Captain, could make a further difference.

The idea in Amritsar East is to somehow weaken Sidhu's vote bank collectively so that a surprise winner could be thrown up. It may be recalled that the Captain after demitting office last year had declared that he would make every effort to get Sidhu defeated by fielding a strong candidate against him. Political circles had wondered whether he was himself planning to contest against him in Amritsar but this is not happening since the former CM shall be filing his nomination from Patiala on Monday. However, being a master strategist,

he may have laid this political minefield for the Congress leader. Sidhu had earlier claimed that during his tenure, Amarinder Singh had a secret understanding with both the BJP on one hand and the Akalis on the other. There would be clarity on this charge once the campaign progresses. In addition, Sidhu's half-sister, Suman Toor, who lives in the United States, surfaced in Chandigarh to make certain personal allegations against Sidhu. She alleged that their mother, Nirmal Bhagwant Singh was in her last years, badly treated by her brother who was obsessed with amassing the family property. Sidhu has described these charges as baseless and political veterans recall that Nirmal Bhagwant Singh

(earlier Nirmal Sodhi) had contested unsuccessfully on a Congress ticket from Dakala in 1972, losing by less than 2500 votes to Jasdev Singh of the Akali Dal. Old Patiala residents also recall that Sidhu, fondly nicknamed Sherry during his childhood was extremely close to his mother and at their Yadvindra Colony house, no one other than her was allowed by him to comb and tie his hair. This is a personal matter best left to the family to sort out.

However, in view of fast-changing developments in the political scenario, some of Sidhu's supporters want him to also contest from a second seat, preferably Patiala, to counter the Captain's offensive. If this was not possible, they feel

that he should spend quality time in Patiala to pin down his opponent. Before Amarinder Singh's government was toppled by his own party, there had been this talk of Sidhu Vs the Captain contest in Patiala. This would have been a mother of all elections and the focus would have shifted from Amritsar in Majha to Patiala in the Malwa region.

Many more twists and turns would take place in the near future when the Congress High Command announces its Chief Ministerial face shortly.

It is evident that it would be suicidal for the grand old party to have someone other Channi as its principal mascot at this juncture.

— PANKAJ VOHRA

DOC-TALK

Familial cancer: A relatively less discussed burning issue

What is familial cancer syndrome? It’s a genetic problem where a person harbors a specific or multiple genetic alteration which makes him/her predisposed to have one or multiple cancer and the problem runs in the family.

DR DODUL MONDAL
NEW DELHI

Cancer is considered as a modern-day epidemic. its incidence and prevalence are increasing slowly but steadily over the years across the globe. As per recent GLOBOCAN 2020 data, almost 20 million new cancer cases were diagnosed worldwide, and 10 million people died of this disease. The cancer incidence has been projected to be almost 30 million in next two decades. There have been spectacular developments in many aspects of cancer. These include but essentially not limited to screening, early diagnosis, treatment, complication prevention etc. Still there are many things to achieve and there are some areas where progress has been limited over decades. Familial cancer is one such area.

What is familial cancer syndrome? It's a genetic problem where a person harbors a specific or multiple genetic alteration which makes him/her predisposed to have one or multiple cancer and the problem runs in the family.

Am I at increased risk of having cancer? A very common question we often encounter. “Doc, my mom had breast cancer, am I at risk?” or, “Doc, will my kids be affected with similar cancer in future?” are some of the questions. Familial cancers are associated with higher risk of transmission in the family.

What are different types of genetic mutations? There are two basic types, germline and somatic mutations. Almost 5-10% of all cancers are supposedly caused by inherited genetic mutations. A gene can be considered as a basic unit of hereditary information of a person. A mutation is alteration or change in that genetic information. When a mutation comes from a defective sperm or egg at the time of conception, such mutations can be incorporated into the DNA of every cell of the offspring and is known as germline mutation. That means, the child is born with such genetic defect from mother's womb. And only such germline mutations can be transferred to an offspring. So, in essence, this type of mutations can be considered hereditary or familial as they



Cancer is considered as a modern-day epidemic.



All cancers are genetic but not all cancers are familial.



have the risk of running in the family. The other type of mutation can happen after conception and can involve any cells of the body other than the germ cells (sperm or egg) and known as somatic mutation. Such mutations can not pass on from one person to the children. It has to be remembered that all cancers are genetic but not all cancers are familial (ability to transfer in the family). So, cancers which are results of germline mutation, can affect same family members who are blood related. Cancers which are result of somatic mutation, cannot affect other family members.

What are the cancers which can run in family? Many cancers can be associated

with high risk of running in family. A very common mutation is TP53 gene mutation. Normally this gene prevents occurrence of cancer by suppressing the growth of tumor. There are some other genes which normally repair a damaged DNA and thus prevents cancer. Mutation of such repairing gene can also lead to formation of cancer. Sometimes multiple cancers happen due to mutation of such genes, and they are known as Familial Cancer Syndrome. Few such syndromes are Li-Fraumeni Syndrome, hereditary breast and ovary cancer syndrome, hereditary non-polyposis cancer syndrome etc. The list is longer. One of such syndromes which is mostly discussed is hereditary

tary breast-ovarian cancer syndrome. This is associated with mutation of BRCA1 and/or BRCA2 genes. Almost 7-10% of breast cancers are associated with gene mutations. Among such cases, almost 80% are related to BRCA1/BRCA2 mutation. This gene mutation is associated most commonly with breast cancer, ovarian cancer, fallopian tube cancer, colorectal cancer, uterine cancer, male breast cancer and prostate cancer. Similarly, some blood cancers, colorectal cancers, soft tissue sarcomas, kidney cancers, brain

tumors, nerve fiber tumors, skin cancers etc. can also be associated with hereditary cancer syndromes.

How can familial/hereditary cancers be suspected? A suspicious mind is the first requirement to suspect and evaluate such situations. Detailed family history along with family tree can be of great use to suspect familial cancers. Most of the people give a positive cancer history among the blood related family members. Once suspected, genetic screening and testing can be advised along with counseling of the affected person and family.

What are typical features of familial cancers? Other than being associated with family history, these cancers have a

tendency to occur at a relatively young age. Sometimes they are associated with multiple cancers. Also, they have a tendency to be more aggressive compared to non-familial counterpart.

Should genetic testing be advised for all? Certainly not. Indiscriminate genetic testing will increase confusion and fear. It is indeed a job of an expert who understands the associated confusions and uncertainties. Given the context of our country, its socioeconomic and cultural practice, advising genetic tests may be difficult for many reasons and needs extreme caution to avoid unnecessary complications in life.

Having a mutated gene synonymous of having a cancer? Essentially No. It only means a higher risk of having certain cancers. People having certain genetic mutations need to be cautious and consult an expert. They should also follow a surveillance program to detect any cancer at the earliest possible time.

Is radiation more harmful when used in such patients? Not necessarily. It needs understanding of the current cancer problem, risk and life

threat associated with the already diagnosed cancer and the relative risk of radiation causing any additional harm. Sometimes, radiation treatment is a life saving measure and the patient can die out of the already diagnosed cancer if not treated properly, well before the projected timeline when he/she could develop radiation induced second cancer causing any harm. So, avoiding radiation only because someone has a mutation can be dangerous.

What should I do? If you think you can have a higher risk of having cancer for some reason, you should talk to an expert. If you have strong family history of cancer or multiple cancers or cancers at very young age, you should seek help from an expert at the earliest possible time. And, last but not the least, Do not do random genetic testing.

The opinions shared are personal and based on available medical literature to the best interest of non-professional. The author is Associate Director, Radiation Oncology, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Saket, Delhi and can be contacted at dodulmondal@gmail.com

NEW STUDY

VITAMIN D, FISH OIL SUPPLEMENTS MIGHT REDUCE RISK OF AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE

CORRESPONDENT
WASHINGTON (US)

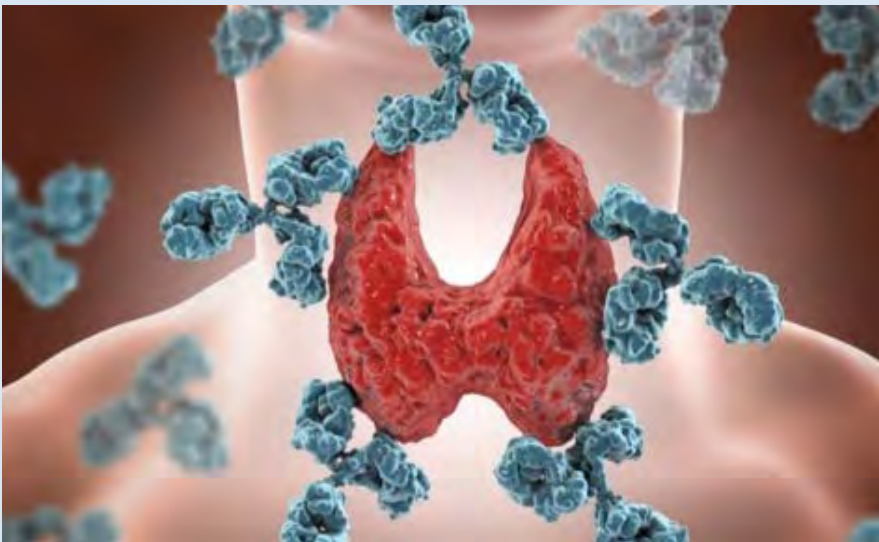
Taking daily vitamin D supplements - or a combination of vitamin D and omega-3 fish oil - appears to carry a lower risk of developing autoimmune disease, with a more pronounced effect after two years, according to a recent study. The study has been published in 'The BMJ Journal'. The researchers said that the clinical importance of these findings is high, "given that these are well-tolerated, non-toxic supplements, and that there are no other known effective therapies to reduce rates of autoimmune diseases."

Autoimmune disease happens when the body's natural defence system mistakenly attacks normal cells. Common conditions include rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, and thyroid diseases, which increase with age, particularly among women.

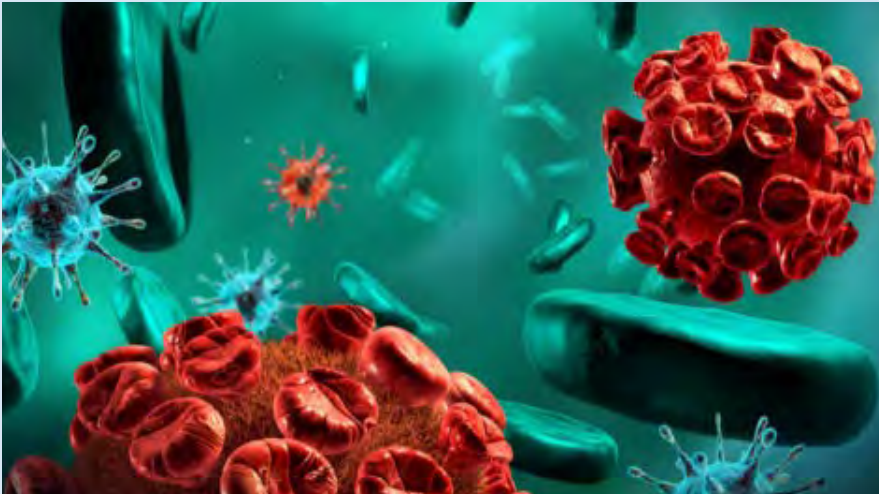
Both vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids derived from seafood are known to have a beneficial effect on inflammation and immunity, but no large randomised trials have tested whether these supplements can lower the risk of autoimmune disease.

So researchers set out to test the effects of vitamin D and omega-3 fish oil supplements on rates of autoimmune diseases in 25,871 US adults (average age 67; 51 per cent women; 71 per cent non-Hispanic white).

When they joined the trial, participants provided information on their age, ethnicity, region of resi-



New study could lead to better treatments for autoimmune diseases.



An autoimmune disease occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks and kills the body's own cells.

dence, income, education, lifestyle, weight, medical history, diet and supplement use. Blood levels of vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids were also measured.

Participants were then randomly allocated to receive vitamin D (2,000 IU/day) or matched placebo, and omega-3 fatty acids (1,000mg/day) or matched placebo, and were asked to report any diagnosed autoimmune disease over an average 5.3 year period.

These included rheumatoid arthritis, polymyalgia rheumatica (pain and stiffness in the muscles around the shoulders, neck and hips), thyroid disease, and psoriasis, among others.

Reported cases were confirmed using medical records. Those with insufficient documentation for certainty were classed as "probable" cases.

Over the full duration of the trial, a confirmed autoimmune disease was diag-

nosed in 123 participants in the vitamin D group compared with 155 in the placebo group - a 22 per cent lower relative rate.

In the omega-3 fatty acid group, 130 confirmed cases were diagnosed compared with 148 in the placebo group (a 15 per cent reduction), but this was not a statistically significant result.

However, when probable cases were included, omega-3 fatty acid supplements did significantly re-

duce the rate by 18 per cent compared with placebo and there was a significant interaction with time, indicating a stronger effect the longer supplements were taken.

Similar results were found when only the last three years of the trial were considered. The vitamin D group had 39 per cent fewer confirmed cases than placebo; while the omega-3 fatty acid group had 10 per cent fewer confirmed cases than placebo.

Both vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acid supplements decreased autoimmune disease by about 30 per cent versus placebo alone.

This was a large trial involving a diverse general population with high rates of follow-up and adherence to treatment. However, the researchers acknowledged that they tested only one dose and formulation of each supplement, and say the results may not apply to younger individuals.

Nevertheless, they said that this is the first direct evidence that daily supplementation with either agent - or a combination of vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids - for five years among older US adults reduces autoimmune disease incidence, with more pronounced effect after two years of supplementation.

"We are continuing to follow participants for two years in an extension study to test the time course of this autoimmune disease reduction effect," they wrote.

"Further trials could test these interventions in younger populations, and those with high autoimmune disease risk."

MATERNAL HEALTH

STUDY FINDS PANDEMIC ADDED CHALLENGES FOR MATERNITY CARE

CORRESPONDENT
WASHINGTON (US)

According to new research, the COVID-19 pandemic had a wide range of impacts on maternity care. The study has been published in the 'The Journal of Perinatal and Neonatal Nursing'. "Maternity care providers in Michigan experienced a range of complex challenges due to the pandemic, with many experiencing conflicts and questioning their role as a provider amid concerns of the effects of COVID-19 on themselves and their families," according to the qualitative research reported by Lisa Kane Low, PhD, CNM, and colleagues of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

In early February 2020, Dr Kane Low and colleagues were in the process of administering a survey to maternity care teams across the state of Michigan that take part in 'The Obstetrics Initiative (OBI), a data-driven quality improvement collaborative.

The intent of the survey was to assess the influence maternity unit culture has on cesarean birth rates, but as the pandemic unfolded, the researchers wanted to additionally capture how a global health crisis might affect the maternity care landscape in Michigan. In mid-April 2020, they added a single, open-ended question: "How has COVID-19 impacted your work?" A total of 647 responses were received from nurses, physicians, midwives and other maternity care professionals at 21 hospitals, representing a range of hospital types (academic medical centres and community hospitals) and settings (urban/suburban, rural).

In a content analysis of survey responses, the research team identified five key themes:

1. Patient care impact. Cancelling elective procedures and shifting from in-person to telehealth visits led to patients waiting longer to go to the hospital when they thought they were in labour. However, at some hospitals, respondents perceived positive effects, including more women coming to the hospital in active labour and fewer undergoing induced labour. "It seems as though this has decreased the intervention rate and maybe the cesarean section rate," a nurse-midwife wrote.
2. Burdens of personal protective equipment (PPE). All providers reported challenges related to the new reality of being masked when providing patient care. Nurses provided "more intense" responses - they described barriers to providing hands-on care



Covid-19 pandemic had a wide range of impacts on maternity care.



Maternity care providers in Michigan experienced a range of complex challenges due to the pandemic.

as well as fatigue and discomfort from wearing PPE all day.

3. Visitor restrictions. Restrictions on visitors to reduce COVID-19 spread had some negative effects, especially in decreased support for labouring women. However, there were also reports of positive effects: some providers felt that fewer visits led to increased rest for patients and decreased stress for staff.

4. Ethical challenges and moral distress. Respondents voiced concerns related to the complex balance between their own health and well-being and the ability to carry out their professional roles. Concerns about "moral distress" related to conflicting roles were most apparent at hospitals with high COVID-19 case rates.

The study provided important new evidence and direct quotes from a wide range of maternity care providers across Michigan in "real-time" as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. "This ongoing disruption to usual care has taken a physical and emotional toll on all maternity care professionals," Dr Low and coauthors concluded.

MONDAY 31 JANUARY 2022
CHANDIGARH

DANGEROUS DESIGNS

CHINESE STRATEGIC aim to control Eastern Ladakh was to provide depth to its National Highway G-219, Karakoram Pass, redraw Line of Actual Control (LAC) as per its perception (1959-60) and negotiate border on its terms thereafter. China can claim to have partially achieved it, with continued presence in extra kilometrage in Depsang plains, Hot Spring, Demchok areas, where disengagement hasn’t taken place. Having developed its infrastructure in areas as per its perception of LAC, its aim to deny the same to India has not been so successful, as India continues to develop its infrastructure at unprecedented speed to catch up, in recent past. Its efforts of bilateral border talks with Bhutan and Nepal including trijunctions, are to create further complications in the long term resolution of borders. China will continue to try encroaching Bhutanese land to create more space in Chumbi Valley, to threaten the Siliguri Corridor.

The Indian aim has been to get Chinese back to pre-standoff positions as of April 2020 in all friction points, not to concede unilateral change of LAC, and pursue talks towards its demarcation, hoping to lead to border resolution. With current disengagement, status quo stands achieved in areas north and south of Pangong Tso, albeit at the cost of losing the crucial leverage of giving up occupation of certain heights on Kailash range and north of Pangong Tso, prior to Chinese vacation of ‘Other Areas’. Pursuing disengagement and de-escalation in remaining areas will be an uphill task due to shortage of leverages, given Chinese past track record and recent activities.

China, marched in areas, where it was not supposed to be, junking all CBMs, as part of overall ‘Incremental Encroachment Strategy’, exploiting first mover advantage. China soon found itself handicapped by strong Indian response, resistance and resolve, with proactive actions resulting newly created vulnerabilities to Maldo Garrison and its launch pad, South of Pangong Tso. Despite disengagement in Pangong

Tso area, Chinese discomfort due to Indian dispositions in Sub Sector North including DBO, infrastructure development including DSDBO road, as a threat to crucial Tibet-Xinjiang-Pakistan connectivity remains. Except few proactive actions at tactical/operational level like Pangong Tso heights, Nathu La, and Doklam, by and large, the Indian national strategy against China has been reactive in last seven decades.

Pegasus snoopgate to spook upcoming Budget session

THE STAGE has been set for a stormy Budget Session with the opposition gearing up against the government on the Pegasus snooping issue. The Congress is reaching out to the opposition to devise a joint strategy to corner the government.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi set the ball rolling after he said, “Modi Govt bought Pegasus to spy on our primary democratic institutions, politicians and public. Govt functionaries, opposition leaders, armed forces, judiciary all were targeted by these phone tappings. This is treason. Modi Govt has committed treason.”

Not only the Congress but other political parties are planning to corner the government on the snooping row in the country.

Former Congress Chief Minister in Maharashtra Prithvi Raj Chavan said, “Government must answer which spy agency procured it and who authorised it.”

As per reports, the spyware Pegasus not only breaches the WhatsApp as also the phone but

is able to turn over the cellphones camera and microphone to capture all activities in the vicinity of the phone, besides hacking all the security features of the phone, including listening to, and sending passwords, contact lists, calendar events, text messages, and live voice calls. It also can plant fake material into the cellphone to falsely incriminate people.

Leader of the opposition Mallikarjun Kharge said, “We will seek the view of other political parties and then the further strategy will be decided.”

The Congress has said that the Prime Minister is directly involved in it and alleged that the Modi government purchased Pegasus Spyware in 2017 and other military technology as the “centrepieces” of a package, including “weapons and intelligence gear worth roughly \$2 billion” from Israel during PM Modi’s visit. It is not a coincidence that the Budget of National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) reporting to the NSA went up from Rs 33 crore to Rs 333 crore in 2017-18.



SHRI
BANDARU
DATTATRAYA

Experts predicted that the peak of the third wave of Covid-19 would witness four lakh daily cases. They set January 23 as the time when Covid-19 cases would swell to the maximum but the number didn’t cross the mark of four lakh. Since then the number of Covid-19 cases has been coming down. A little over 2.34 lakh cases were reported in the last 24 hours, informed the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on January 30. The World Health Organization (WHO) has not kept India in a danger zone.

When the second wave of Covid-19 - April 30, 2021 -

was at its peak, there were 3.86 lakh new cases. Then the proportion of fully vaccinated people was just two per cent. Now, 75 per cent of all adults are fully vaccinated. So far over 165.70 crore vaccine doses have been administered under the Nationwide Vaccination Drive. Over four crore youngsters in the age group of 15-18 have been administered with the first dose of the vaccine. On an average, 60-70 lakh vaccine doses are administered every 24 hours.

As a result, the severity of the third wave of Covid-19 is much less. There is no need to panic but to exercise precautions. One needs to stick to Covid appropriate behaviour.

Wearing masks, use of sanitizer, social distancing, and avoiding crowded places are some of precautions we need to take diligently to defeat Covid-19. Healthy diet and exercise are equally important. Since strong immunity helps the body fight coronavirus properly, one should avoid junk food and opt for a healthy diet. Equally important is the need to make regular exercise and yoga a part of our daily routine.

Thanks to the whole government approach of the Centre and the States, and colossal resilience and perseverance of corona warriors from different walks of life - doctors, paramedical staff, civil administration, NGOs, armed

forces - helped India fight the menace of Covid-19 valiantly. The fight continues but we will decisively win the war against Covid-19. It is the collective confidence of the nation, and a great example of solidarity set before the world.

In our sustained battle against multiple socio-economic, mental and psychological repercussions of Covid-19, the whole world also realized our prowess as a nation to deal with an unprecedented challenge like the coronavirus pandemic. From the use of technical platforms like CoWIN to firming up the supply chain, India has today become a hub of hope for humanity in its fight against Covid-19.

We have effectively busted

the myth that India is not too strong and well-prepared to withstand Covid-19 like shock. The leadership and vision of Prime Minister Narendra proved to the international community that India is capable of rising to the occasion with ease. India has been able to handle the third wave of Covid-19 so efficiently thanks to our aggressive vaccination drive.

Every eligible person should go for vaccination without fail along with the booster dose, which is being given to elderly and others with comorbidities. It will also be a salute to our corona warriors, who braving odds and challenges, are reaching every nook and corner of the country to vac-

“‘It’s Not Whether You Get Knocked Down, It’s Whether You Get Up.’”

VINCE LOMBARDI

EDITORIAL

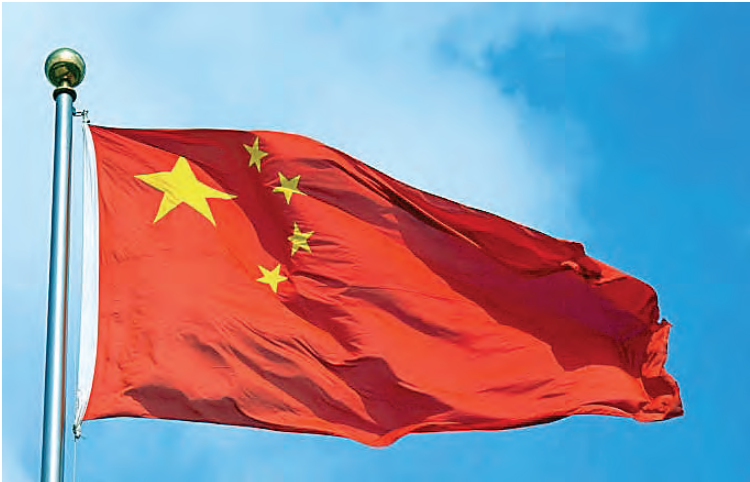
The evolving triumvirate to take on China

/ RN PRASHER /

The western nations who elevated China in trade relations in preference to Taiwan followed the conventional wisdom that economic interdependence between nations gradually leads to strategic reconciliation but they have come to grief. The USSR, the founder of Communism in China learnt the lesson soon after the Chinese Communists came to power with its help and had to finally show China its place in the Vietnam War. Efforts at improving Sino-Japanese relations, particularly during the tenure of the last Prime Minister Abe, have yielded the same lesson; if you feed the dragon, it grows stronger and bites your hand. None of the five major players in this region, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan has had friendly relations with others in the long history of this region. The Russo-Japanese War and Japan's occupation of China, Taiwan and Korea always cast a shadow on the geopolitics of this region. Yet, China's recent display of hegemony, arrogance and belligerence has brought the triumvirate of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan closer than ever and Putin is not taking sides in their confrontation with China.

Let us rewind to 2011. On 14th February of that year, the BBC reported that China had overtaken Japan as the world's second biggest economy and added a prediction that turned out to be uncannily accurate. The US economy at that time was three times that of China in dollar terms. Yet, the report quoted Tom Miller of DK Dragonomics, a Beijing based economic consultancy as saying, “It's realistic to say that within 10 years China will be roughly the same size as the US economy”. Reacting to the news of being overtaken by China, the then Japanese Economics Minister Kaoru Yosano sanguinely said, “As an economy, we are not competing for rankings but working to improve citizens' lives”. Importantly, he also cautioned that Japan needs to closely watch “risks from overseas economies and currency moves”.

Sadly, Japan has not been fully free from arm-twisting by the US since the occupation after the Second World War. It was forced to keep the Yen very strong against the dollar, making Japanese exports among the costliest in the world and Japan the most expensive destination for foreign tourists. Chinese



manufactures were highly attractive to the Japanese and foreign travel was cheaper for them than domestic holidays. Manufacturing moved rapidly to China and domestic employment in Japan nosedived. It did not help matters that the US too was following the same self-destructive path on which it had led Japan on a leash. In an interview published in the Harvard Business School's “Working Knowledge” around the same time as the BBC report, on March 28, 2011 Professor Willy Shih was categorical about the deleterious impact of moving industries to low-cost countries, “exporting manufacturing has a negative impact on the country's industrial commons, which represents the collective capability to sustain innovation.” Both the US and Japan were draining their manufacturing base and the means to sustain their innovation edge.

It is in this economic quagmire that Shinzo Abe, who had briefly been the Prime Minister during 2006-2007, started his eight-year term in 2012. A conservative, right wing politician, he tried to move away from excessive dependence on the US, China and South Korea and increased interaction with NATO and the EU. Yet, he could not do much about the fundamental problem ailing Japan; the high value of the Yen. Also, he ended up infuriating neighbours by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine of martyrs, some of whom were war criminals in the eyes of China and both the Koreans, having committed atrocities in these countries. Japan further angered China by state purchase of privately owned islands in the Senkaku group that are claimed by China as its own Diaoyu Islands. In 2012, there were riots in

China resulting in extensive damage to Japanese manufacturing and retail facilities of Toyota, Honda, Nissan, Panasonic and Canon, resulting in the temporary shutdown of production and a serious question over the possibility of expansion in China.

Abe made four visits to China to smoothen relations and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and President Xi visited Japan during Abe's tenure. Yet by 2019 it had become clear that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the increasing threats to take over Taiwan, by force if necessary, were a threat to the security of Japan too. There is talk of bringing Japan into the Five Eyes, the intelligence sharing network between the US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand. In an article published on January 1, 2022 the Economist described how Japan had warned the US of the dangers of China in 2012 but was ignored by the US and EU leaders who had “focused on the benefits of integrating China in the global economy”. The article listed three worrying trends about China as perceived by Japan. The Chinese are overconfident that the West is in decline and the Chinese political system is better than America's messy democracy, going to the extent of publishing a white paper claiming China is more democratic than the US. The second worry is about China's shift from collective leadership to individual rule as in the days of Mao. Most worrying, however, to the Japanese is the future of Chinese growth. China is investing reduced sums abroad including in the BRI projects and is encouraging foreigners to invest more in China. With 22 percent of their exports going to China, the Japanese are clearly worried.

This situation has led to a focus on bringing back industries to Japan and the increased engagement of Japan with South Korea and Taiwan. Nikkei Asia reported on May 8, 2021 that Japanese makers of raw materials for computer chips are increasing their production in South Korea and Taiwan to broaden the supply chain. Shin-Etsu and Sumco, two Japanese companies sell 60 percent of the world's requirements of silicon wafers. South Korean Samsung and SK Hynix and Taiwan's TSMC are pumping more than \$350 billion in chip making. These three countries together control two-thirds of the world supply while China produces about 12 percent. The civic society in these three countries is pressing for closer ties between them with polls showing a vast majority holds a negative opinion of China. On December 23, 2021, the Japan-Taiwan Co-prosperity Leader Alliance was launched in Tokyo by 127 civic society leaders with a call for a Japanese-Taiwan Relations Act on the lines of the US-Taiwan Relations Act. The Taipei Times reported on January 25, 2022 that Japan has made a provision of 100 million Yen for “advancing the Japan-Taiwan relationship”. Japan is mulling heavy militarisation of its islands closest to Taiwan and on December 23, 2021 Reuters reported that for a Taiwan emergency Japan and the US have drawn up a joint plan involving use of the Japanese islands of the Nansei Chain with the Japanese providing logistics support. There is even a talk of a “Semi Quad” comprising the US, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to coordinate the efforts against Chinese hegemony.

What China failed to realise is that Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are now firmly democratic. Even if the US falters in giving leadership to this region, Communist China will not be acceptable as an alternative. These democracies, with Australia and perhaps a reluctant New Zealand and the partial democracies of the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia along with Communist but trusted Vietnam, are carving out strategic and economic relationships in which China is the common adversary. China will have neither the stomach nor the capacity to take on a triumvirate of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. / DAILY WORLD /

THE AUTHOR is a retired IAS officer of Haryana cadre. The views are strictly his personal.

Battered by Covid, common folk crave for a miracle budget

DEEPIKA BHAN

If wishes were horses, then ‘Nirmala would lower all prices’. The change in the original proverb may seem contrived, but the thought is not unwarranted, as it reflects the sentiment of common folk in the country today.

The customary presentation of the Union Budget on February 1 invariably raises expectations that there may be a cut here or there to help people save money or earn more.

The Budget presentation is all about big numbers, lots and lots of money, multi-million-rupee projects and schemes, and policy stipulations, but all

that common folk care about are announcements of relief measures.

These could be reductions in prices of food, clothing, medicine, education, housing and health, and above all, in taxes and fuel rates. This is the basic list of just about any family in the country.

Talk to any person and the principal complaint is about the ever-increasing prices of the basic items required for normal living. These include basic food items - vegetables, fruits, grains, pulses, spices, edible oil and milk; stationery and items of clothing; and expenses on travel and healthcare.

Especially because of the Covid surge, the per capita per-

sonal expenditure on healthcare has increased manifold. Almost every family has seen a rise in medical expenses, from minor medical consultations to major hospitalisations.

Covid has altered the economic picture of households, especially in middle-income settings. Many spent their life savings on the medical treatment of their near and dear ones. When the Covid second wave struck the country in April-May 2021, a number of families had to resort to external help and crowd-funding to pay their hospital bills.

The desperation for treatment, hospital beds, medicines and even medical consultations has not been seen on such a massive, heartbreaking

scale in recent times.

Covid exposed the huge gaps in the country's healthcare system and for some time even created a sense of hopelessness all around. The suffering has affected common people gravely and they desperately aspire for some relief, either in the form of tax cuts or a lowering of the cost of the medical treatment of Covid-19 and other chronic major illnesses.

Since 2014, the Centre has increased the basic income-tax exemption limit and 80C deduction, introduced standard deduction and optional tax slab rates. This has been helpful, but in the Covid-affected environment, more needs to be done. So, hopes for some

relief are expected in the family units.

Along with increased expenditure on health, the Covid surge has also affected the creation of new jobs. Hiring is muted; in fact in the private sector a significant number of people have been laid off, many have suffered salary cuts, and many more have either been not paid or are poorly paid.

The simmering frustration was lately manifested when a train in Bihar was set on fire by job aspirants. The Railways had received about 1.25 crore applications for 3,528 vacancies, and just 7,05,446 candidates had been shortlisted - a mind-boggling statistics. / IANS /

Bird's eye view

Colossal resilience, perseverance shown in combating Covid-19

Experts predicted that the peak of the third wave of Covid-19 would witness four lakh daily cases. They set January 23 as the time when Covid-19 cases would swell to the maximum but the number didn’t cross the mark of four lakh. Since then the number of Covid-19 cases has been coming down. A little over 2.34 lakh cases were reported in the last 24 hours, informed the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on January 30. The World Health Organization (WHO) has not kept India in a danger zone.

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the myth that India is not too strong and well-prepared to withstand Covid-19 like shock. The leadership and vision of Prime Minister Narendra proved to the international community that India is capable of rising to the occasion with ease. India has been able to handle the third wave of Covid-19 so efficiently thanks to our aggressive vaccination drive.

Every eligible person should go for vaccination without fail along with the booster dose, which is being given to elderly and others with comorbidities. It will also be a salute to our corona warriors, who braving odds and challenges, are reaching every nook and corner of the country to vac-

inate the people. Instead of being discouraged by initial resistance from the people due to lack of awareness and superstition, they overcame all hurdles surmounted to keep vaccination drive smoother and flawless.

Our seven vaccine makers - Serum Institute of India, Bharat Biotech, Dr Reddy's Laboratories, Zydus Cadila, Biological E, Gennova Biopharma and Panacea Biotech - also deserve the best of appreciation. They have proved their leadership capabilities at the world level. As on to date, more than 12.84 crore balance and unutilized vaccine doses are available with States and UTs.

The state of Haryana has

emerged as a role model in Covid-19 management and vaccination drive. So far almost four crore doses of vaccines have been administered to protect the people from the onslaught of Covid-19. With each passing day, the pace and scope of vaccination is expanding marked by better planning and streamlining the vaccine supply chain. At the same, nothing is being left unturned to alleviate the woes of all sections of society caused by Covid-19. In a sentence, we are firmly dealing with Covid-19 with an inclusive approach!

The author is Governor, Haryana

FACTS & FACETS, A 360° VIEW

USHA SHARMA LEAVES DELHI TO BECOME RAJASTHAN CS



RAKESH RANJAN

The author is a senior journalist & CEO, New Media Network

It looks certain that Mrs Usha Sharma, currently Union Secretary of Youth Affairs at the central government, may become the next chief secretary of Rajasthan. She may have a tenure as CS up to June 2023 i.e. till retirement. Her repatriation from the centre to the state was announced on Sunday.

It is widely believed that in addition to seniority and the right political background, Mrs Sharma shines on her own as a clean and efficient officer.

It is after 10 years that she is returning to her state cadre after serving at the Centre from 21 May 2012.

She will be the second woman Chief Secretary after Ms. Kushal Singh who was made the first woman CS by the then CM Ashok Gehlot during his second term as CM.

First India had on December 26, 2021 reported that the state administration is back to the time-tested principle of seniority in the appointment of the top civil servant of the state.

A native of Uttar Pradesh Ms. Sharma is a Science Graduate in Chemistry. She joined IAS in 1985 and was allotted Tripura Cadre where she served as Assistant Collector, Deputy Secretary, and SDO till April 1989. Later she was allotted Rajasthan cadre and did her first stint in the Municipal Administration in Alwar (Rajasthan) beginning July 01, 1989.

She became District Collector and District Magistrate of Bundi District in January 1994 and later became DM Ajmer in October 1999 and served in Ajmer till August 2001.

In addition to her stint in field/districts (Bundi & Ajmer) she has a wide and varied experience in education, power/energy, cooperative, handloom & handicrafts, industries. In addition, she also headed the Jaipur Development Authority (JDA) as Commissioner during 2003-2004.

Prior to moving to the Centre in May 2012, she had a long stint in the state department of Tourism and Culture.

At the central government, she started her career as Joint Secretary. Initially, she served as DG (Tourism) and later as Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Culture (DG, Archaeological Survey of India), and finally Union Secretary for Youth Affairs.

Her career witnessed

She is said to have remained out of the most favoured list of NDA administration officials. Despite her eligibility and being the youngest officer in her batch (1985), she was made a full Secretary two and half years after her batchmates. She was first empanelled for holding Secretary Equivalent posts at Centre in May 2017

many ups and downs like most of her colleagues.

She is said to have remained out of the most favoured list of NDA administration officials. Despite her eligibility and being the youngest officer in her batch (1985), she was made a full Secretary two and half years after her batchmates.

She was first empanelled for holding Secretary Equivalent posts at Centre in May 2017 and only two and a half years later in October 2019 empanelled for holding Secretary rank posts at Centre. It was only in February 2020 she got the full-fledged Secretary level posting as Union Secretary for Youth Affairs.

Her appointment as the new CS will signal that the state administration is back to the time-tested principle of seniority in the appointment of the top civil servant of the state after having strayed from this path while appointing Arya as the state's first 'Dalit' Chief Secretary of the state in November 2020 in the hope of consolidating his Dalit vote bank. That's the beauty of a democratic framework of governance and administration.

Further, it is worth underlining that Ms Sharma as the new head of the state bureaucracy may also signal a sort of rapprochement between the CM and state assembly speaker CP Joshi whose kinship with Ms. Sharma is well known.

In June 2023 when Ms. Sharma may bid farewell to her colleagues, opportunities for the 1988-batch officer Subodh Agarwal may open up as the age is on his side in addition to the skills all politicians love among their officers. His service tenure may last till December 2025. In addition to Agarwal, there will also be 1989 batch officers like Ms. Shubhra Singh, Rohit Kumar Singh, and V Srinivas for consideration as CS candidates if the state administration for some reason desires to bypass Agarwal.

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE AUTHOR ARE PERSONAL

IN-DEPTH

INCREDIBLE RAFA STEALS A MARCH OVER FEDERER & NOVAK DJOKOVIC



Rafael Nadal was expected to make tennis history at Australian Open and on Sunday he lived up to those expectations when he defeated Russian Dimitri Medvedev in a hard fought to win his 21st Grand Slam title and become one of the greatest tennis players in the sport's history. With this win Rafa edged ahead of Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, both with 20 titles each to demonstrate his tenacity and resilience. The injury prone Spaniard sailed through the tournament without any recurrence of his foot injury.

After his semi-final win Rafa had down played the statistical advantage he now enjoys over his closest rivals Djokovic and Federer. "In some ways it doesn't matter if someone achieves one more or less," Rafa said. But it does put Rafa on a high pedestal. What was noticeable in Sunday's final was the absence of Djokovic who will get a chance to catch up with Rafa at next year's Australian Open to keep alive a great rivalry.

SPIRITUAL SPEAK

He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye.
—Bhagavad Gita

TOP TWEETS

Piyush Goyal
@PiyushGoyal



We do not have to forget the cleanliness campaign, it is necessary to accelerate the campaign against single use plastic. The mantra of #Vocal4Local is our responsibility, we have to work wholeheartedly for the self-reliant India campaign. With the efforts of all of us, the country will reach new heights of development: PM@NarendraModiji

Dharmendra Pradhan
@dpradhanbj



Full vaccination of over 75% of the eligible adult population is a significant feat in India's fight against the #Covid19. Congratulations IndiaFlag of India on achieving this landmark. Together, we shall overcome. #IndiaFightsCorona

● Vol 3 ● Issue No. 235
● RNI NO. RAJENG/2019/77764.
Printed and published by Anita Hada Sangwan on behalf of First Express Publishers. Printed at Bhaskar Printing Press, D.B. Corp Limited, Shivdaspora, Tonk Road, Jaipur. Published at 304, 3rd Floor, City Mall, Bhagwan Das Road, C-Scheme, Jaipur-302001, Rajasthan. Phone 0141-4920504.
Editor-In-Chief: Jagdeesh Chandra.
Editor: Anita Hada Sangwan responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act

PEOPLE UP IN ARMS OVER JAB MANDATE



Call it dread of vaccine or defiance, resistance to the jab at several places has been shocking. But nothing can be as shocking as in Canada where protests have grown to such an extent that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family were forced to move to "a secret" location for their safety. The protesters are opposing mandatory Covid-19 vaccination for cross-border truckers. Thousands of protesters, including truckers and children, converged on Parliament Hill to give the protest dubbed Freedom Convoy a serious new turn.

Thousands recently protested in France against the proposed law that would allow those aged 16 and above

Critics called it social apartheid & "shameful" & said it transgressed against their freedom. Some defiant protesters at a rally shouted, "Vaccine pass-total resistance" at a time when Omicron caseloads were at a record high

access to restaurants, bars, inter-regional transport or leisure activities only after they show proof of being fully vaccinated. Critics called it social apartheid and "shameful" and said it transgressed against their freedom. Some defiant protesters at a rally shouted, "Vaccine pass-total resistance" at a

time when Omicron caseloads were at a record high.

This is the situation in almost all other major western European countries. Austria was also mulling to ban the unvaccinated from public venues and in England Prime Minister Boris Johnson "blasted the mumbo-jumbo being spread on social media" against vaccine.

Countries are tightening their no vaccine-no entry rules and people are inconvenienced because of their strict implementation. Rules did not allow a pregnant New Zealand journalist to return to her home country from Afghanistan due to "a bottleneck of people" in its Covid-19 quarantine system. A few weeks back Novak Djokovic was sent back from Melbourne for not having the mandatory vaccination proof.

EDITORIAL

Come clean

The revelation made by the *New York Times* that the Indian government agreed to buy Pegasus spyware from Israel's NSO group is startling and has stoked a new political controversy in the country. Months back in July-August last year, a consortium of 17 media organisations and a non-profit, Forbidden Stories, came out with names of thousands of individuals who would have been possibly snooped in numerous countries across the world. Names of many highly placed individuals in India including many Opposition leaders, journalists, Constitutional authorities, civilians, a former Chief Justice were also included in the list. But the issue goes far beyond the political realm and involves complex strategic and Constitutional aspects that demand urgent discourse within the country. The allegations leveled by the Opposition are grave. In the first place, the Central government has been alleged of misleading the Parliament — an institution held so supreme within any democratic nation. As a place which represents the views of the entire populace of the country, the Parliament, needless to say, commands a high degree of respect. A statement made in the Parliament is considered a reference point of high credibility. Prominent ministers in the government had clearly stated in the Parliament last year that the government was not involved in purchase and misuse of the spyware. The NYT report however completely contradicts these statements. Either of the two will have to be termed as correct and the other as wrong. Government's silence on the matter is indeed worrying — it is naïve as it neither admits nor denies the charges. If the government didn't purchase the spyware, it should come out loud and flag the NYT report as incoherent through citing authentic records. National government can in no way be allowed to be defamed if the charges made against it are untrue. The question here goes much far beyond the images of political leaders; it is a blot on the national image of the country as a whole. The obvious course of action should be to deny the allegations if those are incorrect, and punish the culprits if the allegations are found true. And also, the Pegasus issue is not just about presenting false facts or hiding information before the Parliament. The government had even responded in negative to the Supreme Court's direct question regarding the use of Pegasus. The central issue, however, is the right to privacy of citizens. The potential overreaches of the Pegasus spyware, to a certain extent, exceed far beyond what is governed by the Indian laws. The existing laws simply don't appear to cover the aspects of the technically sophisticated nature of the spyware. None of the crimes enlisted in the existing data laws, and even the punishments, match the magnitude of espionage that Pegasus can potentially carry out. As of now, the legal framework of the country may not be updated enough to deal with the issue. Furthermore, such intrusive is the nature of surveillance made through Pegasus is that the invader can see the phone's location and even take control of its camera and microphone. The extensive nature of the surveillance appears to have totally disrupted the balance between state's prerogative of monitoring of demography and people's right to privacy, and that too in a stealthy manner. While the government has not made any response until now, the NYT has also not come up with an attributed source or proper method of arriving at the conclusion. The newspaper, however, drew a link between the mutual visits of the two leaders and India's "support of Israel at the UN's Economic and Social Council to deny observer status to a Palestinian human rights organisation." Before considering what the government has to say in this regard, no conclusion can be arrived at. But for that, the government will have to respond in a timely and appropriate manner. Government's silence could well be a question mark on its accountability to the people. The government must act very responsibly and cautiously in this matter.



RAJEEV NARAYAN

As it oft does, history is repeating itself; as are our mistakes of yesterday. Society is again sporting a veneer of suspicion and the surreptitious, with today's politicos increasingly pursuing very personal agendas. We need to be very careful, lest we slide further into the abyss

A divide happened in India 75 years back, ending in untold blood- and heart-loss. Today, another divide is being created, with rifts and animosity growing each day

The Indian national flag has four colors – saffron, white, green and the blue of the Ashok Chakra, the colors of togetherness we first unfurled patriotically 75 years ago. Three years after independence, we had Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar embracing all that was new in a free India, encompassing these same four vociferous colors, with members of every 'Indian' community partaking in the opportunity to create a secular Constitution. I shall delve on this today, for we are changing dramatically as a people and a society. I grew up in India and can myself see a sea-change in my lifetime itself. And we are changing more, for the worse.

Today, 75 years later, the hues and tone in India are getting scary. There is divisiveness everywhere, with a motivated and deviant section pushing their own unscrupulous and illegitimate agenda. It is just not politicians, but even the common brainwashed many people who have changed – a vagrant lot out to demolish the very foundation of our country, corrupting both the susceptible and the impervious. We are turning into moral cowards, victims perhaps of the well-being and financial wellness that India found three decades ago on the back of bold economic reforms. Today, with that well-being under threat, we are in an economic mess; a very visible one. For those that decide I am a doomsayer, let me assure you that I am being kind, for today we are staring a dire tumult in the face. Let me take you back to where we started out from, for that may give you a glimpse into the scary times we are hurtling toward.

Colors and society

For long now, we have been equating society and religion with colors. Ironically, these colors that divide India today are predominantly green, saffron, white and blue – the same colors as our national flag, which is a shining symbol of unity. We just celebrated our Republic Day and publicly rejoiced over the secularism that is the bedrock of our society, but the on-ground reality is that secularism is being ground into the dust. It is a paradox that secularism, multi-culturalism and diversity are enshrined



Inculcation of cultural diversity is possible through better understanding of reasons behind hatred

in our Constitution; I say this because what's happening on the ground is vastly different.

Further, it is an irony and absurdity that this latest societal whip is being wielded today by those very people who are supposed to rally us against any disharmony and divide – our political and religious leaders. Finally, it is a startling contradiction that the line between these two sections is thinning fast. As this line thins, those with very suspect ideas and principles are beginning to address the people from the pedestals of public office, with an official say on matters that are deeply sensitive, thus distorting the very fabric of society. In the process, society is beginning to sport a veneer of all that is suspect and surreptitious, with politicos and other leaders increasingly pursuing very personal agendas. We need to be careful, lest we slide some more into this abyss.

Remember, they are attempting to do what many others have tried to for centuries and failed – the Mughals and the British being amongst the most recent. India's secularism has stood the test of time despite all these attempts. What is really irksome is that today, these attempted deathblows on our secular fabric are coming from within, from our very own.

Unity in diversity

The first shining public display of India's secularism was witnessed at the 1948 Olympic Games, held after a hiatus of 12 years due to the Second World War. As was largely expected, India went on to win the Gold

Medal in hockey. Amongst others, the Indian team was powered by Kishan Lal, the captain, Balbir Singh, who scored the most number of goals for India, Patrick Jensen, also amongst the highest goal-scorers, and Latif-ur-Rehman, who was outstanding in his gamesmanship. Also in the team were Akhtar Hussain, Leslie Claudius, Gerry Glackan, Reginald Rodrigues, Amit Kumar, Trilochan Singh, Jaswant Singh Rajput and Keshav Dutt. To rub salt into the British wounds, the team from newly-independent India thrashed the English team at their own home ground in London 4-0.

While talking sports, let's fast-forward to a game invented by the British and year 1983, when an inexperienced and underdog Indian team lifted the Cricket World Cup, beating England in the semi-finals and defending champions West Indies in the finals. It was an Indian miracle that was powered, amongst others, by Kapil Dev, Syed Kirmani, Roger Binny and Balwinder Sandhu. Other standout players in the team were K Srikanth, Madan Lal, Mohinder Amarnath, Kirti Azad and, of course, Sunil Manohar Gavaskar. After lifting the cup, the team proudly waved the Indian tricolor at the Mecca of cricket, Lords. The trophy was not won by Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, nor was the flag waved by them – it was unleashed by very proud Indians.

We glorious Indians

From glory in sports, let's move on to the gallantry of

India's armed forces, amongst the largest in the world. The highest Indian award for gallantry is the Param Vir Chakra, which has so far been conferred upon 21 outstanding iron men in uniform. In this list is Captain Vikram Batra, who martyred himself as India threw the Pakistanis out of Kargil. Others in the list include Flying Officer Nirmaljit Singh Sekhon, who shot down two enemy aircraft attacking India's Srinagar Air Base, and Lance Naik Albert Ekka, who achieved martyrdom during the Indo-Pak war of 1971. Then there is Company Quartermaster Hawaldar Abdul Hamid, who received the award for using his humble jeep-mounted weaponry to destroy enemy tanks during the Indo-Pak war of 1965.

Let's move on from the armed forces to the field of entertainment, where the highest honor is the Academy Awards. For Indians, Oscars have come few and far between, but even here, the winners' list is telling. Bhanu Athaiya was the first, followed by Resul Pookutti, AR Rahman and Gulzar. Who can forget Satyajit Ray, who was presented with an Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement?

If we move on to Indians who have been featured on the cover of 'TIME' magazine, that list includes Shah Rukh Khan, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and current Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Our DNA fabric

Let's go back in time to when India was stitching together its Constitution. This

was in itself a completely secular process, with 299 members of the Constituent Assembly involved. Amongst them were Dr BR Ambedkar, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad and BN Rao. Collectively with the other members, they decided to cast aside divisive boundaries, including religion, and blessed Indians with fundamental rights.

I could go on, talking about others like Govindan Gopalakrishnan, a Hindu who is fondly called India's 'mosque-man', having constructed 110 mosques for his Muslim brethren, apart from four churches and a Hindu temple. On the other side, we have an Indian Muslim, HMG Basha from Hoskote, who donated his personal land worth nearly Rs 1 crore for the construction of a Hanuman temple. This was because he found out that Hindus were having trouble offering prayers in a much smaller previously-constructed temple.

I am not even daring to delve into the achievements of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Maulana Azad, whose contributions have literally built and nurtured our nation. Or others still like APJ Abdul Kalam, Ratan Tata, Azim Premji, Nandan Nilekani and others, who have sustained India through their personal efforts.

What triggered this line of thought today? Well, I was watching a program on social media that captured this sentiment. This set me thinking; if a young Youtuber can have enough compassion and understanding to recognize our historical culture of unity in diversity, what has gotten into the leaders of today, some of whom openly spread hatred and divide the country on religious grounds? More importantly, why are today's authorities not taking immediate and the strongest possible action against them, both to bring them to book and yank the carpet from under the feet of the many others who may walk the same path? We all know the answer, but few today dare to walk that talk openly.

The writer is a clinical analyst and communications specialist. Views expressed are personal. narayanrajeiv2006@gmail.com



DearEditor

LOSS OF A LEGEND

With the death of former Indian hockey captain Charanjit Singh this week, India has lost another member of the golden period. The crafty midfielder belonged to an era when hockey was one of the key sources of national pride and the players were among the first heroes of post-independence India. In the last few years, many of those stars such as Balbir Singh Dosanjh, Balbir Singh Junior and Keshav Datt, have left us. Many of them are forgotten, but Charanjit will always be remembered as one of the key men responsible for India regaining its supremacy on the hockey field. His absence in the final of the 1960 Rome Olympics, due to an injury, was seen as one of the reasons why India lost to its arch-rival Pakistan. But four years later, Charanjit captained the Indian team that defeated Pakistan to win the gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics. While a lot more needs to be done to preserve the legacy of these legends, it's reassuring that India is coming back to the top of world hockey. Coincidentally, India's resurgence has begun in the same city — Tokyo — where it reclaimed its lost glory under Charanjit. The bronze at the Tokyo Olympics last year has breathed fresh life into the dying sport. We hope that this is just the beginning. And the revival would be complete when India reaches the top of the Olympic podium.

— KHOKAN DAS, KOLKATA via email

UNEMPLOYMENT FIASCO

Varun Gandhi seems to be the only BJP leader to show some spine and acknowledge the problem of joblessness in the nation. All others are predictably silent, afraid to offend the PM. The election promises of crores of jobs have largely been forgotten as the focus of the government has been on other unimportant matters. Recent violence by the job aspirants who have been shabbily treated is just a trailer of what could follow if the problem of unemployment is not solved. The expected demographic dividend could well turn into an albatross round the nations neck. To make matters worse, the wealth of the richest in the nation has been increasing by leaps and bounds while those at the bottom of the pyramid are left wondering from where their next meal is coming!

— ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI via email

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SHANTANU MUKHARJ

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Wenbin hinted that the country will soon recognise the Taliban regime

There has never been a diluting moment for Afghanistan, especially in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover some five months ago. Sadly, the country is reeling under a severe humanitarian crisis, with acute food shortages threatening the sustainability of children and creating an unprecedented economic downslide without any signs of improvement. But that's hardly surprising. Pakistan is a country that has been making maximum noise in an apparent bid to draw global attention to redress the problems in order to prove to the Taliban regime that it cares for it. However, how genuine the shed tears look is a bit dubious. Just to remain at the centre stage, Pakistan has been crying hoarse that Afghanistan needs a massive financial assistance but, at the same time, little emphasis is given on the Taliban's leadership to rein in domestic terror and improve the condition of women and children, or for that matter, to end the medieval excesses against the women for non 'compliance' of Sharia. Pakistan had even involved the OIC to bring some help but was conspicuously silent on prioritising an end to the ongoing oppression.

Interestingly, Prime Minister Imran Khan (PMIK) came out with an impractical plan, far from being feasible, reiterating the call to the international community (Jan



There's hardly been any focus on ending the woes of women and children in Afghanistan

23) for helping Afghanistan under the international doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Through this plea, the Pakistani PM wants the global community to fulfil the international commitments towards the Afghan people. However, this has immediately drawn a flak from within Pakistan itself. Former Pakistani foreign ministry spokesperson and erstwhile High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit summarily dismissed PMIK's appeal saying that R2P has nothing to do with the current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Insinuating the plans of the PM, Basit strongly asserted that people who are making such interpretations are frivolous and dangerous. Meanwhile, knowledgeable quarters say there is no international norm on part of the Global Centre for R2P that requires the international community

to provide help unless there is an end to mass-level atrocities, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crime against humanity. But that's not the case with the current regime in Afghanistan.

In fact, the Taliban-led Afghanistan government is struggling to survive in the absence of economic aid from any quarter, and the future is as grim as the present. Frustrated by this, the Afghan PM Mohd Hassan Akhund called upon (Jan 19) all the Muslim countries to be among the firsts to recognise Afghanistan in the wake of acute humanitarian crisis the country is afflicted with. Even worthwhile assistance from the OIC doesn't seem forthcoming. Interestingly again, China has evinced renewed interest through expressing its willingness to maintain communication with the Taliban

government in Kabul. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Wenbin also hinted that the country will soon recognise the Taliban regime. Such overtures and statements have come in the past too, but in substantial terms. There hasn't been much forward development, and the status quo more or less remains the same. In another related development on Afghanistan, for the first time since the Taliban took over on August 15, a Taliban delegation has been in Norway to press upon the Western countries to rush aid to Afghanistan for pulling it out from the woods in the wake of the worst economic situation prevailing currently. Taliban representative Shafuallah Azam met delegates from the EU, the UK, the US, France and Italy for release of funds. However, how much would it succeed is a million-dollar question. In the beginning, it has

been mentioned about Pakistan making hullabaloo over humanitarian crisis, keeping silence on acts of terror in Afghanistan at the same time. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in the meantime, has stepped up terror activities in Pakistan. It's linkages with the Taliban radicals operating in Afghanistan are well known. Emergence of ISIS(K) is another nightmare for Pakistan. There have been blasts in Lahore's crowded Anarkali Bazaar; other parts of Afghanistan have also not been spared with terror assaults. The nexus between terrorists on both sides of the borders needs to be broken for the good of all. Unless both the countries provide an assurance of a terror-free region to the international community, all appeals for humanitarian assistance, including R2P, will fall on deaf ears; such hollowed pleas are unlikely to work. This would be an exercise in futility. And, shedding crocodile tears for Afghanistan in the name of bailout packages will be a mere eye wash. The losers will be ordinary Afghans, especially the women and children, who continue to suffer without any fault. They are victims of the Taliban's terrorising acts. Is PMIK listening?

The writer is a retired IPS officer, a security analyst and a former National Security Advisor to the PM of Mauritius. Views expressed are personal

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In order to see, you have to stop being in the middle of the picture.

SRI AUROBINDO



Boris In the Dock

It goes to the credit of the British institution of democracy and the people's awareness of their democratic right to criticise, without fear or favour, the government of the day perceived to be indulging in wrongdoing. This is glaringly visible in the instance that two high level inquiries have begun into alleged breaches of CoVID-19 lockdown rules on gatherings in Downing Street - the Prime Minister's residence-cum-office - for which Prime Minister Boris Johnson is in the dock. By contrast, it also shows Indian democracy in a poor light as its democratic institutions, governments and ruling parties repeatedly flouted and continue to flout CoVID-19 protocols with impunity. The saddest part is that while Britain could put the searchlight on alleged wrongdoing when a miniscule number of people are believed to have gathered violating rules of social distancing at Downing Street during CoVID pandemic, India has witnessed such gatherings by hundreds of thousands in religious melas, elections and other political activities with the stated and unstated approval of the government and independent constitutional bodies. The powers that be did not even deign to take note of public criticism of these actions, let alone order any probe.

On the other hand, the probes instituted by the British Cabinet Office and thereafter the Metropolitan Police Services may decide the future of Johnson's tenure as Prime Minister. The fears that a cover-up operation may be mounted by Johnson and the findings of the probe watered down or doctored are not ruled out. But, the fact that the Prime Minister can be subjected to such public scrutiny under public and Opposition pressure for safeguarding the credibility of democratic institutions in Great Britain speaks volumes. Unfortunately, similar institutions are virtually in shambles in India as recent experiences have shown. The fall of the Election Commission seems to be the saddest.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick, who had earlier been ambivalent about any probe, finally announced officers were looking into "potential breaches of CoVID-19 regulations" in Downing Street since 2020. In fact, the investigation was launched after an internal inquiry led by civil servant Sue Gray passed information to the force. The PM, who understandably enough, maintained he did not believe he had broken the law, all the same welcomed the police probe which he asserted would clear the air.

But, the police inquiry is being interpreted as both a ploy to delay the publication of the report by Sue Gray and a confirmation of criminality of the parties held by Johnson. For months, the British PM has been facing criticism for reports of staff parties in Downing Street, some attended by him, when lockdown laws preventing the whole nation from holding birthday and other parties and gathering on social occasions were in force. The PM has, however, apologised for attending a "bring your own booze" event 20 May 2020, during the first lockdown, saying he thought it was a "work event." The Police Commissioner is still evasive about the number of parties being investigated by the force. Her statement that while breaches of regulations can result in fixed penalty notices, the police inquiry did not mean they would be issued "in every instance and to every person involved" does arouse suspicion about the real intent of the government. This is nothing but prejudging the case before the investigation is complete. Moving from conclusion to premise is a known tactic of whitewashing government or ministerial guilt. This has prompted Labour deputy leader Angela Rayner to renew calls for Johnson to resign and brand him as a "national distraction." Her argument that the police investigation itself points to "potential criminality" and "a truly damning reflection on our nation's very highest office" is not without substance. For, the terms of reference of the Cabinet Office's inquiry state if during the course of the work any evidence emerges of behaviour that is potentially a criminal offence, the matter will be referred to the police and the Cabinet Office's work may be paused. The moment the police announced its investigation the deputy Labour leader had no hesitation in telling the nation the Prime Minister has no reason to stay on.

The report of the team led by senior civil servant Sue Gray, was expected to be released last week, but that schedule got derailed when the Metropolitan Police said they had opened an investigation into some of the events to assess whether criminal offences had been committed. Officials are working on ways to publish Gray's report without compromising the criminal investigation. But there are fears that the report may be watered down to save Johnson. The publication of the report may also be delayed which will give Johnson some elbow room to try and save his tenure. The police, however, maintained it had received information it had requested from the Cabinet Office to support its investigation. Assuming that the probe would be prompt enough, the police claimed it had not delayed the Cabinet Office probe report since "the timing of its release is a matter for the Cabinet Office inquiry team." The government's stand is that since it is an independent investigation, the government is not privy to the details of the investigation or any of its content.

It could be a government subterfuge to appear to be innocent about the two probes into what is now known as "partygate" scandal. This may help Johnson claim not to have influenced the probes in any way should he be cleared of the charges or let off with a minor penalty such as fine. But, what stands out as an object lesson to democratically minded people across the world is that Britain has at least the freedom to make anyone, no matter whether he or she holds the highest public office, subject to investigation and face the consequences for alleged wrongdoing. Here in India, it is an oft repeated saying the "The law will take its own course" while, in reality, law on its own can never decide on which path to adopt.

WISDOM CORNER

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Sometimes we stare so long at a door that is closing that we see too late the one that is open.

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL

“

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“

The belief that one's own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions.

PAUL WATZLAWICK

WORDSWORTH

Rogue

Let's take first the basic meaning of rogue, an unprincipled or dishonest man. This can be traced back to the sixteenth century, to a thieves' cant that invented a series of words for categories of villains. The rogue was said to belong to the Fourth Order of Canters and was a beggar, idle vagrant or vagabond. By Shakespeare's day it had become well established in standard English with a meaning much as today's, and had already developed a playful sense as a term of mild reproach. It's sometimes suggested that it was originally a Celtic word, and the Breton rog, haughty, is put in evidence (though that word is probably not the direct source, just its cousin); the related French word rogue is also suggested as an possible origin. But such theories have been superseded by a better understanding of the roots of cant. It seems it comes from a slang term roger, a beggar who pretended to be a poor university student in order to play on people's feelings. This can be traced to the Latin rogare, to ask (and so was said with a hard g, not like the proper name). Now to the elephants. There is a specific sense of rogue that refers to a solitary elephant that is savage or destructive. This can't be the source of our word, since it's only recorded in the nineteenth century, long after rogue had become part of the language. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests this sense was actually based on the existing meaning of rogue, perhaps influenced by the Sinhalese hora or sora, a thief.

FOCUS IDEOLOGY

THE COSTS OF CLOSED MINDS



While there are exceptions, hyper-nationalism is usually disastrous for an economy in the long run. At a time when policymakers are confronting an ongoing public-health crisis, and in some cases the threat of violent turmoil, the economies that succeed will be those whose leaders keep a clear head

This year began amid wide-spread despondency about the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic and the struggling global economy, as well as premonitions of heightened political conflict in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and even the United States. True, there is now some hope that the Omicron variant may be the pandemic's last hurrah. But troubling questions remain about the economic and political legacy of the crisis.

The World Bank's latest biannual Global Economic Prospects report, released last week, points to some possible answers. Produced by a team of talented economists, the report is one of the best summaries of the current outlook for the world economy. And while the report uses the diplomatic language of multilateral organisations, it nonetheless packs a powerful cautionary punch.

For starters, the World Bank forecasts that global economic growth will slow to 4.1% in 2022, from 5.5% last year. With debt burdens rising, supply-chain bottlenecks impeding the flow of goods and services, and inflation picking up, governments are losing the capacity to provide further fiscal support. The report warns that the surge in debt caused by countries trying to soften the "pandemic-induced global recession" means that several economies are now "at high risk of debt distress." Some may need relief.

The report also predicts that energy prices, which surged in the second half of 2021, will increase further – and by more than the World Bank was projecting six months ago.

Finally, the report's tables of summary statistics contain a lot of interesting information – in particular, data on major economies' recent GDP growth and forecasts for the next two years. The fastest-growing economies in 2021 were Argentina, Turkey and India, which expanded by 10%, 9.5%, and 8.3%, respectively. But growth after a crash

needs to be interpreted carefully. Much of last year's growth merely reflected the depth of the pandemic-induced downturn of 2020, as economies climbed back toward their earlier GDP level. In 2020, Argentina's economy contracted by 9.9% and India's by 7.3% – making them, along with Mexico, the worst-performing major economies that year.

Usually, emerging market and developing economies, helped by their lower base, grow faster than advanced economies. But, according to Global Economic Prospects, the prognosis for EMDEs through the end of 2023 is worse than for advanced economies, because EMDEs have limited policy space to provide additional support and face greater risk of hard landings. Moreover, the pace of recovery is likely to vary significantly between countries. Once the dust settles after the current turmoil, therefore, there will most probably be new winners and losers.

One of the main reasons for the uneven recovery has more to do with politics than economics.

From advanced economies such as the United States to EMDEs like Brazil, support for aggressive nationalism has grown sharply in recent years. This is bound to play a major role in determining how these economies perform.

While there are exceptions, hyper-nationalism is usually disastrous for an economy in the long run. This stands to reason, because strident nationalism leads to bloated egos and blurry thinking. Countries in its grip try to become self-sufficient by raising barriers to trade, capital, and ideas from elsewhere.

A striking historical example is Argentina, which was among the world's fastest-growing economies during the early decades of the twentieth century and was widely expected to overtake the US. That changed in 1930, when a military coup resulted in the installation of the hyper-nationalist Lieutenant General José Félix Uriburu as president. Tariffs subsequently rose, together with barriers to immigration. Argentina's open economy, now closed to the world, soon stagnated, and the US surged

ahead.

The lesson seems even more relevant today. In a globalised world, with new ideas and research emerging everywhere, countries that succumb to nationalist solipsism and pull down their economies' and societies' shutters will be anything but great.

One of the remarkable achievements of post-independence India was that its founding fathers and early thinkers, like the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the author Rabindranath Tagore, were passionate advocates of openness to the world of ideas. They stood out, not just in India but globally, for their commitment to absorbing the best, from wherever it or they came, and to upholding a common human identity.

I remember a friend of my father's, who visited us regularly and held forth on the need for more strident nationalism. He was critical of Indian thinkers who, while opposing Western colonialism, argued that India must keep its doors open to the best of the West – in science, literature, and philosophy. One day, angry at his failure to persuade us, he thundered, "My motto is: the West does not follow us, so we must not follow the West."

I was in elementary school, but even then, I could see that his aggressive nationalism had blurred his thinking into adopting a motto that contradicted itself. At a time when policymakers are confronting an ongoing public-health crisis, and in some cases the threat of violent turmoil, countries that succumb to hyper-nationalism lay the foundations of their own failure.

The writer, a former Chief Economist of the World Bank and Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India, is Professor of Economics at Cornell University and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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SPECTRUM UNION BUDGET

Time to focus on job-creation



THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE ROSE TO A FOUR-MONTH HIGH TO 7.9 PER CENT IN DECEMBER 2021

Shivaji Sarkar

It may be imperative on Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to refocus the Union Budget from possible populism, an election-time compulsion, to professionalism, creating jobs everywhere. The trigger should be two different recent incidents, tragic and problematic.

One, a family of four from Gujarat chasing 'better' jobs freezes to death in the US. The other is the growing protests over railway jobs in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh for roughly 40,000 vacancies—a grim reminder of the state of India's job market. Let not Bihar and UP emerge as ticking social bombs for the sheer size of the unemployed.

The unemployment rate rose to a four-month high to 7.9 per cent in December 2021. It stood at 7 per cent in November last year and 9.1 per cent in December 2020. But jobs were shrinking even before that in 2019 and earlier: The World Bank says that India has the highest total unemployment rate at 21.01 per cent for the 15-24 year-old population.

The NSSO's 2017-18 data stress is that actually the job situation is grimmer. The overall rate of open unemployment (as opposed to under-employment or disguised unemployment) had risen sharply after 2011-12. That has been proven in the NSSO numbers. The 2017-18

unofficially leaked NSSO data revealed that the unemployment rate was never over 2.6% between 1977-78 and 2011-12. But it had jumped to 6.1 per cent in 2017-18. Now it touches 9 plus per cent.

The situation has been aggravating and the country is resorting to welfarism. The Narendra Modi government has shown enough empathy with free food dole and MGNREGA jobs to keep the people afloat. Now it has to move beyond welfarism doles so that the country takes a leap to better life. The previous Budgets came up with entrepreneurship, Skill India, MUDRA and similar other schemes. These did not fulfill the objectives. Overall jobs remain scarce and low paid. The Gujarati family was apparently well off with a teacher's job and sundry other chores. It could pay \$2.5 lakh for their dream travel through agents for illegal entry to the US. What sparked them like many Gujaratis and Punjabis rushing to El Dorado may be the flashy 'lifestyle'.

What triggered the crisis in Bihar and UP is lack of jobs. Once private sector jobs were considered well-paid. The Seventh Pay Commission changed that. Now for years the corporates, including the IT sector, are not creating the required number of jobs. And jobs fetch lower wages and remain insecure. Interestingly, during Atal Behari

Vajpayee's NDA-I six crore jobs were created. There is a change. Because of economic slowdown during the past many years manufacturing has suffered. The index for industrial production remains at a low. Educational qualifications have improved causing an aspirational problem. There were 70 million such persons in 2004-05 but increased to 115.6 million by 2017-18. They are growing by about 5 million a year; according to Santosh Mehrotra, Professor of Economics, Centre for Labour: He says what is most worrying is that manufacturing jobs actually fell in absolute terms from 58.9 million in 2011-12 to 48.3 million in 2015-16, a whopping 10.6 million over a mere four-year period.

Indeed, the job strategy has to change. An interesting aspect is that because of the Modi government's less interference in PSU operations, even in the difficult COVID times 171 PSUs continued to have good profits despite better salary structure. This indicates that proper salaries could be paid even during crisis period and profits could be sustained. It also calls for reviewing the PSU disinvestment policy. The world has seen the failure of the global private sector for unethical practices since 2007-08 Lehman meltdown.

The Finance Minister may open a new leaf. India has thrived with

a mixed economy. The PSUs have the capacity to start a competitive economy that the private sector abhors. No national economy can thrive without competition within. Monopolised private or public sector would cause inbreeding, leading to poor performance. She has to be innovative enough to help create rural farm and non-farm jobs that make the rural economy viable and lifestyle attractive to stem rural migration.

Sitharaman has to observe global practices, particularly sharp Chinese economic policies, European backlash against China and possible escalation of Western sanctions against Russia. These would be important to create India-centric policies to increase jobs in different sectors.

Private sector also has a tendency to employ less and pay less. If jobs are to be a priority this policy has to be given up. The PSUs can deliver here creating a situation where private sector also would have to pay just wages, may be to their dislike. The FM has to have sharp job-creation strategy to initiate the steps to boost urban, rural, private and public employment. This helps India accelerate its growth pace with larger participation of the population and become the cynosure of the new world economy.

INFA

Be wary of future variants

Sir, This refers to "Risk persists despite signs of plateau in India: WHO," Orissa POST, January 30. The WHO's caution to India over plateauing of the COVID cases is very appropriate, in fact, no country in the world is yet out of woods. A weary world wonders whether there will be an end to the pandemic this year. The misconceived optimism that the virus will be vanquished by vaccines in 2021 vanished amidst the assault of variants. The virus has surprised us all with its adaptive ability to evade vaccines by springing new variants and its agility in picking up speed of transmission as it moves to a new leg in that relay race. Further, we recognise that the levels of immunity and susceptibility vary across the world and the experience of the pandemic may differ among countries over the course of the year, even if there is no new variant of concern. As far as India is concerned, we have some reasons to feel cautiously optimistic and some others to watch the future with concern. The optimism springs from the fact that many who weathered the Delta storm and the large number who have been fully vaccinated are likely to experience relatively mild, non-life threatening illness, if infected. In contrast to this optimistic scenario, there are potential threats that we must be wary of. A new variant may arise within the country, in unvaccinated persons who experience severe and prolonged disease.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, BANGALORE

End discrimination

Sir, World Leprosy Day is observed January 30 every year on the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi to raise awareness on the disease and call for an end to social discrimination against people suffering from leprosy. This year the day was celebrated with the theme "United for Dignity". Each year around 200,000 new cases of leprosy are reported globally. India is home to the world's highest number of leprosy patients. On an average, 57 people per 10 lakh population in India are diagnosed with the disease. Today an effective treatment exists in the form of multidrug therapy, and with early detection and treatment, the disease can be cured without complications. Many people across the globe continue to suffer from this curable disease due to a lack of medical care. The day focuses mainly on creating awareness among the public about this ancient disease and provides a platform for creating an inclusive society that treats the afflicted with the respect they deserve.

Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, HYDERABAD

Letters

TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa POST are most welcome to contribute letters (200 words), articles and columns (between 750-1250 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send in their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: edit@orissapost.com



OrissaPOST

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Editorial Summit Focus India's role laudable

THERE are several takeaways from the first-ever summit involving India and five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The event, held to commemorate 30 years of the establishment of India's diplomatic relations with these nations, witnessed unanimity on taking cooperation to the next level for boosting regional connectivity and security. The leaders agreed on considerably enhancing India-Central Asia trade, which is only about \$2 billion at present, nowhere near China's over \$40 billion. PM Narendra Modi and the five Presidents decided to set up a joint working group on Afghanistan, with a broad consensus emerge on issues such as combating terrorism and drug trafficking. New Delhi's Central Asian outreach assumes significance amid China's efforts to strengthen ties with these nations that are part of the eight-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which also includes India. What gives Beijing a geopolitical edge is the fact that it shares borders with three of the five countries. Two days before the India summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping interacted with Central Asian leaders and announced an assistance of \$500 million to support livelihood programmes in these former Soviet bloc countries. He also listed several big projects of strategic importance that had been completed, including the China-Central Asia natural gas pipeline, the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Tajikistan expressway. In a bid to counter the Chinese challenge, India has extended a \$1-billion line of credit for infrastructure development projects and offered to provide more training slots and scholarships to meet the requirements of Central Asian countries. India was among the first countries to recognise the Central Asian Republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago. Delhi, which had privileged access to Soviet Central Asia thanks to its special relationship with Moscow during the Cold War, hoped for a quick flowering of ties. Despite the much celebrated historical and civilisational relationship between India and Central Asia and the rekindled geopolitical romance, Delhi has struggled to build a productive relationship. Pakistan's refusal to give overland trade and transit facilities to India and the political instability in Afghanistan have meant the natural routes between India and Central Asia have remained blocked. The two sides have now set up a joint working group that will intensify the effort to use Iran's Chabahar port to promote "free movement of goods and services between India and Central Asia". Complementing the focus on overland connectivity is the emphasis on security.

New Delhi would have to go the extra mile on the diplomatic and economic fronts to ensure that these countries remain all-weather allies, even as Russia is not averse to making decisive interventions in the region. After the recent unrest in Kazakhstan, Russia sent troops there as part of a peacekeeping mission to restore order, while China firmly backed the beleaguered nation's efforts to curb violence. India needs to adopt a proactive approach to further its interests and make its presence felt in the extended neighborhood.

The Price of Hunger

Raising nutritional standards of Indians as a whole is a goal that should be followed on a mission mode, suggests Ramesh Chandra Misra

RECENT reports mention that replying to the questions of the Apex Court about hunger death the Ministry of Consumer Affairs submitted that, "thanks to the progress made by the nation since independence and the comprehensive policies and steps taken by both Central and State Governments, there have been no starvation deaths in the country during recent times, even during adverse situations like the pandemic." The Court wanted to get some updated information about starvation deaths by the Union Government without relying on reports of previous years. This was obviously with reference to the period of the Covid-19 pandemic from the year 2020, when apprehensions about starvation deaths had emerged. The contention of the Government was that the states had not submitted any reports about starvation death. But the Government also admitted that malnutrition does exist, and there were 131 food related programmes run by the Government to mitigate the situation. The Court passed direction to formulate community kitchen scheme in consultation with State Governments to provide urgent relief to people facing the dire prospect of starvation. That in independent India we have been able to prevent a famine is certainly a source of some consolation. In the year 1943, the calamitous Bengal famine was a serious blot on colonial rule. It was alleged that Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister on account of his racial prejudice did not send food grains to Bengal. This resulted in colossal loss of life. Madhusree Mukherjee in her book, 'Churchill's Secret War' has given a full account of colonists' apathetic and inhuman attitude. In the Orissa famine of 1866, known as Na Anka Durbhiksha colonial rulers including T.E. Ravenshaw the fabled Commissioner were also accused of neglect in supplying rice. In 1947, the resources of the independent nation were inadequate, but the leaders of the Republic pursued welfare policies to strengthen food entitlements of the people. India was importing food grains at a point of time, but the Green Revolution helped in the enhancement of food production. The greater challenge was to ensure even distribution through a public distribution system and also to empower the poor with good earning capacity.

In course of time the Governments put in policies for subsidised and free grain distribution programmes, supplementary nutrition programmes and mid-day meal schemes. Even though there was criticism about economic viability of subsidy schemes and competitive populism among states one cannot deny that starvation was largely avoided. The



Hunger or even malnutrition will rob talented individuals of their creative urge and in some egregious cases put them on road to criminal behaviour.

Government of Odisha has submitted to the Apex Court that there have been recently no starvation deaths in the state. On the other hand, the State Government has informed that 1429 children less than 5 years of age have been victims of malnutrition. The overall picture is that the Governments have denied death due to hunger but have admitted the existence of malnutrition which one can describe as slow death.

Considerable attention has been bestowed on the Global Hunger Report 2021 which ranked India at 101 out of 116 countries falling in the category of having a serious hunger situation. Countries having less per capita income are better placed in comparison to India. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) has been refuted by the Government on the ground that it is based on unscientific methodology and is removed from ground reality. The GHI is based on four indicators i.e., percentage of undernourished (PoU) in the population, percentage of children under 5 years who suffer from wasting, percentage of children under 5 years who suffer from stunting and percentage of children who die before the age of 5 years. The basis for preparing the index is the PoU data regularly put up by the FAO. It is not intended to go into the related debates. It is however to be admitted that we do have a hunger problem, even if we prefer to see this as a matter of malnutrition. The year 2021

was a particularly difficult year because of the pandemic. However, from year-to-year India ranks low in the GHI indicating a very disturbing situation. There is a sharp dissonance between India's performance measured in terms of income on the one hand and the progress of living standards involving child nourishment, longevity, health security and literacy on the other. Amartya Sen the Nobel Laureate economist whose economics has centred around human welfare observed in his book, 'An Uncertain Glory' (2013) that there has been very little improvement in India's nutrition indicators during the last twenty years or so. Therefore, the importance of enhancing nutritional status must not be lost sight of in our obsession for economic growth. Fighting malnutrition is not just about saving lives. It is in the long run about building healthy manpower for future generations. The price of hunger and malnutrition is very high for the society for it nips the potential of several lives in the bud. There is a wonderful line in Sanskrit, "Anna chinta chamatkara katara kavita kutaha". It means that when the pangs of hunger are wrenching your stomach you cannot write poetry. Hunger or even malnutrition will rob talented individuals of their creative urge and in some egregious cases put them on road to criminal behaviour. 'Bubhukshitah kim na karoti papam', meaning, what sins the hungry may not be driven to.

The Constitution of India in Article 47 has stipulated that the state shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and improvement of public health as among its primary duties. This is one of the directive principles of state policy. When children do not get nutritional supplements in their food, when adults do not get to eat wholesome food on a regular basis the destiny of the nation is threatened not merely today but for many years to come. The subsidised grain and free grain programmes of the Government have prevented any precipitous decline in the hunger situation. But since the subject requires a sharper focus, raising nutritional standards of Indians as a whole is a goal that should be followed on a mission mode.

The writer is a former Secretary to the Government of India.

Kazakhstan's bitcoin 'paradise' may be losing its lustre

KAZAKHSTAN may no longer be the bitcoin sanctuary it once was, according to some big miners who are looking to leave the global crypto hub following internet shutdowns recently that compounded fears about tightening regulation.

The government web shutdowns during an explosion of unrest in the country, the world's second-largest centre for mining, caused bitcoin's global computing power to drop around 13% as data centres used to produce the cryptocurrency were knocked offline.

Alan Dorjiev of the National Association of Blockchain and Data Center Industry in Kazakhstan, which represents 80% of legal mining companies in the country, said most crypto producers were now back online.

Yet the resumption of operations may belie problems to come for the fast-growing cryptocurrency industry, according to four major miners interviewed by Reuters, with some saying they or their clients may look for other countries to operate in.

The internet outage compounded growing concerns about the stability and prospects of the business as tighter government oversight looms, the miners said.

Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies are "mined" by powerful computers that compete against others hooked up to a global network to solve complex mathematical puzzles.

Vincent Liu, a miner who moved operations to Kazakhstan from China to take advantage of the country's cheap power, said the changing environment had led him to look at shifting operations to North America or Russia.

"Two or three years earlier, we called Kazakhstan a paradise of the mining industry because of the stable political environment and stable electricity," said Liu.

Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies are "mined" by powerful computers that compete against others hooked up to a global network to solve complex mathematical puzzles. The process guzzles electricity and is often powered by fossil fuels.

Kazakhstan became the world's No.2 centre for bitcoin mining after the United States last year, attracting an influx of miners and data centre bookings from former global leader China after a crackdown on the industry by Beijing.

In August, Kazakhstan accounted for 18% of the global "hashrate" - crypto jargon for the amount of computing power being used by computers connected to the bitcoin network. That was up from 8% in April, before Chinese miners shifted machines and bought capacity at Kazakh data centres.

Kazakhstan's crypto mining farms are mostly powered by aging coal plants, which are a headache for authorities as they seek to decarbonise the economy. Power-hungry miners have forced the former Soviet state to import electricity and ration domestic supplies.

The government is now looking at how to tax and regulate the largely underground and foreign-owned industry. It said last year it planned to crack down on unregistered "grey" miners who it estimates might be consuming twice as much power as the "white" or officially registered ones.

Din-mukhammed Matkenov, co-founder of crypto miner BTC KZ, said an influx of Chinese miners had worsened problems for domestic miners by gobbling up power. Clients may look to move to the United States and Russia, he said.

"We think that the development and stability of mining industry in Kazakhstan is in danger," said Matkenov, whose firm has three data centres in Ekibastuz, a city in northern Kazakhstan, running over 30,000 mining rigs. Patchy power supply has complicated the company's business, he added.

"It is very unstable and really hard to predict the profits to pay the electricity bill and salaries. At the moment we are close to being bankrupt and clients are trying to find other countries where they can relocate to with a more stable governmental ruling."

Still, Kazakhstan's relatively low taxes, labour costs and equipment still offer advantages, the four miners said. Power costs a minimum of \$0.03-\$0.04 per kilowatt, Matkenov said, similar to the United States and lower than \$0.05 in Russia. —Agency

With Budget due on Tuesday and FII as sellers, expect market volatility to remain

ARUN KEJRIWAL

MARKETS continued to remain volatile and unsure of which direction they should move. Post the FED meeting what did become clear was the fact that interest rates would rise in March and that the rate of increase would be more than the customary 25 basis points. Various brokerage houses internationally have anticipated that there could be as many as 4-5 rate hikes in 2022. How many will finally happen is anybody's guess but the fact that easy money will become dearer is a certainty. This is probably why the FII's have been big sellers in Indian markets and are adjusting their portfolio ahead of the new stance that would happen post the tightening.

Markets in India rose on one day and fell on three days in a four-day trading week. BSE SENSEX lost 1,836.95 points to close at 57,200.23 points while NIFTY lost 515.20 points to close at 17,101.95 points.

January futures expired with minor losses of 93.80 points at 17,110.15 points. What is worth noting is the fact that during the month, the high registered on NIFTY was 18,350 points. At this level, the series would have been higher by 1,240 points against a loss of 93.80 points that the series ended at.

The week ahead sees the Union Budget being presented on Tuesday. While there are not too many expectations from the budget as of now, one can only speculate on the possible outcome. The government has its options cut out considering the fact that it has been Covid and its after-effects for almost 22 months now. Economy has been showing signs of being resilient and economic indicators point to the fact that there is a sharp bounce back in the same. What new impetus can be given at this point to kick-start the economy further will need wild imagination as well. On the positive side, one can be sure that with the mega IPO from LIC expected shortly, may curb the government from doing any tinkering which may affect stock markets negatively. At the same time elections to five states would be held in the next 10-36 days and this would ensure that any measures which would hurt the masses would not happen.

One may expect measures to increase government spending on

Traders are currently scared of having overnight positions and prefer squaring off at the end of day. In such a scenario, expect markets to have a clearer path and direction when trading begins on Wednesday in the Indian markets.

infrastructure. In line with this the proposal which has been discussed for sometime now where there may be incentives for investing in approved government schemes involved in infrastructure may finally see light this year.

In primary market news, the IPO from Adani Wilmar Limited to raise Rs 3,600 crore has completed two of the three days for which the IPO is open. The issue price band is Rs 218-230 and is subscribed 1.19 times so far.

The offer for sale from AGS Transact Limited which had tapped the capital markets with its issue would be listed on Monday. The price band was Rs 166-175, and the issue was subscribed 7.99 times.

Of the 17 recently listed shares since 18th November, 5 shares are trading below their issue price. Last week in particular, 16 of the 17 companies lost ground. The shares on the receiving side were those from the tech platforms and they lost considerable ground with many of them making new 52-week lows. SEBI is insisting with many of these loss-making tech companies who have filed their DRHP's and are looking to tap the markets with the RHP, to submit latest accounts updated as of 31st December. This has happened after the way many of these companies have fared on the markets and the way they raised money for acquisitions which has since been revised.

Coming to the markets in the coming week, it's a new series but has the budget to be presented on Tuesday. Global markets have just witnessed an extreme bout of enhanced volatility and still seem to be reeling under it. Expect the same to continue. In India, FIIs have been continuously selling and adding to the pressure that markets are facing. With the budget due on Tuesday, markets would remain volatile without a doubt. On the positive side, if nothing majorly negative for the markets happens, we have a possibility for a small rise happening. Traders are currently scared of having overnight positions and prefer squaring off at the end of day. In such a scenario, expect markets to have a clearer path and direction when trading begins on Wednesday in the Indian markets.

Infant deaths from respiratory virus much higher than thought: Study

NEARLY one in 10 of all deceased infants under six months were infected with Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), according to a study.

RSV is a common virus that produces cold-like symptoms and is merely a nuisance for the vast majority of people who contract it. But for babies -- especially infants in low- and middle-income countries who lack adequate access to medical care -- the virus can be fatal.

Prior research has estimated that about 120,000 infants die from RSV each year, but this figure is based on modelling conducted in hospital-based settings and does not account for RSV deaths that occur in the community, which are not captured in hospital-based surveillance.

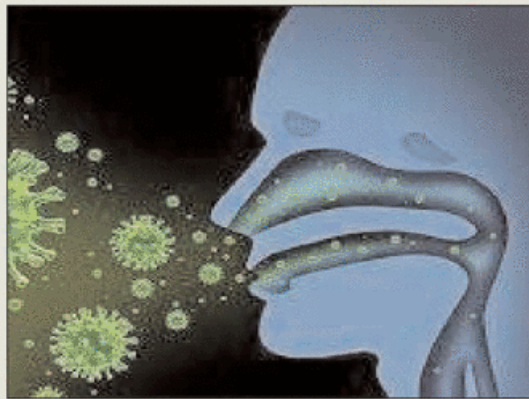
In the new study led by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers have found that the true burden of RSV infant mortality is substantially higher than what was previously believed.

The team used systematic surveillance to measure the presence of RSV among infants who died in medical facilities or in the community. The findings, published in the journal The Lancet Global Health, showed that the virus was present in 7 to 9 per cent of infants under 6 months old and was primarily concentrated in infants under 3 months old.

Notably, two-thirds of these deaths occurred in the community -- that is, among infants who never received medical care in a hospital and were overlooked in previous facility-based surveillance.

"The concentration of deaths in young infants less than 3 months old is

important for two main reasons," said the study's principal investigator Christopher Gill, associate professor of



global health at BUSPH.

"First, it is a reminder that these very young infants with very small airways are at particular risk of RSV infections anatomically. Second, both of the proposed new tools to prevent RSV infections -- maternal vaccinations and infant monoclonal antibodies -- will be most effective immediately after birth and could wane after," Gill added.

The researchers enrolled 2,286 deceased infants, representing almost 80 percent of infant deaths in Lusaka from August 2017 to August 2020.

The study showed that RSV directly caused at least 2.8 per cent of all infant deaths, and 4.7 per cent of all infant deaths outside of hospitals. The majority of these deaths were seasonal, occurring in the first half of the year, and were concentrated in the most impoverished areas.

Preventative measures such as RSV vaccination of mothers who could pass on antibodies to her baby would also effectively be the most effective strategy to reduce infant mortality from the virus, the researchers said. There is currently no approved vaccine for RSV, but trials are underway. —IANS



TheHitavada

They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three
Lowell

Nakshatra Uttarahadha 21H 57M
Moon Makar (Rajandekar Panchang)
Paush Krishna Paksha Tithi Chaturdashi 14H 19M
Muslim Jamadilakhar 27th Hijree 1443

RANJI RELIEF

INDIA'S domestic cricketers have heaved a huge sigh of relief after the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) spelt out its plans to hold the Ranji Trophy in two phases from February. The announcement has come as a lifeline to a throng of cricketers whose livelihood depends upon domestic matches. They were in a state of despair since March 2020 when the coronavirus halted sporting activities across the world. For the first time in 2021, the BCCI had to cancel its premier tournament triggering a wave of despondency among hundreds of cricketers who ply their trade on the circuit. The BCCI deserves all compliments for finding a window, though staggered, for the most-awaited domestic tournament.

After losing one full year to the pandemic, domestic cricketers had geared up for a restart in 2021 before the Delta and Omicron variants of the virus barged in to stop play. It was a bodyblow for the cricketers as Ranji Trophy meant a world for them and the biggest opportunity to break into the national team or 'A' and 'Emerging' teams. The tournament assumes great importance in the Indian cricket ecosystem as it acts as the perfect feeder line for the senior teams. Halting the tournament meant putting many promising careers on hold for one full year.

Already suffering a depressing phase due to cancellation of Ranji Trophy in 2021, the domestic players would have been left in the lurch had the tournament not been held in this season. The Ranji Trophy has a special place in a cricketer's life. Not only the players but a lot many other people are dependent on the tournament. Scorers, umpires, statisticians, broadcasters and also groundsman make an integral part of the tournament as it is the only source of income for many. All these things had made it imperative for the BCCI to devise a plan to hold the tournament by adhering to the health protocols needed for a mass event. The Board mandarins had worked overtime to find a window for the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL) and it was incumbent upon them to give deserving respect to red-ball cricket. Now that they have found dates for the Ranji Trophy, it is their moral duty to see to it that the tournament is held at any cost. The domestic players need it for survival.

While congratulations are due for the BCCI for this decision, the bosses need to remind themselves that they are patrons of women's cricket too. When all mechanism is working with alacrity for IPL and Ranji Trophy, there is no word about holding a similar tournament for women. The eves are on the sidelines since long when pandemic disrupted their cricketing schedule. Barring a few limited overs games, there is no major tournament for the women making them a pariah in the cricketing system. This reality should not be missed on M/s Sourav Ganguly and Co. even as they rack their brains to fit in the IPL to a safe venue.

For long, women have been meted secondary treatment in the ecosystem despite being an affiliate of the BCCI. Hardly a few get chance to play top leagues like the Big Bash in Australia. Even after much noise about starting women's IPL, precious little has been done on that front. If a top sporting body like the BCCI, too, indulges in gender bias, then it can have a debilitating effect on women's cricket in the country.

They Said It...

■ There's a bunch of reasons. I do feel my recovery is taking longer and considering my son is three-years-old, I do feel I am putting him at risk by travelling so much with him. Unfortunately, the pandemic is making us take certain decisions. Also, my body is wearing down.

SANIA MIRZA, 35-yr-old tennis star announcing her retirement at end of 2022 season.

■ At a time when the entire nation is marking the 125th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, I am glad that his grand statue, made of granite, will be installed at India Gate.

This would be a symbol of India's indebtedness to him...

NARENDRA MODI, Prime Minister before unveiling the hologram statue on January 23rd, Netaji's birth anniversary.

■ A 69-year-old mistake started through the wrong step of nationalisation of an airline that actually belonged to the private sector has been corrected. Prime Minister

Modi believes that Government should not be there to do business but rather create environment to support enterprises and businesses. This transaction can only be completed because of his vision and guidance.

JYOTIRADITYA SCINDIA, Union Civil Aviation Minister on Government formally handing over Air India to the Tata Group.

■ Right now, all you think of is how best to stay safe. Airports have become hotspots for the virus and with so many people across the country getting infected, I couldn't risk sitting in a flight in a closed-doors environment and decided to travel via road for a cricket camp recently.

MITHALI RAJ, Indian cricketer and the Test and ODI captain of women's national cricket team on the pandemic.

■ Biden is treating the American public like fools. Biden is a damp socks puppet in human form.

ELON MUSK, American billionaire slamming US President Joe Biden after the latter left out the name of Tesla in a post that talked about the future of electric vehicles in America. The US President met with executives from rival car companies General Motors and Ford Motor, but not Tesla.



CURRENT TRENDS IN LAW

By ADV. R. S. AGRAWAL

■ The impugned common judgement and order passed by the HC insofar as directing the State for 3% reservation for sports persons and/or provide for a sports quota of 3% in the Government Medical/Dental Colleges is unsustainable and the same deserves to be quashed and set aside. In case of Medical/Dental Colleges in the State of Punjab, the same has been quashed and set aside by the Supreme Court with the observation that no writ of mandamus could have been issued by the High Court.

IN THE judgement of the case – The State of Punjab v. Anshika Goyal and others, delivered on January 25, 2022, Justices M.R. Shah and B.V. Nagarathna, at the Supreme Court, have quashed and set aside the direction issued by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, to provide for a sports quota of 3% in Government Medical/Dental Colleges in the State of Punjab with the observation that no such writ of mandamus could have been issued by the High Court.

A bunch of writ petitions came to be filed before the HC for the academic year 2019-20 challenging the notification for (i) not providing reservation for sports persons, children/grand children of terrorist affected persons and Sikh riot affected persons insofar as the management quota seats in private institutes are concerned; and (ii) for providing 1% reservation for sports persons insofar as the Government Medical/Dental Colleges as well as the private institutes, instead of 3% reservation for sports persons.

By the impugned judgement and order, the HC has allowed the said writ petitions, directing the State Government to issue a fresh notification providing for one p.c. quota/reservation for children/grandchildren of terrorist affected and Sikh riot-affected persons in all private unaided non-minority Medical/Dental Institutions in the State of Punjab. This reservation/quota shall apply to management quota seats as well.

Dissatisfied and aggrieved State Government has filed these appeals challenging the impugned common judgement and order passed by the HC in issuing the said direction, particularly directing it to issue a fresh notification providing for reservation/quota for sports persons, children and grand children of terrorist affected and riot-affected Sikhs persons in all private unaided non-minority Medical Dental Institutions in the State and directing to provide for a sports quota of 3% (instead of 1% as fixed by the State Government) in Government Medical/Dental Colleges.

As far as the HC's direction to provide for 1% reservation/quota for children and grand children of terrorist and riot affected Sikhs is concerned, according to the HC, the said issue has

become academic, firstly on the ground that the issue before the HC and even before the SC was/is for the academic year 2019-20. Pursuant to the to the interim order passed by the SC, admissions for the year 2019-20 are already given as per the judgement of the HC except providing 3% per cent reservation/quota for sports persons and applying 1% reservation.

Secondly, the State has now already provided the reservation/quota for sports persons and children and grand children of the already mentioned categories even with respect to admissions in the private institutes for the academic year 2021-22. Therefore, the first issue, whether the HC was right in issuing direction to the State to issue a fresh notification providing for 1% reservation/quota has become academic and therefore, the Court disposed of these appeals keeping the question of law open.

As the admissions were given for the academic year 2019-20, pursuant to the interim order passed by the SC, it has directed that the said admissions shall not be disturbed/affected. However, the SC has observed that the Court has not entered into and/or considered any other dispute including whether the admissions were made on the basis of merit or not. If anybody has any individual grievance, in that case, it will be open for the aggrieved person to take recourse to law.

Applying the law laid down by the SC in its decisions of the cases - Gulshan Prakash v. State of Haryana-(2010) 1 SCC 477 (para 27); C-MD Central Bank of India v. Central Bank of India SC/ST Employees Welfare Association –(2015) 12 SCC 308 (para 26); Suresh Chandra Gautam v. State of UP – (2016) 11 SCC 113 (para 49); and Mukesh Kumar v. State of Uttar Pradesh- (2020) 3 SCC 1 (paras 18 and 19) to the facts of this case, the Supreme Court has been of the opinion that the HC has committed a grave error in issuing a writ of mandamus and directing the State Government to provide for 3% reservation/quota for sports persons instead of 1% as provided by the State Government.

A conscious policy decision was taken by the State Government to provide for 1% reservation/quota for sports persons. A specific order dated July 25, 2019 was also issued by the State Government. Therefore, the HC has

Not Russia, but US is invading Ukraine

WHILE major media in the US, both conservative and liberal, have everyone on edge waiting for a Russian “invasion” of Ukraine, they ignore the reality that the US has already “invaded” not just Ukraine but numerous other countries in the region. The Biden White House revealed on Monday that as many as 50,000 US troops, along with warplanes, tanks, and missiles, could be on their way to Eastern Europe and announced on Tuesday morning that 8,500 US troops are now on “high alert” for deployment to the region.

No mention was made with those announcements, however, of the fact that thousands of US troops and plenty of offensive US weapons are already stationed in Eastern Europe, many positioned right along the borders of the Russian Federation.

France, Denmark, and the Netherlands, under pressure from the US and NATO, have announced their own deployment of troops and weapons to Eastern Europe.

Poland, formerly a member of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact alliance, already has some 5,000 US troops stationed within its borders, not to mention a host of US weapons accompanying those deployments. A similar number of US troops and weapons are stationed in the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. They have been staging and continue to stage manoeuvres near the Russian border.

US troops numbering at least in the hundreds are stationed inside Ukraine, around the city of Lvov, where they are

said to be “advising” Ukrainian troops. Although it is known US troops are already inside Ukraine, the number that could be positioned in the eastern part of the country near the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, populated mostly by ethnic Russians, is unclear. Huge numbers of Ukrainian troops, many of them members of fascist organisations, are already engaged in periodic fighting along the borders of the ethnically Russian regions.

US military planes are flying inside Ukraine, criss-crossing the skies over that country in a dangerous game. Also flying in Ukrainian airspace and near Russian airspace along the borders are US spy planes that listen to any and all military and other ground communications. So far, those planes have picked up no indication that the Russians are beginning a ground invasion of Ukraine. The existence of the spy planes and the job they are doing were admitted to Monday even by the *New York Times*, a consistent supporter of the war hysteria over Ukraine.

In another warlike move, the United States, the UK, and Canada have ordered personnel out of their embassies in Kiev. The Ukrainian Government itself objected to this move, calling it “premature.” The Ukrainians say there actually has been no change in the security situation they are facing since Russian troops deployed on Russian territory along the border have been there since last April.

In Parliament Monday, Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov said

that “there are no grounds to believe” that Russia is preparing to invade imminently. He said there are no signs that Russian troops have formed what he called a “battle group” that could cross the border by force. “Don't worry, sleep well,” he told Ukrainians. “No need to have your bags packed.” *MSNBC* reporter Matt Bradley, reporting from Kiev on Monday described a city where everyone seemed to be going about their business as usual, shopping, going to school, and commuting to work. He even noted that members of the public thought that an invasion from Russia would not happen and that the controversy was the fault

of the US and NATO. That dispatch, at 9 a.m. central on Monday, was the last one like that coming from Bradley. He has submitted no further reports regarding public reactions in Kiev.

While the US, through NATO, rails about growing Russian “aggression,” it deflects from the reality that it is the US that has and is increasing the number of troops almost everywhere in Eastern Europe, including in Ukraine. The US is trying to conceal that it is building a huge potentially offensive military force along Russia's borders.

Meanwhile, so-called “democracy” advocates are being called upon to support the war hysteria. Garry Kasparov, the one-time world chess champion and modern day self-proclaimed democracy champion, criticised Biden in a television interview on Tuesday morning, saying “It would be better if (US Secretary of State) Anthony Blinken was President.”

exceeded its jurisdiction while issuing a writ of mandamus directing the State to provide a particular percentage of reservation for sports persons, namely, in the present case, 3% reservation instead of 1% provided by the State Government, while exercising powers under Article 226 of the Constitution of India. Therefore, the impugned common judgement and order passed by the HC insofar as directing the State for 3% reservation for sports persons and/or provide for a sports quota of 3% in the Government Medical /Dental Colleges is unsustainable and the same deserves to be quashed and set aside.

For the academic year 2018-19, the State Government issued notification of February 6, 2018 for admission in Medical/Dental Colleges. Clause 16 of the said notification provided for admission to private institutes. However, it appears that 1% seats were reserved for sports persons and the children and grand children of terrorist affected persons so far as the State quota seats in Government Institutions are concerned, similar reservation was not provided for admission to private institutes even with respect to Government Quota seats in the private institutes.

By the impugned judgement and order, The HC had directed to provide for reservation/quota to sports persons, children/grand children of terrorist affected and Sikh riot-affected persons for admissions in the private institutes and more particularly the management quota in the private institutes. The HC had also further directed to provide for 3% reservation/quota for sports persons in all Government Medical/Dental Colleges.

The SC has held that the first direction has become academic, so it has disposed of these appeals regarding the first direction, keeping question of law open as to whether such a direction/writ of mandamus could have been issued. So far as the second direction issued by the HC directing to provide for a sports quota of 3% in the Government

Medical/Dental Colleges in the State of Punjab is concerned, the same has been quashed and set aside by the Supreme Court with the observation that no writ of mandamus could have been issued by the High Court.

Blinken, of course, has been even more hawkish than Biden during this crisis. Kasparov said the US should be sending even more weapons than it has, and he attacked Germany for being a “corrupt” country due to its willingness to purchase natural gas from Russia. Germany is dismantling its nuclear power plants and using natural gas during its transition to clean energy. It has been unwilling to close off relations with Russia for this reason.

As the war hawks continue beating the drums, there must be a bigger than ever push for diplomacy. Ukraine is a very corrupt entity run largely by anti-democratic and fascist forces. If the European Union were to take its own pro-human rights constitution seriously, Ukraine would not qualify for membership in the group. NATO, of course, has counted fascist regimes as members before, such as António de Oliveira Salazar's dictatorship in Portugal.

It was among the military alliance's charter members in 1949. Indications are that Russia's bottom line in this conflict is stopping Ukraine from joining NATO, and it wants promises that the United States will never place offensive military weapons on its borders, particularly in Ukraine. Stationing such weapons there would cut off any possibility of diplomacy and likely leave the Russians feeling they have no choice but to intervene.

If we were not dealing in the US with a foreign policy establishment dominated by the Pentagon and the dangerous military-industrial complex, there would be more than enough grounds for pursuing diplomacy rather than war. (IPA)

Every Man in his Humour | Letters to the Editor

Budget task

Sir,
The Union Budget 2022-23 is all set to be presented by the Union Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, 2022 in paperless form. This is the 4th Budget of Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led NDA Government in its second tenure. A 'Union Budget Mobile App' was also launched for hassle-free access of Budget documents by Members of Parliament (MPs) and the general public. On one hand, the ambition to become a \$5 trillion economy by 2025 and on the other hand the risk of another lockdown. The Finance Ministry has a quite a task to manage and deliver a pragmatic budget. Shivakti Jaiswal, Ujjain

NCC gives direction to youth

Sir,
The NCC annual rally, which is the culmination of Republic Day celebrations, gained prominence this year with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inspecting the Guard of Honour and addressing the youth. Without much ado, the NCC has been carrying out changes to improve its appeal to the youth, adding value to the nation in times of the pandemic crisis. Generally, NCC's activities are visible during Republic Day parades. But not many are aware of the more important creative works this organisation can perform during various contingencies. It is a matter of great pride that with around 15 lakh cadets, NCC is the largest uniformed volunteer organisation in the world, which is committed to youth empowerment. The NCC also takes pride in adding value to the disadvantaged sections of society and helps realise their aspirations, contributing both towards equity and development, and inculcating the idea of India with unity and diversity. For the burgeoning youth to get direction and create a disciplined young India, NCC can well be the answer. The Prime Minister also recalled about his training in NCC and said the things he learned there provided him with immense strength in delivering upon his responsibilities. This interaction with the cadets boosted the morale of the youth in NCC. Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Loss to kids

Sir,
Schools are closed for last two years, which is the longest time in the history of India due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in many students unable to recover from the psychological impact like frustration, depression, anxiety and tension which has created direct and serious impact on students' learning ability and mental health. As per a report 8 per cent to 10 per cent children in villages have access to online education, while in many places up to 40 per cent students have dropped out. This is worrying issue for our nation. Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai

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NEW WINGS

It has been a long time coming but on Thursday, the Tata Group finally regained control of Air India, seven decades after the government had nationalized the carrier. The handover marks the Narendra Modi government's first successful privatization effort, eight years into its stint in power. It is a pivotal moment for Air India, the country's aviation sector, and the government's role in running businesses. For the airline, which J.R.D. Tata launched in 1932, the homecoming promises to be filled with emotion and challenges. The Tatas had attempted to buy a 40 per cent stake in the airline at the turn of the century in partnership with Singapore Airlines, but the Southeast Asian firm pulled out, killing those plans. This time, with the whole of Air India up for sale, the Tatas decided to go all out on their own. It worked, for a price tag of Rs 18,000 crore. Now, it must deal with a series of air pockets — from a pandemic that refuses to go away and will likely bleed the already debt-ridden Air India further, to an experienced, unionized workforce that is not accustomed to a corporate culture. India's flag carrier relies on an aging fleet of planes and will need fresh ones to turbocharge its recovery.

But it is not just the Tata Group that is staring at a brave new world following its acquisition of Air India. India's crowded aviation sector is poised for churn too. The Tatas already run a full-service airline, Vistara, with Singapore Airlines, and a low-cost carrier in Air Asia India. It now has a second full-service carrier in Air India, and an additional low-cost service in Air India Express. How will Air India market itself as fundamentally distinct from Vistara, and Air Asia from Air India Express? Will the Tatas merge some or all of these airlines, and will their overseas partners agree? And what will all of this mean for IndiGo, the market leader? Meanwhile, this should also serve as a moment for Mr Modi's government to reflect on its track record. Between 1998 and 2004, Atal Bihari Vajpayee ran a government dependent on coalition partners, at a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party was much weaker than it is today. Yet, that administration privatized 12 State-owned enterprises. For all its claims of working toward 'minimum government', Mr Modi's team has only struck privatization gold for the first time with Air India. It must use this as a point of take-off.

ALL TOGETHER

It is slow work — subverting independence. That the work is in progress was indicated by the remarks of the Union law minister, Kiren Rijiju, about 'coordination' of constitutional bodies with the executive. As the law minister, he cannot have any doubt regarding the importance of independence of constitutional bodies such as the Election Commission. The whole point of free and fair elections is defeated — and democracy made into a travesty — if the EC, for example, acts in coordination with the law ministry headed by an elected politician. But it is precisely this that formed the context of Mr Rijiju's remarks; he praised the EC for its cooperation after a meeting with the election commissioners that he had called. The impropriety of the proceeding had been criticized by members of the Opposition and the former chief election commissioner, S.Y. Quraishi. The EC may call officials for administrative tasks, but its commissioners cannot be summoned by the executive. Moreover, the 'coordination' was in the matter of a controversial change. The election laws (amendment) bill, 2021 links Aadhaar with voter rolls which, according to the Opposition, is likely to disenfranchise a number of voters apart from breaching privacy.

So the context of the Union law minister's paeon to coordination defines what he, or his government, means by the term. He has even spoken to the judiciary about the importance of coordination; should justice 'coordinate' with the executive then? The independence of officials of autonomous institutions was being undermined for quite some time, whether through the delay in appointing the necessary number of vigilance commissioners for the Central Vigilance Commission or through amending the law so that information commissioners in the Central Information Commission became dependent on the government for their tenure and salaries. Such moves add more weight to the criticism from the former Supreme Court judge, Madan B. Lokur, Mr Quraishi and others that followed Mr Rijiju's praise of coordination. They pointed out the lack of checks against 'executive overreach', focusing on the fact that, unlike the CEC, the other two election commissioners do not have constitutional protection from removal and therefore feel insecure. The process of their selection and appointment is faulty, being dependent on the executive. But that is what this government desires; executive overreach was implicit in the law minister's high-minded benevolence.

SCRIPSI

'We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.'

MILAN KUNDERA

Decoding Muslim religiosity in India
Changing patterns

HILAL AHMED

Muslim religiosity in India — an expressed adherence to Islamic belief by Muslims and the performance of religious practices, such as *namaz* and *roza* — has always been seen as a settled issue. It is strongly believed that Muslims are more religious than other religious communities and every aspect of their social life, especially their political world view, is determined by Islam.

This highly-rigid assumption is often used in two very different ways. In a negative sense, Muslim religiosity always comes across as a destabilizing phenomenon. For a rigid, secular mind, adherence to Islam is seen as an obstacle that prevents Muslims from embracing modernity. The *Hindutva* groups envisage, on the other hand, Muslim religiosity as a serious threat to Hinduism. The Muslim congregational prayers and Islamic emphasis on community feeling/brotherhood are always described as a communal strategy to weaken Hindu presence. The old *Hindutva* slogan, '*Garp se kaho hum Hindu hai*' actually underlines this anxiety.

There is also a positive interpretation of Muslim religiosity. It is claimed that the crisis of identity, especially the challenge posed by aggressive *Hindutva* in recent years, would eventually force Muslim communities to take refuge in the domain of spirituality. In other words, the *Hindutva* threat will make Muslims more Islamic.

Interestingly, the contemporary Muslim imaginations of Islam and religious practices are very different from these given explanations. Various survey-based studies (conducted by CSDS-Lokniti and an all-India study by Pew Research Center in 2021) as well as recent ethnographic works on Muslim communities tell us that Muslim religiosity is not a static phenomenon at all. Muslims, like other religious communities, practise religion in a number of different ways. This diversified, ever-changing engagement with Islam actually determines the nature of Muslim religiosity in different contexts.

The recently published report, *Indian Youth: Aspiration and Vision for the Future*, a study conducted by CSDS-Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Germany, is relevant to our understanding of the changing patterns of religiosity among Muslim youth in India. This report is based on a representative sample of 6,277 young respondents (aged between 15 to 34 years) and covers 18 states. The report shows that a significant majority of Muslims offer *namaz* on an almost regular basis (86 per cent; 45 per cent of the respondents said that they offer *namaz* five times a day). This finding confirms that *namaz* is the core element of contemporary Indian Islamic religiosity.

Hilal Ahmed is Associate Professor, CSDS, New Delhi

Laid bare

■ Sir — The *New York Times* article documenting how Israel reaped diplomatic benefits by selling Pegasus to various countries — India is allegedly among them — was shocking ("Pegasus treason finger at Modi", Jan 30). Worse, India was included in the category of countries with "questionable records on human rights". It is shameful that India, which was once reputed to be a protector of democracy and individual rights, has bartered its conscience to read the WhatsApp messages of its citizens.

Instead of investing in spyware, the government should look to buy agricultural technology from Israel. Advanced farming techniques and equipment sourced from Israel can lift millions out of poverty in India.

Abhilash Gupta, Ghaziabad

■ Sir — The charges levelled by *The New York Times* article seem to be backed by solid facts. If the findings are true, the Indian government not only jeopardized citizens' privacy but also violated the core principles of the Constitution. Shockingly, this subversion of democracy was done with public money. One eagerly awaits the results of the probe into the matter by the Supreme Court panel. National security is no excuse for spying on citizens.

Shayan Das, Calcutta

■ Sir — The Supreme Court of India has tasked a panel to



However, this enthusiastic response for *namaz* must also be seen in a comparative manner. In 2016, when a similar survey was conducted by CSDS-Lokniti, around 97 per cent of Muslims reported that they offered *namaz* on a regular basis. This means that there has been a significant decline in the actual number of regular Muslim worshippers in the last five years.

This is also true about the observance of *roza* (fasting) during the month of Ramadan. According to the report, around 85 per cent young Muslim respondents said that they observed fasting regularly. This figure in itself is quite impressive. However, if we compare this response with the findings of the 2016 survey, a different picture emerges. The 2016 study notes that 93 per cent young Muslim respondents reported that they are committed to keeping a fast during Ramadan. On the basis of these responses, the report argues that young Muslims are gradually moving away from religious practices. In fact, young Muslim women are relatively less religious than Muslim men.

These findings, we must remember, should not be exaggerated to make sweeping generalizations about any possibility of secularization among Muslims. Instead, these facts must be seen as indicators to explore the significant manifestations of Islamic religious practices in contemporary India. Two very broad observations could be made in this regard.

First, it is clear that Muslim religiosity is facing a serious internal crisis. The impact of 20th-century Islamic religious reform movements, which actually defined the contours of the religious domain, is gradually declining. These movements are no longer capable of responding to the emerging social and cultural issues young Muslims often encounter.

Take, for instance, the Tablighi Jamaat. It was a Sunni religious reform movement that redefined the concept of *dawa* (invitation to Islam) in a significant way. The Jamaat gives tremendous emphasis on *namaz*-centric religion to invite Muslims to embrace Islam in purely spiritual terms. This non-controversial notion of *dawa* became attractive for traumatized Muslim communities, especially in post-Partition, North India.



Journeys of the mind

■ Sir — The article, "Aladdin's armchair" (Jan 26), by Uddalak Mukherjee took the readers on a flight aboard the proverbial magic carpet. Mukherjee referred to the fictional character, Siddhu Jyatha, as a proponent of a 'cerebral life of immobility'. In real life, Rabindranath Tagore, who travelled across the globe, yearned for journeys of the mind — "*Kothao amar hariye jayar nei mana, mone mone*," the poet had written. Mukherjee's list of writers who wrote about places without having to travel also brought to mind James Hadley Chase, author of popular detective stories, who based many of his novels in America, even though he had not seen the country too much.

Sanjit Ghatak, Calcutta

look into the Pegasus issue. As such, giving too much importance to *The New York Times* report would be unwise.

Sravana Ramachandran, Chennai

Momentous win

■ Sir — Ashleigh Barty should be congratulated for her stellar win in the finals of

playing consistently, she has every chance of emerging as a leading light in women's tennis.

Jayanta Datta, Hooghly

■ Sir — The match between Danielle Collins from the United States of America and Ashleigh Barty from Australia was thrilling. Barty won without dropping a set. One could even go so far as to say that she resembled a young Serena Williams on the court. It is a moment of celebration for Australia and for Barty as winning on home ground is special for any sports person.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

■ Sir — At the women's singles final of the Australian Open, Ashleigh Barty had her full repertoire on display. The kick serve, the one-handed slice, two-handed drive backhands, the forehand dripping with heavy topspin, risky drop shots, opportune volleys, and the overhead. But the shot that was most exciting to watch was played



Historic moment

Living under a shadow

PRADIP PHANJOUBAM

Nobody can deny the reality of a sense of renewal in the celebration of New Year despite the knowledge that the only thing that would have really changed is the calendar. Everything else would remain an unbroken continuity. The idea of a New Year is, indeed, another example of what Jason Silva has called the co-creation of reality by the observer and the observed. We created the calendar; now the calendar is, in a substantive way, creating our subjective reality.

For the northeastern states, the same can be said of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, a legislation designed to meet, first, the challenge of Naga insurrection and, then, the proliferation of more such secessionist movements in the region. AFSPA was obviously intended as a temporary measure, and a Supreme Court ruling mandated its review every six months wherever it was imposed. However, AFSPA has lasted 64 years, prompting commentators to say this can no longer be termed a 'state of exception' but more a revelation of an inherent character of the Indian State and how it sees those in the periphery of its core historical stream. Hence, the use of a war machine in dealing with civil strife in these spaces does not seem to trouble the nation's conscience.

This reality has created another subjective reality marked by a sense of siege and alienation among a greater section of the people of this region. Although not always in the conscious realm, this mindset endures as repressed memories in the deeper recesses of the subconscious. For instance, this inherent trauma seldom surfaces in literature, cinema and theatre that emanate from the region, except in works of non-fiction consciously dealing with the political predicament, indicating it exists as an "unclaimed experience" in the words of the scholar of comparative literature, Cathy Caruth. Therefore, there is a need to read meanings into these silences for an accurate diagnosis of the problem.

The reaction in Nagaland and, indeed, the entire Northeast to the botched ambush by a detachment of para-com-

mandos near Oting village in Nagaland's Mon district on December 4 conveys this pretty loudly. While the rest of the country has had little difficulty in explaining the tragedy, which meant the loss of lives of 14 villagers and a soldier as a mistake, this explanation can never be enough for those living under AFSPA's shadow. For them, Oting is not a one-off blunder, but an inevitable consequence of a climate of impunity AFSPA has co-created.

AFSPA not only provides for the use of the army in dealing with civil unrest in northeastern areas (and those in Kashmir) declared 'disturbed' but also gives the army extraordinary powers, such as the right to enter and search homes without a warrant, use force to the extent of causing death on suspicion, destroy shelters (homes) on suspicions that they are militant hideouts and, over and above this, provides a shield for soldiers in these operations from litigations in civil courts. The last clause is what is behind this oppressive atmosphere of impunity.

The resultant arrogance is that the law is in the hands of those given this power, not the courts. And this arrogance is infectious too often in unwarranted ways. For instance, despite a Supreme Court directive to have AFSPA's imposition reviewed every six months, for the past two years, the Manipur government has been extending it one year at a time. This time, it lapsed on November 30 without the government's notice. But when it was finally extended on January 8, it was done retrospectively from December 1, a dangerous move as pointed out by legal experts, for excesses in non-AFSPA areas can now be exempted from legal purview by retrospectively extending the Act there.

The remedy is not difficult to visualize. The State obviously has to fight insurgency, but this responsibility can be left to the police, trained, equipped and motivated accordingly. The police, too, can commit atrocities but they will always be moderated by the fear of law, unlike under AFSPA's impunity. This was also what was advocated by the late supercop, K.P.S. Gill. If reality is a co-creation, such a gesture could be the beginning of the renewal of public faith and goodwill to end the psychology of alienation of the Northeast.

Pradip Phanjoubam is editor, *Imphal Review of Arts and Politics*

during a practice session that was put out in a tweet. In it, Barty casually tucked the tennis ball off her hip, a textbook leg glance, pointed elbow and all. This shows how different sports persons can influence each other in spite of the vastly different nature of their games.

Indranil Sanyal, Calcutta

Safety first

■ Sir — The ministry of road transport has introduced a fire alarm protection system in passenger and school buses. This is encouraging. Studies on fire incidents indicate that injuries to passengers in fire accidents are caused primarily by heat and smoke in the compartment and the time taken for evacuation. Panicky passengers get trapped in the heavy smoke and flames that gut vehicles within minutes. In the new system, heat and smoke will be controlled by thermal management devices. A water mist will control the temperature. The ministry should now think of a similar system in all vehicles.

M. Pradyu, Kannur

Scream the truth

■ Sir — The editorial, "Unfettered howl" (Jan 30), was thought-provoking. In Boston, a group of mothers, led by a therapist, gathered in a field and had a meltdown. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on their lives; they have

had to bear the burden of office work, house chores and children. The editorial rightly said that mothers, especially of young children, who have been imprisoned at home for months are now ready to let go.

Ashok Kumar Ghosh, Calcutta



Primal scream?

■ Sir — American women have the luxury of letting go that their counterparts in India do not. Women here have to take care of husbands, who behave worse than children. They also have to put up with all kinds of abuse and torture silently in the interest of keeping up the sham of a united family. Things are slowly changing in urban India, but unfortunately not at the desired pace. Work from home has only exacerbated the suffering of women.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Letters should be sent to: The Telegraph, 6 Prafulla Sarkar Street, Calcutta 700001, tedit@abp.in

DECCAN Chronicle

31 JANUARY 2022

Meaningful debate critical, beware of sabotage by govt

Parliament meeting for progressively shorter durations than was previously the case, and even these short durations being disrupted on account of volatile actions by Opposition parties and carefully calibrated actions by ruling parties aimed to ensure Opposition members storm out and allow governments to have their agenda cleared without any questions asked, have been the bane of our parliamentary practice. We should keep this in mind when the Budget Session commences today.

In recent years, India has been called an “elected autocracy”, which means the show of elections is maintained but in practice the ruling party steamrolls its way through overwhelming numbers in Parliament. Even outside the forum of Parliament, the government conducts itself in an overbearing manner. The best that Opposition parties can do is to make the government accountable on the floor of the House. The first thing which suggests itself is that no matter what the provocation from the Treasury benches, they will persist in asking the right questions. They owe this to those who elected them. Noisy protests and walkouts are fine and may become unavoidable at times. People will understand. The proviso is that they will understand if their elected representatives speak on their behalf and bring their concerns to the attention of the nation.

This is especially the case since the government would like nothing better than to have the Opposition benches leave the House in anger and protest. This should be uppermost in the minds of Opposition MPs and their parties. We are living in a very different era from the Nehruvian times. The Opposition was miniscule in size. Governments were elected with a large majority. But the government, especially in Nehru's day, encouraged the Opposition to play an important part and this produced outstanding parliamentarians who were staunch opponents of the government. The Budget Session is the longest in the parliamentary calendar and arguably the most important. The fundamentals of the government's financial and economic policies are cleared in Parliament. If the Opposition parties do not intervene effectively when this is being done, when indeed will they do so?

The government would like nothing better than to have the Opposition benches leave the House in protest. This should be uppermost in the minds of Opposition MPs and their parties.

At the present juncture, unemployment is at a record high and so is inflation. The rate of growth is at best a sobering datum. Two years of Covid have badly retarded the economy. The World Bank's assessment of the prospect in the next two years is far from reassuring. The situation that confronts the finance minister is thus daunting. This is a time for all parties, especially those in the Opposition but also members on the Treasury benches, to contribute to meaningful debate.

The template the present government has adopted to deal with the Opposition produces points of friction all the time. Recent revelations on the Pegasus affair made by *New York Times* are indeed damaging and contribute to the growing feeling in the country that the government has targeted political leaders, judges, the media, business groups, and other key institutions of democracy. The Opposition parties may be duty-bound to highlight this important issue. But whether this should consume all the time of Parliament, as the last Winter Session had, is something to ponder.

The Budget is to be presented on February 1 at a time when the country is in the throes of important Assembly elections. Will it be populist? How will it tackle unemployment, very high prices, shrinking private consumption, and declining savings and investment rates? The Opposition parties must themselves be accountable in order to oblige the government to be accountable.

Stop denigrating nation's icons

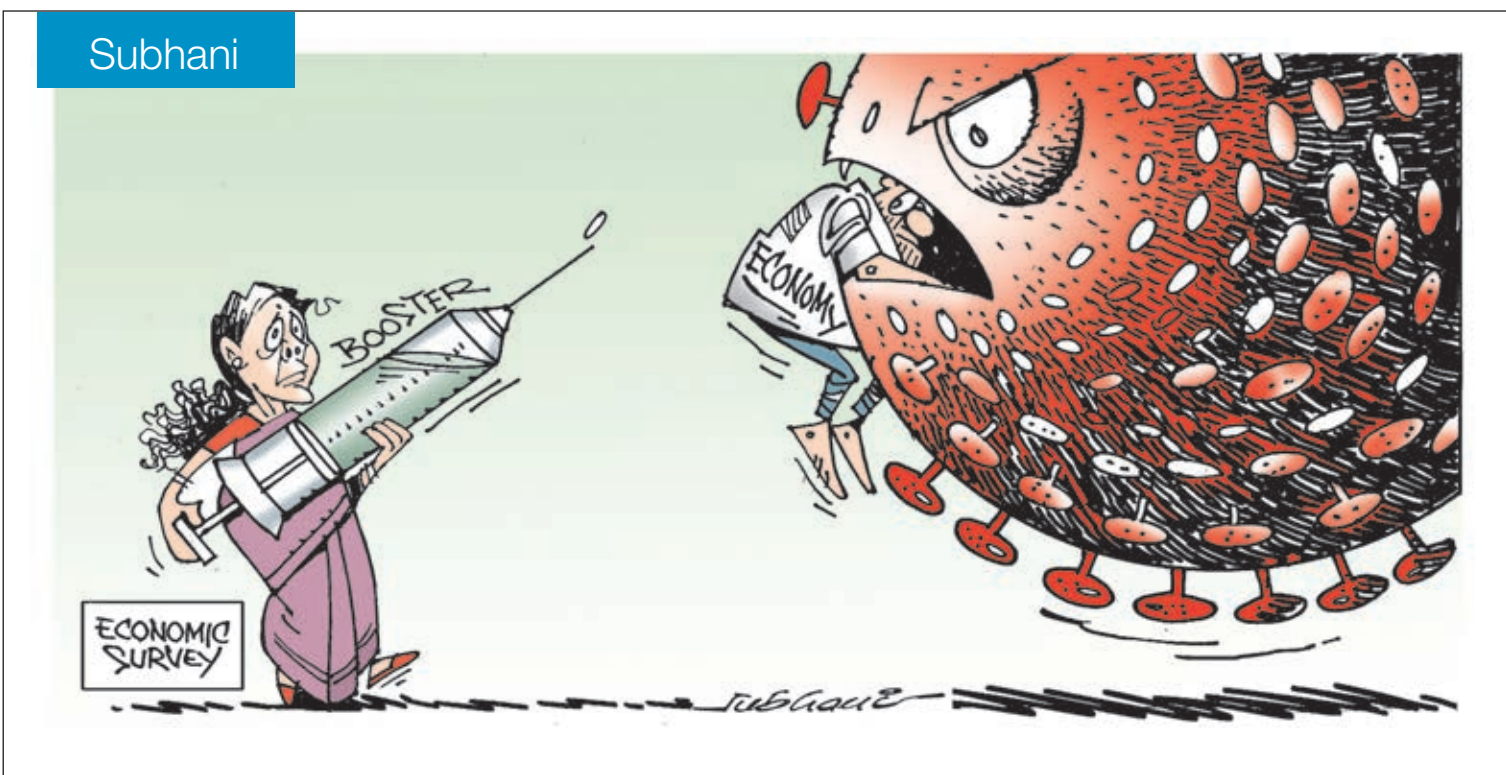
The Congress has demanded that Madhya Pradesh higher education minister Mohan Yadav apologise for the tweet in which he sought to ridicule Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. According to the party, the tweet that has since vanished, said “Subhas Chandra Bose and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel were there in the parade of the Republic Day. Neither the country's fake father nor the fake *chacha* were there”.

The tweet is a reflection of the desperate attempts by the Sangh Parivar to create a narrative that would give an impression that the Hindutva forces were part of the freedom movement. Subhas Chandra Bose was president of the All-India Congress Committee before he fell out with the then leadership, quit and formed the Forward Bloc, which was nationalist, secular and socialist in nature. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was a Congressman till the end. The Parivar is making every attempt at appropriating these leaders, and its outcome is yet to be seen.

The Mahatma and Pandit Nehru continue to remain a sore spot with the Indian right wing for many reasons. The Parivar, even when underscoring the role of Gandhiji in Indian history, would never agree to the title “Father of the Nation” borne by him. There are even fans of Nathuram Godse, Bapu's assassin, associated with the ruling dispensation. Yet despite the best efforts to dig up the story of V.D. Savarkar, the finding of the Jyvanlal Kapur commission that investigated the conspiracy behind Gandhi's assassination that “all these facts taken together were destructive of any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group” comes in the way of further venerating the Hindutva icon.

The Sangh Parivar can exult in celebrating the unsung heroes of the Indian freedom movement and that would be welcome. But the tragedy is that it would have none of its own to name when the future generations ask about its role. Attempts to denigrate two greatest Indians are unlikely to be accepted as the answer.

Subhani



Opp. divide to make it easy for govt in Budget Session



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

It seems unlikely at the moment that the Narendra Modi government has any major legislative agenda apart from the Finance Bill 2022 in the Budget Session of Parliament that begins on Monday, January 31, and whose first phase will last till February 11. The Economic Survey will be laid before Parliament on Monday itself, while finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present the Union Budget 2022-23 on Tuesday. The second phase of the session will be from March 14 to April 8.

It is of course possible that the government has something up its sleeve, and that it will put the cards on the table as it were only at the eleventh hour. But it may not take too many risks in the first phase of the session because of the Assembly elections due in five states — Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa, and Manipur — in February-March. It may well try to announce some measures in the Budget or bring in legislation to deal with sections of the electorate in these five states. Due to the multi-phase polling, the extent of the Election Commission's model code of conduct will differ, and the government will surely want to do something electorally gainful in the window that is available. The major policy instrument that the government has is the Budget, and it could announce measures for farmers and address the unrest by unemployed youth as it exploded during the railway job examinations in Bihar. There will just be minor bills that come up, but little of major controversy. It does appear that in the last two Covid-hit years, the government had little room for anything else but to come up with ameliorative mea-

sures to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. As the crisis has not yet passed, the government cannot hope to do anything really new and innovative. The President's speech to the joint session of Parliament, which is the government's statement, is likely to talk about the successes achieved in rolling out the vaccination programme, the free rations that have been announced for 80 crore ration card households, and various incentives for different segments of the economy.

The all-party meeting that the government customarily holds with the Opposition parties and its allies is unlikely to be fruitful. The Opposition will demand a discussion on the Covid-19 situation, on the controversial Pegasus issue involving Israeli spyware acquired by the government, the youth unrest over jobs. The government is unlikely to yield any ground on the Pegasus issue as it is being probed by a Supreme Court-appointed technical committee. The Congress is likely to use an exhaustive New York Times report about an India-Israeli deal, which included the undisclosed Pegasus spyware. But it will not be sufficient to cry foul and “treason”, as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi did at a press conference. There is a need for some member to cull the facts and build a strong case against the government's secrecy in the matter. It's much more likely the issue will create a lot of predictable heat and little of substance. There is likely to be a furore in both Houses on the issue. The Opposition parties have consistently failed to nail the many omissions and commissions of this government. All that they display is fury and little

No question has been raised by any Opposition leader on why the India-made Covaxin of Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech has failed to produce the vaccine doses needed in the country...

argument.

As the first phase of the Budget Session is quite short, the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address could take up much of the time though the presiding officers and the government have restricted it to a few days. This will most probably end up in a slanging match between the government and the Opposition. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will use his reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks in the two Houses to talk about the government's successes and dismiss the Opposition's charges, which could as well be an indirect campaign speech for the elections to take place in the five states in the following weeks.

In more ways than one, the government is on safe ground. The focus will be on the Opposition. If the Opposition parties can chalk out a strategy of cooperation, then it could put pressure on the government on several issues, especially during the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President. Unfortunately, the Opposition remains divided, much to the amusement of the government.

It is indeed the case that the government is unwilling to yield time and space to discuss issues that the Opposition wants to raise, but the Opposition most of the time is failing its hands in the air. It should be using the Comptroller and Auditor-General's reports, though there are not many of them, to expose the government. For example, the CAG report on the new Indian Institutes of Technology, which are failing on every front, from infra-

structure to enrolment to research work, has not been taken up by any of the Opposition parties. The reputed British science journal, *Nature*, has done a critical editorial on the issue. No one in the Opposition has paid attention to the reality of these so-called “unicorns” among the start-ups as much of it is market overvaluation. The government is getting away because there is not an iota of diligence on the part of the Opposition parties, and they don't do their homework.

In a press conference at the Congress office in New Delhi on January 19, 2021, Rahul Gandhi lamented: “*Vipaksh ko free and fair media ki zaroorat hai*” (The Opposition needs a free and fair media). But the media needs substantial stories and not rhetorical hot air. When the BJP was in Opposition, its leaders used to dig out stories of corruption and inefficiency, and hold press conferences. Though Mr Modi enjoys huge support in sections of the media, there are others who are looking to get real stuff about the government's exaggerated claims and even lies. The Opposition leaders are not willing to dig out the facts.

An untapped story of secrecy and wrongdoing on the government's part is its much-hyped vaccination programme, its procurement of vaccines from various manufacturers. No question has been raised by any Opposition leader on why the India-made Covaxin of Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech has failed to produce the vaccine doses needed in the country, and why is it manufactured in India Covishield of Pune's Serum Institute of India that has supplied about 85 per cent of the vaccine doses administered in the country.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Narendra Modi government can be assured of an easy time in Parliament.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

OFFLINE CLASSES

The state government's decision to reopen all educational institutions from February 1 is creditable but it does have its cons. Considering the health status of people, it is not completely safe to start offline classes. Though the online classes are resulting in a bleak future for students, a healthy and safe environment is important for students.

K. Lalitha
Hyderabad

DO NOT REOPEN

Telangana should not reopen educational institutions as the Omicron variant of Covid-19 is spreading fast and the actual number of cases are several times more than the officially reported ones (Schools, colleges to reopen on Feb. 1 under Covid rules, DC, Jan. 30). They can wait for a month when things get clearer.

Phani Marur
Hyderabad

EMPLOYMENT

Congress leader Manish Tewari has rightly expressed concerns over the challenges on employment generation in Budget 2022. The pandemic has destroyed lives and unsettled all plans. Employment generation has been seriously aggravated by the pandemic. The situation is very tricky, it's a catch-22 situation on whether it is a development tomorrow or surviving today. The lopsided situation needs serious thinking, followed by sincere action.

Balasubramanian Pavani
Secunderabad

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50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Pakistan quits Commonwealth

NEW DELHI, Jan 30.

Pakistan today quit the Commonwealth after Britain, Australia and New Zealand informed it of their decision to recognise the People's Republic of Bangla Desh.

While Australia and New Zealand notified that they would announce their recognition of Bangla Desh tomorrow, Britain told the Islamabad Government it proposed to recognise the new republic 'soon'.

Kishwar Desai
London Diary



Partygate to be watered down; dating fraud the newest menace

As sunshine finally creeps across the London skies, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to get lucky again! While the Opposition has been fuming over Partygate, it seems that he may get away with a rap on the knuckles and a 100 pound fine for attending parties at number 10 Downing Street while the rest of country were forbidden from doing so!

A lot of time in Parliament and on air has been spent in discussing how many parties there were actually at number 10 and who attended. There was even an impromptu birthday party for the Prime Minister who turned 50 during this period. But Johnson has always managed to survive crisis upon crisis through machinations no one can predict. It is difficult to outwit him — and though he may have become the first Prime Minister to face a vote of no-confidence over parties he had either allegedly known about or attended — the possibility looks increasingly remote. The Metropolitan police has been hauled in to investigate if there were any parties — or indeed who organised them. Their “investigation”, however, comes after a report by a senior civil servant — which is to be announced shortly on the same matter.

This means that much of the information in

the Sue Gray Report will be edited out if it hampers the police investigation! And so the Opposition can keep trying to get him out but Boris isn't budging. It is an old trick to get commissions and inquiries to look into controversial matters and it is the best way to kick everything into the long grass.

Obsession can come in many forms — and now Emma Raducanu, the champion tennis player is facing it from an over-friendly fan who has become a stalker. Unemployed Amrit Magar expressed his affection not only from himself but also his wife Bina and dog Logan towards Raducanu — and while he decorated her porch with a Christmas tree, none of it was welcomed by either the tennis player or her family. He even walked off with a shoe he thought was hers as a souvenir. He now has a restraining order on him, and the young player is keen to move into a new house to avoid any further visits by him. Well, not only does the stalker appear to be of Indian origin, the judge, Sushil Kumar, who found him guilty certainly was... yes, we know hundreds of Indian movies have been made where the hero is a stalker, but no one thinks of it as a sign of affection anymore. Magar has confessed he was ashamed of his own behaviour

— but let's hope he no longer behaves like Hindi film heroes of days gone by...

Having shifted our home closer to the city centre, I am always surprised at the number of Indians who live and work here. And Asians of all varieties. The other day the friendly green grocer asked me which country I was from — and then immediately said ‘*Aap Hindi bol sakte hain?*’ Turns out he is from Afghanistan and loves India — a country he said had always supported Afghanistan. He immediately offered to deliver the groceries whenever I wanted to our home. I was impressed at how far reaching Indian diplomacy can be! But good economic sense must have prevailed on him, because as I left he mumbled that home delivery was only possible if the basic cost was more than 20 pounds.

London is now done with social distancing. And masks are increasingly becoming a rarity. This weekend the city is back to its days of having fun in the sun, and staycations with themes or short specially curated experiential events are becoming increasingly popular. These intense moments include a few which I finding very tempting!

Wouldn't you love to attend a Regency ball, a la *Bridgerton*? The serial by the way returns soon with an Indian heroine at the centre of it... and then of course we have yoga being taught everywhere — especially out in the wilderness.

But while having fun in London a word of caution — everyday the media is full of women being duped by men they “met” on a dating app — and even so-called smart women are being ripped off — of their money and their reputations. So swiping right might not be the easiest thing in the world anymore. The pandemic probably made things worse because many relationships remained online for a long time — and allowed gullible women to fall victim to swindlers, who rarely revealed their identity. This seems to be among the most common scams to hit the Internet. So watch out!

Otherwise, head for London, which is back in business!

Kishwar Desai is a prize-winning author and her latest book is The Longest Kiss: The Life And Times of Devika Rani. She is also the chair of the trust that set up the world's first Partition Museum in Amritsar.

How budget can generate higher growth, jobs

By S MahendraDev

The first advance estimates released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) showed that GDP in constant prices in FY 22 was 1.26 per cent higher than the pre-Covid year of FY20. In other words, India had a growth rate of 0.63 per cent per annum in the post-Covid period. Although the impact of Omicron is less on the economy, the loss of GDP in the last two years is high. Also note that the pre-Covid year FY20 had a low base with 4 per cent growth of GDP. Therefore, the need to focus on higher growth in the forthcoming budget and in the medium term, that is, beyond India@75, is obvious.

There are several challenges in creating quantity and quality of jobs in the economy: (a) Unemployment rate is high in both rural and urban areas; (b) decline in work participation rates, particularly for women; (c) recovery in employment is still below the levels of the pre-Covid period. According to CMIE, the employment in December 2021 was 2.9 million less compared to that of 2019-20; (d) 85 per cent of the workforce is still in informal sector; (e) less than 5 per cent of India's workforce has formal skill training; (f) manufacturing and services need structural change; (g) focus on MSME sector is needed for higher employment.

There is a need to have policies in the forthcoming budget and in the medium term for achieving higher economic growth and jobs. Some of these policies are discussed below.

First, the last budget has given a push to capital expenditure and infrastructure. This has to be continued in the next budget and in the medium term. The government outlined an infrastructure project pipeline worth more than Rs 102 lakh crore and asset monetisation pipeline of Rs 6 lakh crore to be implemented in the medium term. Continuing focus on infrastructure and capex by the government is important as it is a key driver for the "future of India". Of course, all these plans on infrastructure depend on effective implementation and creating appropriate models of infrastructure and also on generating the required finance.

Second, it is well known that rise in exports is one of the main engines of growth and also important for employment creation. Export growth in India has increased and is expected to reach \$400 billion by the end of FY22. One worrying aspect of India's export performance is the failure in expanding the share of labour intensive products in the export basket. In the post-Covid situation, there are several opportunities for India to occupy the space vacated by China to boost exports. However, one problem in recent years is that India's trade policy has become more protectionist by increasing import tariffs. India should also join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) for integrating our industries with the value chains in Asia.

Third, there is hardly any disagreement that India needs to aim at the larger growth of the manufacturing sector for higher economic growth and creating more productive jobs. However, the share of manufacturing in GDP and employment has hardly increased over time. Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes can improve performance. However, more efforts are required to improve the manufacturing sector. Similarly, there are a lot of opportunities for India in the service sector. The top global service brands like Google, Airbnb, Amazon, LinkedIn, McKinsey, Master Card, Visa, FedEx covering hospitality and consulting firms or food and beverages like Starbucks are from the US. Brand and customer centricity are important here. India can also think of more business in the service sector. Growing startups including unicorns in manufacturing and services is part of this effort.

Fourth, banking reforms are important as bank credit growth is a key indicator of economic growth. In the immediate term, interest rates may rise in India and at the global level due to rise in inflation. This may increase the cost of capital. Credit to GDP ratio in India is only around 55 per cent compared to 100 per cent and 150 per cent in many other countries. Credit should flow to all categories of economic agents like firms, households etc. It is true that bank credit growth increased to 9 per cent in December 2021. But, NPA is still a problem for Scheduled Commercial banks (SCBs) and others. The macro stress tests for credit risk mentioned in the Financial Stability Report released by the RBI "indicate that the gross non-performing asset (GNPA) ratio of SCBs may increase from 6.9 per cent in September 2021 to 8.1 per cent by September 2022 under the baseline scenario and to 9.5 per cent under a severe stress scenario. SCBs would, however, have sufficient capital, both at the aggregate and individual levels, even under stress conditions". The bad bank, a key initiative of the last budget, is yet to take shape. The role of fintech companies in the financial sector has increased significantly. They may not be able to replace banks although they are competing on payments. The banks also have to focus now on ESG (environment, social and governance) while giving credit. Big technology and digital push is also needed for banks. Lastly, the K-shaped recovery of the economy is still continuing. A large part of the corporate sector has been able to manage the pandemic and the stock market is doing well. On the other hand, the informal workers, including daily wage labourers, migrants, MSMEs, the contact intensive sectors etc, have suffered a lot with the loss of incomes and employment. The policies have to focus on giving a push to the MSME sector, increasing investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure, a social sector push including bridging divides in health and education, social protection measures like foodgrain distribution, cash transfers, MGNREGA in rural areas, urban employment guarantee schemes etc. This will also create demand for the economy.

On economic growth and jobs, we have to double our efforts to cover the losses and reach a normal steady growth. The forthcoming budget and medium-term policies should focus on them. The goal of achieving a \$5 trillion dollar economy by 2024-25 may get delayed by one or two years. The monetary policy is already very accommodative and this may not continue as there are headwinds like rising inflation. In the near term, fiscal policy has to play an important role in achieving the objectives of growth and jobs by expanding fiscal space while the fiscal deficit can be stabilised in the medium term. Increase in private investment may take some more time.

How Musk's SpaceX rocket will deliver a crater on Moon on March 4

On March 4, Moon will get a fresh crater thanks to a chunk of a SpaceX rocket that blasted off seven years ago and was abandoned in space after completing its mission and is now on a collision course with the lunar surface. A hefty chunk of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will crash into the far side of the Moon (not visible from the Earth) in a fiery explosion at about 8,000 kms per hour speed.

It was US astronomer Bill Gray who calculated the space junk's new collision course with the Moon. According to ABC News, Gray developed software that keeps tabs on objects whizzing around inside our Solar System, along with a troupe of observers around the world.

They predict the spaceX junk will crash at 11.25 a.m. AEDT (4.55 p.m. India time) on March 4. The impact will be minor, according to the scientists. The rocket was deployed in 2015 to put into orbit a NASA satellite called the Deep Space Climate Observatory (DSCOVR). How did a 4-tonne piece of rocket accidentally end up on track to smash on the lunar surface? Once out of fuel, the first stage typically falls back to Earth quickly. The Falcon 9 engine that's currently en route to the Moon has travelled much further than most other satellite-delivering rockets. When the first stage ran out of fuel, it dropped off and headed back



to Earth. "The second stage provided the extra oomph needed to steer DSCOVR closer to its operational spot. Its job done, the second stage was jettisoned and left to tumble through space, more than a million kilometres from Earth," according to the report. In the seven years since, the rocket stage has been affected by the Moon, Sun and Earth's gravity, wrangling it in an unpredictable orbit. Now, the SpaceX rocket stage is set to crash into a 520km-wide crater called Hertzsprung on the lunar surface. The Moon has no atmosphere, so the stage won't burn up on its way down.

"Instead, it will smash straight into the rock and scatter bits over the lunar surface," Jonathan McDowell, an astrophysicist at Harvard University, told Radio National. "There's going to be a huge spray of moon dust going many miles into the sky above the Moon," McDowell was quoted as saying. It's likely that other objects abandoned in deep space have smashed into the Moon too.

TN's smaller parties hope to make it big in state urban local body polls

By Arun Lakshman

The urban local body polls scheduled to be held in February 2022 after a gap of six years are an opportune time for the fringe political parties of Tamil Nadu to prove their mettle and acceptability among the general public.

The PattaliMakkalKatchi (PMK), the powerful political party of the Vanniyar community, has already announced that it would be contesting these polls on its own or rather without any proper political alliance. The party which was part of the NDA alliance in the 2021 elections did not have that alliance during the rural local body elections in nine districts of the state and had then announced that it did not have enough time to forge an alliance.

The PMK won only 47 councillor seats in the elections in which the DMK won 974 seats out of the 1421 seats while the AIADMK got 212 seats. The Congress could get only 33 seats while the BJP got 8 seats only proving the poor representation that the national parties have in Tamil Nadu.

PMK leaders S. Ramadoss and his son and former Union Minister, Anbumani Ramadoss have already announced that they would campaign extensively in the elections and would prove that they are a major force to reckon with in Tamil Nadu. The PMK which won 5 assembly seats out of the 23 assembly seats it contested as part of the alliance with the AIADMK however walked out of the alliance in the October elections for the rural local bodies.

The PMK has also announced that it wants to lead an alliance in Tamil Nadu sans both the DMK and the AIADMK. Political analysts find the dream of the PMK out of sync with reality.

C. Rajeev, Director, Centre for Policy and Development Studies, a thinktank based out of Chennai, told IANS, "The PMK is aiming too far too high. They have only a 3.8 per cent vote share in the 2021 assembly elections and that too is in alliance with the AIADMK and riding the wave of a 10.5% internal reservation for Vanniya within the OBC reservation. The PMK fared poorly in rural local body polls and in the urban local body elections also it will not be different. The party seems to be far from



reality and in politics, you have to have a decent assessment of yourself before aiming for the sky."

Matinee idol turned politician, Kamal Haasan has announced the second list of candidates of his party MakkalNeedhiMaam (MNM) for these elections. The MNM fared poorly in the 2021 assembly elections and in the October 2021 rural body elections. The party failed even to get a single seat in the assembly or rural local body elections and several senior leaders have already quit the party. Kamal Haasan is however optimistic that the party would do wonders in the urban local body elections and it is contesting the polls on its own.

The Naam TamilarKatchi (NTK) of actor and director turned politician, Seeman has also to prove its worth as the party drew a blank in the rural local body elections as well as in the preceding assembly polls of 2021. Seeman with his ultra-Tamil nationalism and his pro-Tamil overtures is still not able to break the jinx of not getting elected and he has also announced that his party would contest alone.

The two national parties, the Congress and the BJP are playing second fiddle to the Dravidian parties with the Congress in alliance with the DMK and the BJP with the AIADMK. Both the parties fared poorly in the assembly elections and subsequent rural local body elections but are aiming to make a dent in the urban local body elections and win quite a number of seats.

With the DMK firmly in the saddle and Stalin becoming hugely popular with his pro-people programmes, and with the absence of a popular leader in the AIADMK leadership, it is almost a cakewalk for the ruling front in the urban local

body elections also. However political observers said that the AIADMK as a political party has a rich legacy and that it cannot be considered as an easy pushover in the murky politics of Tamil Nadu where Tamil nationalism and Tamil culture rule the roost more than national or international issues.

The Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) of Vaiko is another political party that is fading into oblivion if it does not rework itself. The party is facing difficulties due to the poor health of Vaiko and his son DuraiVaiyapurai having entered the mainstream of MDMK politics only recently, it will take time before the party can rejuvenate itself and push for a reckoning among the public.

Actor turned politician Vijayakanth had made major strides in politics with his political party, DesiyaMurpokkuDravidaKazhagam (DMDK) earlier in the 2011 assembly elections winning 29 seats. Vijayakanth became the leader of the opposition in the assembly. However, after that, the party did not fare well and was strong only in certain pockets of the state. Vijayakanth is tormented by health issues and his wife Premalatha and brother-in-law L.K. Sudheesh are in control of the party now. In Kanniyakumari and Virudhunagar districts, the party still has a say in some pockets but without proper ideological backing and no proper political alliance, the DMDK is fast entering into political oblivion.

Dr S. Uma Maheswari, a political analyst and retired professor of a private college in Chennai, told IANS, "The politics of Tamil Nadu revolve around Dravidian politics. The fringe parties will not have any role to play and the urban local body polls will in no way differ from the rural local body elections held in October 2021 and the DMK led front will cruise along. The AIADMK led front will give a fight but other than that no other front can challenge the two major Dravidian parties. There are no movie stars also on the horizon to raise a challenge to the two major Dravidian parties and the only person who can now have a grand entry in Tamil politics is superstar Vijay but the chances of him jumping into the political arena of Tamil Nadu are remote, at least for the time being."

Ban on 100-yr old stage play raises questions in AP

By Narendra Puppala

The Andhra Pradesh government's ban on 'Chintamani' a Telugu stage play that has been around since 1920, has raised the hackles of the art and culture fraternity in the state. The play scripted by pre-independence era social crusader Kallakuri Narayana Rao that deals with the evils of prostitution, had celebrated its hundredth anniversary only last year.

In normal times, the play is staged regularly all year round at village and temple fairs, and other social events, across Andhra Pradesh. While the play revolves around the central character of Chintamani, a prostitute who attains salvation through repentance, it is the character of SubbiSetti, a Bania or merchant community member who descends to abject poverty, is at the centre of the current controversy.

The state government's move to ban 'Chintamani' had come following representations from the Arya Vysya community in Andhra Pradesh. The Telugu merchant community, known as 'Banias' in north India, has long been up in arms against the play in which the character of SubbiSetty is portrayed in extremely poor light.

The ban order was issued on January 17, following the latest attempt by the Arya Vysya community, in the form of a memorandum submitted to the state government about four months ago. According to observers, the fact that Endowments Department Minister Vellampalli Srinivas, who also belongs to the community, helped matters move at a fast pace.

Predictably, the Arya Vysya community is rejoicing over the ban on the play. Community representatives have been expressing their gratitude to the Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy.

"The depiction of 'SubbiSetti' in the play, is very objectionable and humiliating. Showing him as ugly, and using charcoal as makeup to



darken his complexion, and making him the butt of lewd jokes. It was intolerable to the Arya Vysyas" said Ambica Krishna, a leading member of the community, former legislator, and former chairman of the AP Film Development Corporation. The actual problem however does not lie with the playwright or the original script of 'Chintamani'.

"The play was written by Kallakuri Narayana Rao garu to highlight the evils of wrong company, in this case, a prostitute. The language used by the author in the original play has nothing objectionable. But over the years, local drama troupes began to modify the situations and language of the play, in a bid to appeal to mass sentiments. It is the fault of these actors and local drama troupes who keep manipulating the script and go overboard penning ribald dialogues as per their whims and fancies to attract more people." said Golla Narayana, President of the Andhra Arts Academy, cultural organisation that was set up to spread the fervour of independence in British India.

The last few days have seen several art and culture organisations join hands to voice their protest against the ban on 'Chintamani'. Their argument is that the play is a reflection of the social mores of the prevailing times when it was originally written. The government's decision to ban the play is being seen as too extreme a step.

"If any part of the play is objectionable, or someone is making changes to it, you can warn

such people. But a blanket ban is untenable, especially since the play gives us insights into the social ills of its time" says S Anil Kumar, Secretary, PrajaNatyaMandali, Andhra Pradesh unit.

He points out that in 2002, when the community had sought a ban on the play, the High Court had ruled in favour of the play after going through the original script

However, the Arya Vysya community is firm that a blanket ban on staging the play, is the only solution. "It is impossible to monitor the plays which are staged in villages, and even in bylanes of towns and cities. We never know when and where a play is being staged. It will need to be videographed and then followed up, which is impractical to implement. A ban is the ideal solution," says Ambica Krishna.

Meanwhile, concerns are being raised over the possible precedents that the ban sets for muzzling all kinds of creative expression in the days to come.

"Today the ban is because a community is finding it objectionable. Tomorrow another community might object to another play or it could be that a political party finds fault with a stage play. This decision to ban a play, leaves the door open for future trouble," said G Narayana.

Considering that the play survived several attempts to get it banned over the years, the urgency with which the Jagan Mohan Reddy-led state government has banned the play by issuing it through the general administration department is raising eyebrows.

Observers opine that the ban may be the ruling party's ploy to garner favour of the community which though relatively small in numbers, has financial clout.

While clarifying that the Arya Vysyas are well within their rights to protest against the caricaturing of their community, culture champions are finding fault with the state government for the arbitrarily disposing off a very important issue.

Clash of 'bitter' enemies: Sidhu vs Majithia in Amritsar

By VIISHAL GULATI

Once close friends, they are now political enemies. They are in fray from Amritsar (East) that will witness a bitter but an interesting 'do-or-die' battle in this Punjab Assembly election. The poll fight has become a clash of two titans -- sitting legislator and Congress state chief Navjot Singh Sidhu versus Bikram Singh Majithia, one of the most powerful Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leaders.

Besides contesting from the Majitha constituency, near Amritsar, where he is the sitting legislator, Majithia, who is brother-in-law of SAD President Sukhbir Badal, is also contesting from Amritsar (East).

While announcing his candidature on Wednesday, Badal said Majithia would contest against Sidhu "to dismantle his arrogance".

The Sidhu-Majithia duo have had heated exchanges on several occasions in the Assembly. And Sidhu has been training guns against Majithia over his alleged connections with drug cartels.

Booked under the Narcotic Drugs and

Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act last month, Majithia has been trying to secure protection from arrest from the Supreme Court. Considered a Congress stronghold, Amritsar (East), the seat that came into being after 2012 delimitation, has backed Sidhu and his namesake wife -- Navjot Kaur. In 2017, the cricketer-turned-politician not only defeated his BJP rival Rajesh Honey with a big margin of over 42,000 votes but also played a role of a game-changer for the party by winning 10 out of the 11 seats in Amritsar district, once the citadel of the SAD-BJP combine. Coming in support of her former cricketer husband, Navjot Kaur said. "Get the bail first". She was responding to the pitting of Majithia against Sidhu to make the contest high voltage. "I don't feel that there is any arrogance in us. He can also contest from behind the bars," Navjot Kaur, who represented Amritsar (East) as the SAD-BJP combine candidate from 2012-17, said, adding they consider 'no challenge' from the Akali Dal as Amritsar is their 'karmbhumi' (place of work) and they worked for their constituents.

Navjot Sidhu is a three-time Amritsar MP from the BJP. In 2014 he "sacrificed" this seat for his



'guru' Arun Jaitley. Later he was adjusted in the Rajya Sabha by the BJP but not finding a bigger role in Punjab, he quit the party and resigned from Parliament. Saying the political life of the former cricketer is coming to an end, Badal told the media, "Sidhu's arrogance will be his undoing. He has been harping on his support among the masses. Now his support will be tested with 'Majha da sher' (warrior from Punjab's Majha region) taking him on in his home constituency." He should get ready to fight the brave SAD workers. We will break his arrogance by ensuring he loses his security deposit." Responding to Majithia's candidature against the party chief, Congress legislator Raj Kumar Verka, a vocal Dalit face, told IANS, "The Akali Dal wanted Majithia to taste defeat at the hands of Sidhu. The voters will teach him a lesson on their own." Expressing gratitude to Badal for

giving him the opportunity to contest from Amritsar (East), an elated Majithia said: "Akalis have a brave history of fighting to safeguard the rights of Punjabis and protecting them from the anti-Punjab elements like Sidhu." The younger brother of former Union Food Processing Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal and brother-in-law of former Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal, sitting legislator Majithia, who is the eye of storm again, was summoned by Enforcement Directorate in 2014 for investigating the money laundering link in the Rs 6,000 crore international synthetic drugs racket busted by the Punjab Police in 2013.

In the latest drugs case, he got protection from arrest from the Punjab and Haryana High Court till January 28 in the case registered against him by the Punjab Police in Mohali on December 20. He was booked under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, including Sections 25 (punishment for allowing premises), 27 (A) (whoever is financing any activities pertaining to narcotic drugs) and 29 (party to a criminal conspiracy to commit an offence).

Majithia, one of the most powerful Akali leaders, is also facing allegations of having links with

certain NRIs who have been accused of international money laundering related to the massive drugs racket. Responding to the recent drug case against Majithia, SAD patriarch and five-time Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal said he was apprehending such an action by the Congress government. During the state Congress government to arrest him, elderly Badal told the media that, "The Congress governments have always tried to weaken Punjab and the Akali Dal. Whenever I was the chief minister, I never troubled any Congress leader." Majithia, who is educated at the Lawrence School in Sanawar in Himachal Pradesh, retained the Majithia seat in 2017 with a margin of 22,884 votes, lower than a margin of 47,581 he had got in 2012. He won this seat in 2007 too. His father Sardar Satyajit Singh Majithia is a former Deputy Defence Minister.

In the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections, the Congress had won an absolute majority by winning 77 seats in the 117-member Punjab Assembly and ousted the SAD-BJP government after 10 years.

Punjab will go to the polls on February 20. (Vishal Gulati can be contacted at vishal.g@ians.in)

EDITOR’S CHOICE

SC’S NON-COMMITTAL
STAND POINTS TO COMPLEXITY
OF QUOTA SYSTEM

EXPERIENCE SHOWS QUOTA ONLY A
MEANS AND NOT AN END IN ITSELF

K RAVEENDRAN

The Supreme Court was expected to introduce some clarity on the issue of reservation for promotion in jobs for scheduled castes and tribes. In fact, the Centre had specifically requested the court to remove the prevailing confusion in the issue. But the court has not only failed to bring about greater clarity, it has preferred to add to the confusion by taking a non-committal approach.

The court has taken the firm stand that it cannot lay down any yardstick to determine the adequacy or inadequacy of representation to SC-ST communities in matters of promotion. The court pointed out that it is neither legal nor proper for the courts to issue directions or advisory sermons to the executive in respect of the 'sphere which is exclusively within their domain under the Constitution'. Determination of inadequate representation of SCs and STs in services under a State is left to the discretion of the State, as the determination depends upon myriad factors which this Court cannot envisage, the judges further said.

The court has taken cover from the responsibility of laying down criteria for determining the inadequacy of representation by saying it would result in curtailing the discretion given to the state governments. In addition, the prevailing local conditions, which may require to be factored in, might not be uniform.

The court's stand only highlights the interplay of patently irreconcilable considerations that the issue of reservation in promotions entails. It raises certain fundamental issues about the reservation policy, the sensitivities of which have prevented a realistic look at the gamut of issues involved. Reservation is a highly emotive issue that defies straightforward approaches in which symbolism plays a greater role than its efficacy.

The Constitution framers had envisaged reservation as a means to right age-old wrongs, but along the way the means have become the end itself, defeating the very purpose of the policy. In certain cases, reservation has become not just a right, but a privilege that tends to be abused, particularly when it comes to promotion in jobs, where efficiency must not be sacrificed in favour of political expediency.

There is no doubt that the dalits have been victims of humiliating social segregation and barbaric social oppression, but it is also a fact that a section, though small in size, within the community has become rich and turned exploiters themselves. This is where reservation as a privilege comes into play and defeats the very purpose of providing a safety net to the vulnerable. Despite their new found affluence, even these people insist on reservation as a life-long privilege, which in

all fairness constitutes an abuse of the concept.

But when one delves deep into the matter, it becomes clearly evident that no fundamental change can be brought about by reservation or for that matter by any other provision of this kind in the actual social-economic condition of dalits and backward castes within the framework of the existing system. The principal design of reservation is solely to douse the raging flames of wrath and resentment among people, deprived and oppressed for centuries, and thus to contain it from flaring up further. That is clearly a political solution, which has not had any real impact on the overall life of the depressed classes.

According to reports, approximately there are about one lakh government jobs in the country which are lying vacant under quota for want of suitable candidates. The truth is that the majority of common population amongst the scheduled castes-tribes and other backward castes do not have such economic-academic status so as to apply for these jobs. The reserved seats that get filled are actually grabbed by the relatively well-to-do among the community.

It is a matter of deep concern that even as the nation is celebrating 75 years of independence, the educational status of the vulnerable people continues to lag behind by big gaps, with nearly 80 percent students from scheduled castes dropping out midway through their school education. The 50 percent of reserved seats for scheduled castes and tribes in higher education remain unfilled and 25 percent of students who seek admission under reservation leave their education in the middle. This means quota by itself is not the panacea to address backwardness of these sections of people and that is what muddles the issue further.

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HEALTH CAPSULE

INDUSTRY EYES INCREASED FUND
ALLOCATION FOR HEALTH IN BUDGET



NEW DELHI: India has been facing the Covid pandemic for two years now and the pharma industry has witnessed ups and downs during this period while the government has introduced some policies to strengthen India's healthcare industry during the crisis. But public health expenditure, as a share of country's gross domestic product, is still low and the industry stakeholders are hopeful of a change this year as Covid has provided an opportunity to increase health spending in this budget. "The Indian pharmaceutical industry is of strategic importance for the country, providing access to affordable quality medicines across the world. The pharmaceutical industry is science-based and knowledge-driven with scientific developments evolving at a rapid pace. The budget should spur innovation and set the pace for taking the pharmaceutical industry to the next level," Sudarshan Jain, Secretary General, Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance, told IANS. He said that the primary thrust for the Indian pharmaceutical industry going forward should be to move up the value chain by scaling up R&D and innovation to meet the unmet needs of patients across the world. "The industry should evolve from 'Make in India' to 'Make and Discover in India, for India and World' fulfilling the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," he added. Jain underlined that as we have been into the pandemic for the last two years, everyone has talked about strengthening of health infrastructure. "But it can not be done with spending just 1.2 per cent of the GDP, and instead the health spending should go around 2.5 per cent of GDP this year."

THE BIG LIE BEHIND UNITED STATES AND NATO POLICY IN EUROPE

PRESIDENT BIDEN HAS TO ADJUST
HIS FOREIGN POLICY TO NEW REALITY



DAVID CAVENDISH

In a speech in 1881, Wendell Phillips, the famous abolitionist and Native American rights activist, said that history is but "a series of lies agreed upon."

The expression originated in 18th century France, with both Voltaire and Napoleon Bonaparte, along with the American transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, expressing versions of it. In truth, however, history is much more than a series of "lies," but these eminent figures highlight a seamier side of our past.

Demagogues and those in positions of power have often resorted to such deceit in order to bend public opinion in their favor and manipulate how people understand what happened in the past. Three examples, among many, stand out: Adolf Hitler in his rise to power, Donald Trump after the 2020 presidential election, and the U.S. government leadership after World War II. The results of such tactics have led to the deaths of millions of people, war, and a threat to democratic governance.

After World War I, Germany was a defeated nation whose people faced severe problems, with runaway inflation, unemployment, and massive debt, the result of the Treaty of Versailles imposed by the victorious Allies.

Demagogues like Hitler blamed Germany's problems on "Jewish bankers" and "Marxists," whom he

said, "stabbed Germany in the back" during the conflict. The outcome of his ranting resulted in the Holocaust and World War II, with some of the worst fighting taking place on the Eastern Front in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Currently, we are still living with the aftermath and ongoing storm of Donald Trump's "Big Lie." The former president claims that through massive vote fraud his re-election was "stolen" from him. So far, this Big Lie has not brought the mass death and destruction seen in the 1930s and '40s, though one cannot forget what happened during the January 6th insurrection.

The third of these "Big Lies" (though not labeled as such in the United States) was the enunciation in the years immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War of the idea that Western democracy was under existential threat from the Soviet Union, a country it claimed was run by communists out to destroy "democracy" and the American way of life. This policy had profound effects on U.S. society and the history of the world in the last three-quarters of a century.

The outcomes within our country included the harassment of thousands of communists and other progressives, the destruction of the militant labor movement, the erosion of human rights, the creation of the national security state, and the growth of extremist right-wing ideology as seen, for example, in the mil-

itarization of society.

The truth is that the Soviet Union never called for armed struggle against Western nations, but on the contrary, followed a policy of peace (at times called "peaceful cooperation" or "detente.")

The words of its three most prominent leaders after World War II spell out this policy. Joseph Stalin, immediately after the defeat of Nazism, wrote in 1946: "[The] peoples [of the world]...no longer wish to live in the old way. [They want] to carry on an active struggle against the forces of reaction, against instigators of a new war. The peoples of the world do not wish a repetition of the calamities of war. They fight persistently for the strengthening of peace and security. In the vanguard of the struggle for peace and security marches the Soviet Union."

Thirteen years later, Nikita Khrushchev reinforced this point, writing, "It is quite often said in the West that peaceful coexistence is nothing but a tactical move of the socialist states. There is not a grain of truth in such allegations. Our desire for peace and peaceful coexistence is not prompted by any time-serving or tactical considerations. It springs from the very nature of socialist society...."

Nearly two decades later, in a time when detente was a real possibility, Leonid Brezhnev reiterated the Soviet position: "We must fight actively and persistently for peace and detente...[with] a calm and clear

confirmation of our course towards detente and towards the development of good, mutually beneficial relations with the United States."

As an added note, if the Soviet Union was such an armed threat to Western Europe, why did it wait six years after the formation of NATO, until 1955, to establish its own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact?

Three quotations do not make an analysis of Soviet foreign policy of course, but they do give us a sense of its essence.

And though the USSR ceased to exist 30 years ago, the United States continues its policies in the pursuit of world hegemony. Now, instead of the Soviet Union as the enemy in Europe, it is Russia under Vladimir Putin. President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are following the same old worn-out playbook written in the 1940s. And as a cornerstone of its strategy, the U.S. government still relies on NATO.

Yesterday it was Berlin, Bosnia, and Afghanistan. Today it is Ukraine. Where will it be tomorrow?

NATO, an alliance founded in 1949 on a lie-the "threat of a Soviet military attack in Europe"-still persists in maintaining that lie. There is no reason for the alliance (or any military alliance) to exist in today's world. The days of the Cold War are long over.

Let us face up to this "Big Lie." It's time for the United States to adjust its foreign policy to the reality of the 21st century.

UTTAR PRADESH ASSEMBLY POLLS

FINALLY A NARRATIVE AWAY FROM HINDU-HINDUTVA BLUES

SUSHIL KUTTY

One outlier media in the republic is broadcasting its intent-turn the cash and gold haul from the innards of perfume manufacturer Piyush Jain's Kanpur-Kannauj homes into a poll plank for the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections; for, it is by far the best current issue to battle it out for the right to rule. It is 'Alibaba and the 40 Thieves' and slave-girl Morgiana to the rescue.

The primetime anchor of the channel is insistent and persistent-suggesting like a psychiatrist to the subconscious that there cannot be a more compelling issue. For the last two nights, his is a solo vociferous voice in the ear canal, demanding that everything else be dropped and everybody in Uttar Pradesh doggedly pursuing the "cash in the tunnel" election issue.

"I am going to open the phone lines, I'm going to open the phone lines," he tells the line-up of guests in their little square boxes, the warning that he is serious and not about to relent.

The story is, the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party-and the party's 'Double-engine ki Sarkar' in Uttar Pradesh-is in a fix. More than it wants an electoral plank, it does not want a couple of other planks-one, the farmers protests-Lakhimpur-Kheri-Teni issue; two, the 'Hindu Vs. Hindutva' differentiation row.

The farmers' protests were of Prime Narendra Modi's making and



Modi realizing rather late that he had very less time to walk back from the brink. The damage was done. Lakhimpur-Kheri happened and 'Mishra-Teni' added to the BJP's woes. Now, it's an issue simmering and refusing to go away, come what may.

The second-the 'Hindu Versus Hindutva' row-cleverly injected into the political discourse and electoral rhetoric by the politically-savvy 100-plus-year-old Congress-has neutered the BJP's aging Hindu-Muslim polarization plank.

With an alternate definition for 'Hindu'-inclusive and liberal-the BJP's 'Hindutva' is with its back to the wall, like a truant boy left to explain his conduct.

The farmers' protests and 'Hindu-Hindutva' were potent issues against the BJP, which found that it was losing the perception battle just when it counted most. The two issues continue to pull the BJP out of contention-and threaten to drag it out of the

competition altogether.

The 'Dharam Sansad' in Haridwar-and a second one at Raipur-haven't helped. Now, there is even reason to justify the 'Hindu terror' charge and the 'safron terror' tag. Things were not going according to plan and script. There is even talk that the "Dharam Sansads" were a plant to thwart the BJP, and that the Congress was behind the carnivorous plant.

It is at such a time that the Piyush Jain cash tunnel bore its way into the narrative-succour for the Hindutva. "Forget Hindu, Hindutva; forget farmers' protests, forget Lakhimpur-Kheri, all these pale in comparison-it's the poor people's money, those behind this should be banned from taking part in elections, forever," the words shouted at the top of the voice.

If there was Alibaba, he would have shouted "Open Sesame", but there is no Alibaba. The "Challis Chor", if they are indeed there, are unknown-only the tunnels of cash and

gold and "three names of politicians"! But who? Nobody in Government is talking and BJP spokespersons are like mummies.

The mystery helps-as does the 'Alibaba and 40 Chor' narrative help the BJP. It can now hunt with the hounds. There are no hares. The primetime anchor, gunning for the Samajwadi Party, cannot wait for the tunnels of cash and gold issue to dig in, and take hold.

Meanwhile, the tower-stacks of cash stand like sentinels. If clueless media are to be believed, the "40 thieves" are faceless politicians, three of whose identities are being tightly guarded because they would spill the beans.

Of course, there is no Alibaba. That is a fairytale. But there is the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) and the biggest seizure in over a lifetime-Rs 195 crore in cash, 23 kilograms of gold and sandalwood oil worth Rs 6 crore. Whose man is Uttar Pradesh perfumer Piyush Jain? Is he an independent operator, a BJP lackey, or an SP lackey? There are in history many collectors of perfume, but this one's been elected to save somebody's goose. Will the outlier media's anchor-in-chief succeed in turning tunnels of cash and gold into an election issue for BJP's sake? The answer to that is, his 'Open Sesame' is out there in the open. Finally, at the end of the day, when everything fails Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath may only have 'Alibaba and his 40 thieves' to thank!

Letters to the : Covid shadow on Beijing Winter Olympics



Sir — Public safety must be paramount. Less than two weeks before the Winter Olympics are scheduled to begin in Beijing, China has seen an uptick in confirmed Covid-19 infections, with at least 23 Games-related personnel testing positive. Although the figures are much lower than most other countries, this will likely change when athletes from around the world arrive in China. In spite of stringent safety measures, several athletes and staff tested positive during the Summer Olympics in Tokyo last year. The authorities must ensure that all safety protocols are maintained so that the number of infections does not spiral out of control.

Sir — It was shocking to learn that around 1.3 million people lost their lives to superbugs because of antimicrobial resistance (“Danger ahead”, Jan 26). Furthermore, the Interagency Coordination Group on Antimicrobial Resistance estimates that drug-resistant fatalities could reach 10 million globally per year by 2050. These are alarming numbers. The primary source of AMR has been identified as the overuse of antibiotics; Indians are guilty of indiscriminate self-medication. There is also an urgent need to fast-track research on antibiotics which has remained stagnant for the last few decades. Unless we take immediate steps to rectify the problem, many lives will be lost to preventable diseases. Sir — People who have grown up in households with medical professionals have always known that antibiotics should not be used at the drop of a hat. But many people self-medicate when they catch a cold and use antibiotics. The repercussions of the misuse of life-saving drugs are now right before us. The rising threat of superbugs must be taken seriously.

Sir — There is no doubt that the growth of the Indian economy now resembles the K-curve and not V as the Centre would like to believe (“Fall and rise”, Jan 27). There is plenty of data to confirm that the rich have only become richer in the last few years while the poor have been pushed further into debt. Last year’s budget was lacking in several aspects. It remains to be seen what the finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, unveils in this year’s budget.

Sir — The squad selection for the Indian men’s cricket team, which is set to play against West Indies in a series of limited-over matches next month, leaves room for improvement. As expected, most of the top players have been included in the team. However, it may have been wise to rest K.L. Rahul and Rishabh Pant for the time being and instead select young, upcoming players. Both Rahul and Pant have performed inconsistently at the recently-concluded South Africa tour and should have been given time to reflect on their shortcomings. Sir — The Indian cricket team’s performance in South Africa showed that there are numerous problems plaguing the Men in Blue. In such a situation, playing back-to-back series, without an adequate break in between, is inadvisable. It is imperative that the Board of Control for Cricket in India thoroughly evaluates each player on the roster. They must earn their place on the team. Sir — The picture of a library tweeted by the author, Don Winslow, has drawn admiration from all quarters (“Book Warmth”, Jan 25). It is ironic that we fawn over the sight of libraries filled with books but opt for a quick search on the internet when we need any information. The internet, with its plethora of resources, is certainly necessary and convenient but the knowledge gained by spending hours reading a book is irreplaceable. Ashok Kumar Ghosh, Calcutta In remembrance Sir — Every year, on.



All of us have experienced the delightful pleasure that comes from solving puzzles, whether these be crosswords, jigsaw-puzzles, riddles, Sudoku or a myriad others. Solving puzzles, we are told, satisfies the nimble brain and helps keep our mental faculties in good working order. They also serve the function of making us better at a whole host of other activities, including finding solutions to the real-world problems that we are confronted with on a daily basis. There is evidence that puzzle-solving has taken on greater importance during the ongoing pandemic, since puzzles allow a certain kind of neat closure that has become even more necessary for us to experience at a time when uncertainty seems to be the ruling motif of our lives. The pleasure of solving a puzzle, that ‘Aha!’ moment when you get the right answer, reinforces a whole host of mental functions, which benefit us in ways that scientists are still exploring. People exhibiting the first signs of a diminution of their mental faculties are often encouraged to take up puzzle-solving or playing word games. Puzzles have been around for as long as human beings have, and puzzles, riddles, and similar problems can be found in all the mythologies. The Narasimha avatar of Vishnu, who kills the apparently invincible Hiranyakashipu, Oedipus solving the Sphinx’s ‘unsolvable’ riddle, and Macbeth meeting his doom at the hands of one “not of woman born” can all be seen as instances of ingenious puzzles, which require the kind of lateral, tangential thinking for their solution that puzzle-lovers revel in.

‘Wordling’ is not yet an accepted verb, but given the popularity of the word game that’s taken the internet by storm these last few months one won’t be surprised if it makes its way into dictionaries soon. A Google search throws up 1.6 billion results for ‘Wordle’, and articles about the deceptively simple puzzle — where you get six attempts to guess a five-letter word, with coloured tiles telling you if you guessed the right letters in the right places — range from its origins, to the best strategies to win, to how data miners are undermining (pun intended) the simple pleasure the game affords. Just in case you’ve been living on another planet these last few months, Wordle was developed by a Brooklyn-based Welsh programmer, Josh Wardle, for his word-game-loving partner, Palak Shah, and released to the wider public in October 2021. On November 1, 2021, a few days after the game became available online, 90 people played it — on January 9, 2022, that figure reached two million. The latest news about the game, bringing glad tidings to its legions of fans, is that Twitter has banned a bot using the handle, @wordinator, which would act the supreme spoilsport by leaking the result of the following day’s puzzle on Twitter. Of course, by the time you read this, other articles and news items will probably have supplanted this despatch from the burgeoning Wordle

Cerebral pleasure

Puzzling with words



ecosystem.

I was introduced to Wordle by my brother, who sent me a link to the game’s website (<https://www.powerlanguage.co.uk/wordle/>) early in January, and I’ve been doing the puzzle every day since then. I’ve gone on to send out the link to a bunch of my friends and they, in turn, have passed it on to others, thereby adding a few more to its millions of players. The best part about Wordle for many fans (myself included) is that there is a single puzzle released daily. But not everyone is satisfied with just one puzzle in a day so, inevitably, Cyberia has spawned another online game which allows you to play Wordle as many times as you want: if you want more than your single daily fix, search for ‘word master’ or go to <https://octokatherine.github.io/word-master/> and you can play the game for as long as you like. A friend had a winning streak of 72 successful games before stumbling over ‘TA ES’, where he guessed ‘TALES’ on his sixth — and final — try, only to be told that the correct answer was ‘TAXES’. He has stopped doing the puzzle since. Other word games inspired by Wordle include Lewdle (<https://www.lewdlegame.com/>), launched on January 19, where every word is unacceptable in polite company, which has already garnered 700,000 players, and Swardle (<https://swardle.com/>) where you get just four chances to guess a four-letter swear word, but I have no idea how many are playing this “parody/tribute” (as the game’s creator, Stuart Houghton, describes it) to Wordle, but the number can’t be small. Perhaps the most fiendish twist given to Wordle is Absurdle

(<https://qntm.org/files/wordle/>) where, instead of a fixed five-letter hidden word that you have to guess, the algorithm keeps changing the word as you correctly guess the letters that are in it. Fortunately, the number of guesses you can make in Absurdle is not limited, and even though the game sounds somewhat bizarre, you can usually crack the five-letter word even if you take a fairly long time to do it.

Another aspect of puzzles, as is the case for most games, is that they bring out the competitiveness that seems to be an innate part of our nature. An interesting feature of Wordle is that you can show others the number of tries you took to solve a Wordle without actually revealing the letter-combinations you used on your path to success. The internet is flooded with the little boxes that allow you to show others how quickly (in terms of the number of tries) you solved the day’s Wordle, often accompanied by comments like “This was a hard one!” (if you took more than four tries) or “I just got lucky” (if solved in three tries or less). But even such a spoiler-free report of success can provide clues on how to solve the Wordle in question, as has been pointed out by several blog posts and articles doing the rounds, including some which analyse how to mathematically optimize Wordle decision trees, and others which seek to find the best strategy to make sure that the puzzle can, in fact, always be solved in six tries or less. The expanding Wordle-bubble may or may not last, but logophiles and puzzle aficionados owe a debt of gratitude to Josh Wardle and his labour of love for bringing so much pleasure to so many during such times of stress and uncertainty.

Pull back

Ukraine: the onus of peace rests with both Washington and Moscow

Old habits die hard. When those habits are hardened over a century, that saying is even truer. The United States of America and Russia today stand on the cusp of a dangerous conflict over Ukraine that in reality is a clash over their perceived spheres of influence. Russian troops have gathered on three sides of the former Soviet republic, while NATO is sending ships, planes and weapons to counter Moscow’s threat, all contributing to an ominous drift toward war. The Pentagon has reportedly placed 8,500 US soldiers on standby, for potential deployment to eastern Europe. Post-Brexit Britain is flexing its muscles too, sending weapons to Ukraine. The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, has accused the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, of stoking these tensions in Europe without any provocation from Ukraine or the West. Meanwhile, Mr Putin has alleged the US is trying to threaten Russia’s security. Both are being economical with reality. There can never be a justification for threatening any other nation’s sovereignty. At the same time, Russia has legitimate security concerns in the form of an eastward-expanding



NATO with American warheads stationed close to its borders. To be fair, all signs so far suggest that the US president, Joe Biden, is willing to work with Mr Putin to address some of his worries without agreeing to the

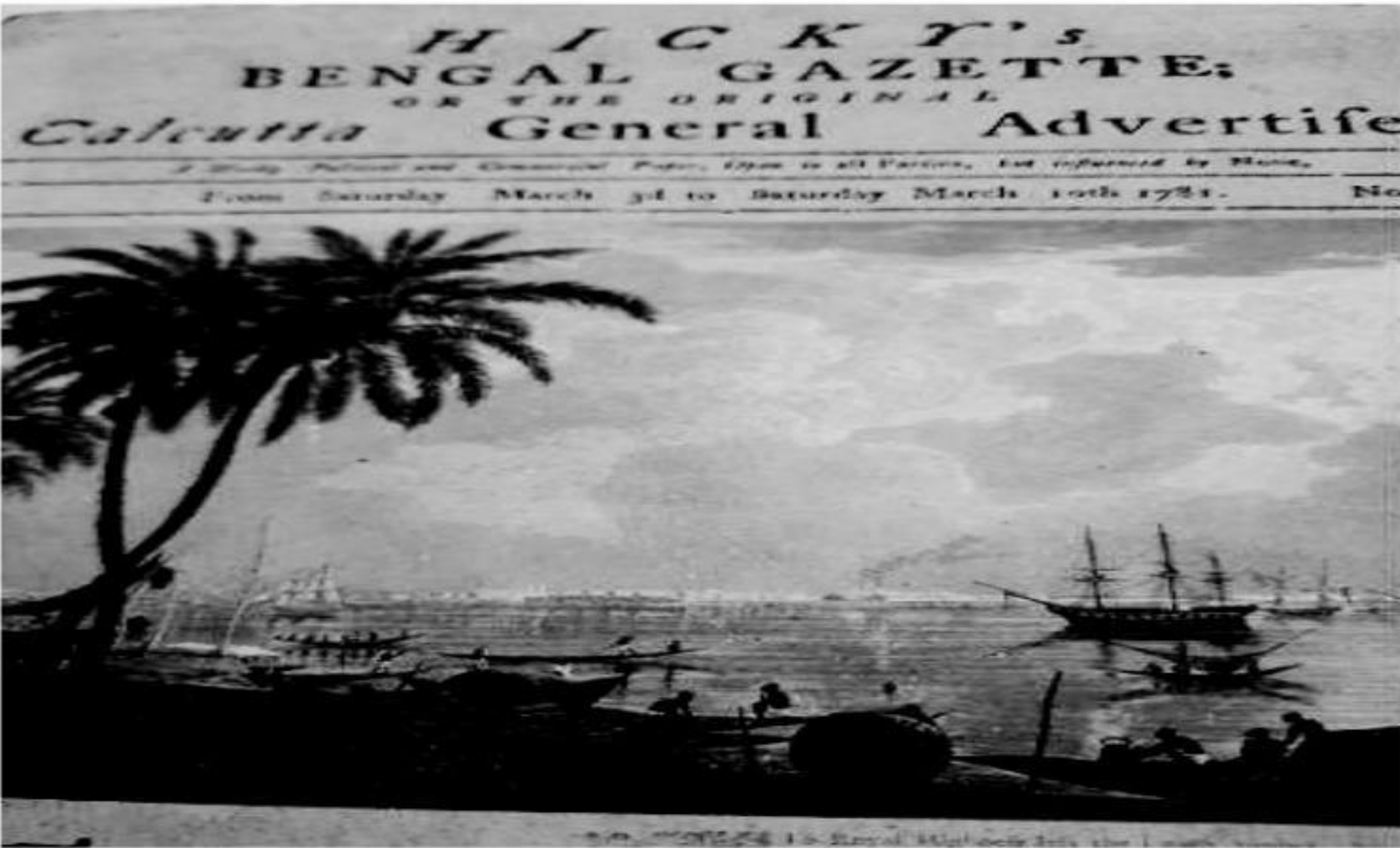
Kremlin’s demand that NATO commit to never including Ukraine. But as is so often the case with US foreign policy, there is a gap between word and action that undercuts America’s moral argument. Washington has said that it rejects the notion of global powers carving the world into spheres of influence. But the US itself has, starting with the Monroe Doctrine in Latin America, long demanded fealty from nations in what it views as its sphere of influence. Worse, the US is contradicting itself over the current crisis. By not ensuring the inclusion of Ukraine in its negotiations with Russia, the US is effectively assigning itself the role of suzerain over Kiev. That, in turn, only serves to undermine the elected government of Ukraine. It is a tragedy the country knows well, with Polish, Lithuanian, Ottoman, Tsarist and Soviet rulers controlling all or parts of modern Ukraine through large periods of the past millennium. In the 21st century, Europe’s second-largest nation by area must not be denied a say over its future.

Historic moment

Asia's first newspaper a powerful beacon of motivation

“To Print — or not to Print — that is the Question.” These opening words of The Printer’s Soliloqui by James Augustus Hicky hold a riveting tale. Tomorrow, January 29, is a significant milestone in the history of print journalism and the incessant struggle for the freedom of expression. For it was on this day in 1780 that Hicky, an eccentric Irishman, published Asia’s first newspaper, Hicky’s Bengal Gazette or The Original Calcutta General Advertiser.

Even 242 years later, Hicky’s intention to take on the establishment, the East India Company and Governor General Warren Hastings, holds relevance, the need perhaps heightened by time and circumstances. The English-language weekly newspaper, published from the capital of British India, was Hicky’s mode of hitting back at obstacles in his path, especially the vested interests of the government. Although the newspaper barely had a lifespan of two years (the East India Company seized the types and printing press), it was priced at Re 1 (like the papers in England at the time) and enjoyed a circulation of over 400 copies. While it was branded as “sensational”, it not only targeted Hastings for corruption but also influential clergyman, Johann Zacharias Kiermader, who had acquired assets beyond his known sources of income. Displaying traits of Irish courage and humour, Hicky lampooned the powers that be. He labelled Hastings as “the grand Turk” in an article in the Gazette and coined equally colourful names for several others. My fellow Fulbright alumnus, Andrew Otis, of the University of Maryland, United States of America, stumbled upon the memoirs of Hicky’s lawyer, William Hickey, at his university library



in New York and followed it up with a research stint in Calcutta in 2013-14, spending hours in our high court unearthing nuggets about the newspaper and Hicky. It resulted in an engrossing book, Hicky’s Bengal Gazette: The Untold Story of India’s First Newspaper. Speaking to me from Maryland this week, Otis said “probably the

most interesting part” of his research was the time he spent in the chambers of Calcutta High Court. He discovered to his delight that no researcher had set foot there although a wealth of information is stored among the papers on court proceedings bound in files from Hicky’s time. The high court has six separate archives

and Otis faced an ordeal navigating his way through the hallowed portals even with valid clearance. “The documents I was looking for were in the Centennial Building, an annex of the court. The process was extremely inefficient. Records were sometimes stored in folders between wood slats organized year by year. Every time I wanted to see some documents, they required a peon to open them for me, one at a time. There was no catalogue or index either.

I had heard that sometimes election ballots were stored in the building but that didn’t seem to be the case when I was there. Other archives were generally easier to access. But for the life of me I couldn’t understand why bringing a laptop to take notes would cause so many problems or create so much paperwork,” he said. In spite of these odds, Otis managed to delineate Hicky most convincingly with painstaking research. “Like no one in India before, Hicky began to believe his duty was to spotlight malfeasance, fraud and abuse of power,” he says of the feisty journalist of Calcutta’s Radhabazar. Broken by court battles and imprisonment, Hicky, who confronted both the State and the Church, died impoverished and ailing on a China-bound boat in October 1802. But he left a legacy that, Otis says, “was powerful enough to challenge an empire.” The upheavals that Hicky staunchly countered in his campaigns against Hastings’ dictatorial attitude and alleged corruption of missionaries like Kiermader could be a powerful beacon of motivation for mediapersons today. But is the fourth estate ready?

FREE PRESS

FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

Do we use Pegasus to help detect Pegasus?

The brouhaha over the latest Pegasus revelations should not make us lose sight of some basic facts; that there are serious allegations about the military-grade spyware being used on civilians; that the government has been stonewalling any query on it; that the Supreme Court had to finally tell the government that it could not hide behind 'national security' all the time. Now, even as the report of the expert committee appointed by the SC to look into the allegations is awaited, a New York Times report says that the ties between PM Modi and PM Netanyahu had "warmed" because of their agreement for the sale of "a package of sophisticated weapons and intelligence gear worth roughly \$2 billion — with Pegasus and a missile system as the center-pieces". It is difficult to dismiss off-hand the NYT report, which lists several countries including India, the UAE, Hungary, Poland and Mexico among those who had purchased the spying software, noting that they had not just strengthened ties with the Netanyahu government, but had shifted on support to Palestine and muted opposition to Israel at the United Nations.

Had it not been for a global media expose — Project Pegasus — the Indian government would have brushed aside the allegations, as it did in 2019. The project began when the Paris-based non-profit organisation, Forbidden Stories, got a leaked list of over 50,000 phone numbers allegedly targeted for surveillance by clients of NSO — the Israeli firm which makes the spyware — since 2016. It roped in Amnesty International as a technical partner and teamed up with 16 news media organisations in ten countries where 80 journalists began corroborating the details. Globally, the suspected victims include three sitting Presidents — France's Emmanuel Macron, Iraq's Barham Salih and South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa — and three current PMs: Pakistan's Imran Khan, Egypt's Mostafa Madbouly and Morocco's Saad-Eddine El Othmani.

In India, the favorite targets were journalists, some 40 of them at last count. Independent digital forensic analysis conducted on ten Indian phones showed signs of successful or attempted Pegasus hack. Among them are leading anti-establishment journalist Siddharth Varadarajan of the news portal 'The Wire' and independent journalist Paranjay Guha Thakurta. Pegasus software, whose sales to foreign governments are vetted by the Israeli government, helped Saudi Arabia spy on Jamal Khashoggi, dissident, journalist and columnist for The Washington Post, who was later killed in Turkey.

The Pegasus affair cannot be compared with Watergate, as Subramaniam Swamy suggests. It is far worse and on a global scale. The latter was a break-in ordered by the Nixon administration at the rival party's office to get some 'incriminating evidence'. Today, such evidence can not only be stealthily extracted from the mobile phone of the target, it can also be planted in the target's phone or laptop, as is the contention of the scholars and activists branded as terrorists in the Bhima Koregaon case.

Looking back, it was the effrontery of the government in scuttling a Parliamentary panel's meeting on the Pegasus issue that was the tipping point. On that day last July, representatives of three ministries — the ministry of electronics and information technology, the ministry of home affairs, and the department of telecommunication — refused to attend a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on information technology, clearly a contempt of the House. BJP members also stayed away, ensuring that there was no quorum for the meeting on citizens' data security and privacy.

Until this point, the SC had not warmed up to the issue. Immediately after this, it took up the PIL filed by veteran journalists N Ram and Sasi Kumar seeking an independent probe into the snooping which they said abridged several fundamental rights and appeared to represent an attempt to infiltrate, attack and destabilise independent institutions that act as critical pillars of our democratic set-up. At this stage, too, the government used the 'national security' card, only to be told off by the SC.

These are no ordinary times and this is no ordinary case. The party in power has neutralised the countervailing power of the constitutional authorities, the autonomous institutions and the media. The extensive use of the deadly spyware here is an assault on not just individual privacy but the very foundations of democracy. It appears that the government is prepared to use all the dirty tricks in the book to undermine its critics and opponents even as we celebrate 75 years of Independence. The Editors Guild of India had rightly called it "a moment that demands deep introspection and inquiry into the kind of society we are heading towards and how far we may have veered away from the democratic values enshrined in our Constitution".

Several acclaimed writers, journalists, lawyers, academicians and activists had collectively sought Chief Justice N V Ramana's 'immediate intervention' in the matter. Among other things, they want to know the justification for such targeting and the Constitutional authority which vetted the cases. They have also raised the critical need for judicial oversight of all interception orders, as in the UK. Non-government organisations such as the Software Freedom Law Centre and The Internet Freedom Foundation have been pushing for surveillance reform and a judicial oversight in our intelligence framework. Such dual-use technology, including facial recognition, is open to misuse by totalitarian regimes or by autocratic leaders. And the citizens literally pay the price, which is quite steep; Pegasus costs an estimated Rs 1.5cr per phone.

Let us not get distracted by the din over the latest revelations. The relevant question then and now is the same: Will we have to use Pegasus to detect Pegasus?

FPJ Archives JANUARY 8, 1964



Tired Nehru advised complete rest

The FPJ News Service, BHUBANESWAR, Jan. 7: - Prime Minister Nehru has been advised complete rest for "the present". His doctors, who flew in from Delhi today and examined him, found that his blood pressure has shown a tendency to be high. They however, are hopeful of his quick recovery within a short time. A communique issued from the Raj Bhavan at 7 p. m. said: "The Prime Minister has been working under great strain for some weeks. As a result, his blood pressure has shown a tendency to be high. He felt very tired and weak. It was, therefore, decided to send for doctors who have been attending on him in Delhi. They have examined him and are hopeful of his quick recovery within a short time. They have, however, advised complete rest and cancellation of all engagements for the present. The Prime Minister is cheerful and in good spirits."

Focus on jobs alone will defuse social time bomb

Viewpoint

★ Shivaji Sarkar



It may be imperative for Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to refocus the Union Budget from possible populism, an election-time compulsion, to professionalism, creating jobs everywhere.

The spark would be two recent incidents — one, a Gujarati family of four chasing 'better' opportunities freezing to death while illegally trying to enter the US and the other being the protests over railway jobs in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh for roughly 40,000 vacancies. It is a grim reminder of the state of India's job market. Let not Bihar and UP emerge as ticking time social bombs for the sheer size of the unemployed.

The unemployment rate rose to a four-month high, to 7.9 per cent in December 2021. It stood at 7 per cent in November last year and 9.1 per cent in December 2020. But jobs were shrinking even before that, in 2019 and earlier: The World Bank says that India has the highest total unemployment rate at 21.01 per cent for the population aged 15-24 years.

The thrust of the NSSO's 2017-18 data is that in actuality, the jobs situation is grimmer. The overall rate of open unemployment (as opposed to under-employment or disguised unemployment) had risen sharply after 2011-12. That has been proven in the NSSO numbers. Former Chief Economic Adviser K Subramanian had stressed that it was not employment but "the

key aspect is meaningful employment". The unofficially leaked NSSO data in 2017-18 revealed that the unemployment rate was never over 2.6 per cent between 1977-78 and 2011-12 but had jumped to 6.1 per cent in 2017-18. Now, it is touching nine-plus per cent.

Jobs have to be the priority in a country where the number multiplies every day. The Covid-19 lockdown was the immediate cause. Blaming any government for this criticality is not wise. As a nation, somewhere, political parties are found to be clueless. The NITI Aayog, supposedly tasked to suggest like its predecessor, the Planning Commission, is not apt at hitting the nail on the head.

The situation has been aggravating and the country is resorting to welfarism — a person slips into an abyss and they are provided free food for sustenance, instead of development — which would make the rescued person self-sufficient in income terms to add to their own and the country's economy. The Narendra Modi government has shown enough empathy with free food doles and MGNREGA jobs to keep people afloat. Now, it has to move beyond welfarism so that the country takes a leap to a better life.

The previous Budgets came up with entrepreneurship, Skill India, MUDRA and similar other schemes which did not fulfil the objectives. The concept of the unicorn has partly succeeded. Overall, jobs remain scarce and low-paid.

The Gujarati family was apparently well off with a teacher's job and sundry other chores. It could afford to pay \$ 2.5 lakh for its dream travel through agents for illegal entry to the US. What inspired them, like many other Gujaratis and Punjabis rushing to El Dorado may have been the flashy 'lifestyle'. In 2007, Babubhai Katara, an MP was caught trying to smuggle out carrying a Punjabi woman and her son as his own for Rs 30 lakh to the US. His party sus-

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: Obstacles are those frightening things that become visible when we take our eyes off our goals.

— HENRY FORD



Pre-Budget economic scenario: The big picture

Taking Stock

★ Kiran Nanda



The economy is in recovery mode. The long-awaited private capex has also begun. But sustainable and inclusive recovery is still distant. Budget 2022 is expected to take major steps towards making recovery sustainably durable and inclusive. Care has to be taken that the ongoing recovery does not slip. Despite India rebounding at the quickest pace among major economies this fiscal, the finance minister will have to provide much more than mere stimulus to make the growth trajectory credible. Budgetary support to economic recovery should be such that the RBI is enabled to switch its focus towards price stability.

A number of factors are making India's economic situation complex and uncertain:

- (1) The economy is vast, heterogeneous, diverse and fragmented;
- (2) Challenges and risks are accelerating because of the prevalence of the pandemic for over two years;
- (3) India has completed three decades of diverse economic reforms, which are progressing at varying paces;
- (4) Climate change events have become more frequent and drastic and
- (5) Geo-political upheavals are becoming more frequent, with changing global power equations.

Both the global and domestic environments need to be conducive to usher in sustainable economic revival. Global growth is projected to slow to 4.1 per cent in 2022 from 5.5 per cent in 2021. Governments abroad are resorting to measures to get their economies back to normalcy. Interest rate hikes have become imminent. The US Fed has started tightening loose monetary policy by tapering off bond purchases. At the recent Davos forum, the IMF and ECB leaders called for urgent policy actions to ensure an equitable recovery. The IMF MD Kristalina Georgieva emphasized, "We have to be data-driven and flexible. If

I were to offer policymakers a new year's resolution, it would be policy flexibility."

Domestically, the policy environment has been focusing on medium-term growth, by taking a plethora of well-meaning measures to boost manufacturing and infrastructure development. The Prime Minister has asked district managers to work on time-bound targets for taking roads to all villages. Other positives include the forex kitty at a comfortable \$635bn, providing import cover for more than 15 months; the fast digitisation of the economy; innovative technological developments and the emergence of a new ecosystem encouraging startups and unicorns; the pro-active push being given to green transition and tax buoyancy, amongst others.

Liquidity in the banking system continues to stay in the surplus mode. The RBI is proactively intervening with necessary steps when tax outflows create temporary tightness. Headwinds are aplenty. Investment rate has been declining. India had, on last count, as many as 53 million unemployed people, with a huge proportion of them being women. There is a slowdown in agriculture and rural belts. Terms of trade have become unfavourable for the agricultural sector. While the majority feel that the fiscal deficit target of 6.8 per cent for FY22 may be attained, it could slip on account of the shortfall in the dis-investment receipts.

Priority submissions
Though the compliance burden in general is getting reduced, TDS & TCS provisions are leading to increased compliance and litigation load on taxpayers. The scope of TDS/TCS needs a relook. A simplification of personal income tax and capital gains tax is needed. The I-T exemption limit at Rs 2.5 lakh and section 80C deduction limit at Rs 1.5 lakh ought to increase. Some remedial measures to check exacerbating inequalities because of the ongoing pandemic have become essential. Lockdowns and frequent restrictions on public mobility have affected incomes disproportionately for a large number of households.

It is extremely important that both Central and state governments work in tandem to facilitate sustainable growth in critical sectors like agribusiness and tourism. The role of policymaking and effective execution has become paramount. For the tourism sector; there should be a 'One In-

dia One Tourism' approach, inclusive of a one-tax structure.

The K-shaped medium-term economic recovery from the pandemic may not be sustainable for a large section of the population. This necessitates government interventions at multiple levels. The Budget being the most important government policy, it would be the right medium to chart a clear roadmap for action.

The long-term solution to India's socio-economic discontent is reliable, productive employment. The economy cannot afford to have jobless growth. India's employment rate at 43 per cent is much lower than the global standard of 55-58 per cent. Budgetary policy should have a pragmatic plan to sustainably create employment opportunities and for upskilling of individual workers, so that they are able to access appropriate jobs.

A tax on the super-rich is likely. At present, the highest tax, including surcharge on income, is 43 per cent. Ideally, no tax rates should be increased or new taxes introduced, which would go a long way to bridge the massive trust deficit that exists

The K-shaped medium-term economic recovery from the pandemic may not be sustainable for a large section of the population

between stakeholders and the government, which the government has already promised. The Budget should focus on implementation of disinvestment targets. The massive tax buoyancy seen in current fiscal may not be repeated next year. The government will have to smartly balance the need for augmenting tax revenues and having a robust and resilient capital market, essential for forex inflows and disinvestment. The inadequacy of a proper social support system has been clearly exposed by Covid. This presents a chance for the FM to set it right through affirmative action, including massive investment in public healthcare infrastructure. It is important to look at healthcare differently. The focus should be on formulating concrete steps to tackle the serious problem of child malnutrition. About two decades ago, the govern-

2007-08 Lehman Brothers meltdown.

The FM may turn a new leaf. India has thrived with a mixed economy. PSUs have the capacity to start a competitive economy that the private sector abhors. No national economy can thrive without competition within. A monopolised private or public sector would cause inbreeding, leading to poor performance.

She has to be innovative enough to help create rural farm and non-farm jobs that make the rural economy viable and lifestyle attractive, to stem rural migration.

Post-lockdown, it would be a wait-and-watch situation for the private sector, says Vikas Chahha, MD, Global Outsourcing. The FM has to observe global practices, particularly sharp Chinese economic policies, the European backlash against China and the possible escalation of western sanctions against Russia. These would be important to create India-centric policies to increase jobs in different sectors.

The private sector also has a tendency to employ less and pay less. If jobs are to be a priority, this policy has to be given up. The PSUs can deliver here, creating a situation where the private sector also would have to pay just wages, may be to their dislike. The FM has to think in terms of the nation's growth and the promised \$5 trillion economy. In the new scenario, she has to involve and inspire the Indian private sector to create quality jobs and make them capable of competing with their international rivals. The FM has to have a sharp job-creation strategy to initiate the steps to boost urban, rural, private and public employment. This will help India accelerate its growth pace with larger participation of the population and become the cynosure of the new world economy.

The writer is a veteran journalist, an observer of the socio-politico-economy and a media academician

GUIDING LIGHT

Feeling at home

— Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Feeling at home, wherever and with whomsoever you are is what I would call the true evolution of human beings. For that, we need to take a look within ourselves.

Thirty years ago, there was so much prejudice towards spirituality and wisdom. People would want to keep it at arm's length and believed that it was not for them. Today, there is acceptance. People are willing to try it and once they see that it benefits them, they are less prejudiced.

Life comes to us like a gift, a very charming gift, but we seldom open it. It's all about opening ourselves and being open. Life is a gift wrapped in golden paper, which is waiting for each one of us to unwrap. Many of us are too formal, but such an atmosphere is not conducive to knowledge. We need to be in an informal atmosphere to know something about ourselves and gain deep wisdom. When you meet somebody, you ask, "How are you?" Now I have a question for you. Did you really greet the person or did you do it as a formality? Most of the time we exchange pleasantries, we really don't

mean it.

But, if the same words come to you from your grandmother, they carry some energy, some vibrations, and some presence. Life becomes so dry and the world becomes charmless when we relate at a superficial level. In the coming decades, the biggest challenge in the world will be mental depression. Belongingness can create a better atmosphere and environment around us. It is for us to create that environment. Can you feel at home with everyone? Then you can truly say you have evolved. For that, we need to go within. A baby smiles 400 times a day; a teenager only smiles 17 times, and an adult hardly smiles. We don't smile from our hearts.

Why is that? It is the stress and the tension that we carry. Meditation can help you get back to your nature, which is pure innocence. Then a smile comes from deep within, that nobody can snatch from you. We should all dream of a stress-free and violence-free world, one where there is total belongingness.

(Spiritual organisations keen to be featured in this space contact : features@fpj.co.in)

School Of Thieves

STORY

THE renowned teacher Senayana had several disciples. One day, he told them that he was looking for a husband for his daughter who had reached the marriageable age. "I will give her to the man who brings me something valuable that he has stolen without being seen by anyone," said the teacher. All his disciples except one left the gurukul and returned one by one with the things they had stolen. One brought a precious diamond; another, pearl earrings; and yet another, a bracelet. They all told him that they had succeeded in stealing their gifts without being seen by anyone. Senayana noticed the disciple who hadn't gone out to steal. "Why didn't you bring anything for my daughter?" he asked. "Do you think that she is not good enough for you?" "On the contrary," replied the disciple. "I think she is too good for me! But the condition you have set is impossible to fulfil." "Why do you say that?" asked Senayana. "How can I steal without being seen? I would see myself steal and I would never be able to live with myself afterwards!" he said. Senayana was pleased with his reply. "Well spoken, son! I was looking for someone like you. You are wise and morally upright!" Senayana gave his daughter to the disciple in marriage and asked the rest of his disciples to return the things they had stolen. **Moral:** Live by your conscience.

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One flew over the nest

#Amit ShahInGoa

Development of small states is Narendra Modi government's priority: Amit Shah in poll-bound Goa

Press Trust of India@PTI_News

The Goa governor who complained that the BJP govt in Goa was corrupt got transferred to Meghalaya. Goa got destroyed by the sitting (defected) BJP govt. Enough is enough!

Kesar Safed Pista@kesarsafedpista

Sure, now that big states have been destroyed by BJP, why not !

@_NairFYI

After failing the biggest states? Where are the jobs? Have put back more people below poverty line.

Prasad Rishi @Prasad17431090

But Modi is not fighting in GOA / He will not be GOA CM How he is responsible for Goa development?

jaiparkash@mathurapuri

MONDAY'S SWIPE

Chopper swiping money...

BUDGET

ARCHANGEL MICHAEL'S MESSAGE FOR THE DAY

It's time to heal, take a break. Breathe and relax. Do not rush into action, think and then act.

Some of you will get a medical check-up done or visit a hospital.

Your sleep patterns are unhealthy, fix it. I have heard your prayers regarding protecting you and your loved ones.

Tip for the day: Close your eyes and visualise golden light and say "Archangel Michael help me to relax. This or better, thank you."

Lots of divine miracles your way, Sheetal Sapan Mhatre.

Will it be a common man’s budget?

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be presenting her fourth budget on February 1. The exercise is over. The budget speech is getting final touches. The FM will present her pre-budget Economic Survey on Monday in parliament ahead of the Union Budget.

The Economic Survey is the document that gives growth projection, policy prescriptions, where the government had failed during current fiscal etc. It also gives recommendations on what should be done during the next financial year. The Economic Survey 2021-22 projected a growth of 11 per cent but it is estimated that it may not be more than 9.2 per cent for the current fiscal.

The government would hide under the cover of Corona pandemic to explain why it could not achieve the projected 11 per cent growth despite RBI rolling out several measures to support the economy. But a look at the earlier GDP growth indicates that the Economic Survey 2018-19 had es-

timated the GDP growth for fiscal 2019-20 at 7 per cent. But it increased only by 4 per cent. Similarly, the Economic Survey 2017-18 had projected a growth rate of 7-7.5 for 2018-19, but the GDP expanded by only 6.5 per cent.

Well, all these statistics make sense for the economists, industry, trade and other sectors but what about the common man who has voted the BJP to power? Year after year, we have been seeing that the common man is left in lurch. His aspirations, the government claims to have met, but in real terms, he continues to be the worst sufferer. Let us take a simple example of health insurance. A majority of the hospitals refused to honour the insurance on one pretext or the other and neither the government nor the insurance companies could come to their rescue. In view of this, the citizens expect that the upcoming budget would address this issue. They also expect that the government may announce tax deduction for those

who had to pay from their pocket for the Covid treatment. The government always provides lip service, sympathises with the common man whose votes it needs most to come to power but finally gives peanuts to this section in the budget. If they get Re 1 benefit in some form or the other, they must pay at least Rs 10 extra from their pocket. Every year like Casablanca on the burning deck, the common man keeps expecting increase in annual tax deduction limit. It remains a distant dream. Similarly, the slogan for home for all remains a slogan as the government does not consider increasing tax deduction limit for repayment of home loan principal under Section 80c. Further, adjusting tax slabs with the increase in other deductions can help the salaried taxpayer, specifically the below Rs 50 lakh per annum bracket with more money in hand.

The question is: Will the government will consider reducing the highest tax slab rate from 30 per cent to 25 per cent, with a cor-

responding increase in the limit from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 20 lakh? Deduction under Section 80C of the Income Tax Act, 1961, provides for various types of payments made by taxpayers who are eligible for relief such as PPF, fixed deposits, housing loan repayment (principal portion), insurance, and expenditure made towards tuition fees. However, the limit under this section is quite low. Experts also recommend enhancement of exemption limit to Rs 3,00,000 from the current limit of Rs 1,50,000.

The common man also expects reduction in GST rates and steep fall in petrol and diesel prices. It is unfortunate that the Centre and the State governments refuse to reduce the VAT on these products when the prices shoot up. They only want to mop up and make good the loss in revenue generation which is more because of policy paralysis. Let us hope that Nirmala ji will be more benevolent towards the common man this time

Why not promise direct cash transfer?

THE WAY AHEAD



Dr Bharat Jhunjunwala

Political parties are competing with one another in promising freebies to the people. The people are already getting free education and farmers free electricity. The government has already implemented programmes such as free distribution of

gas cylinders under Ujwala scheme. Now, political parties are promising laptops, bicycles and even in one case reportedly free distribution of liquor is offered in addition to the freebies already being given.

Whether these distributions will get votes or not is something we may not know; but it is clear that such distribution does not help people in earning stable and long-term incomes. There is a saying that it is better to teach a person how to fish rather than to give him fish. He can fill his stomach for a long period of time once he learns how to fish. Similarly, the distribution of Ujwala cylinders does not help the people earn long-term incomes. Further, the purpose of human life is not merely to eat food. There is a saying one eats to live; rather than lives to eat. "Eating to live" means that there is more than eating to one's life. This "more" consists of jobs, self-esteem, the development of entrepreneurship and a purposefulness in life.

The difficulty is that in the present times of robots, automatic machines, artificial intelligence, we are increasingly adopting automated production and the number of jobs available for the people is reducing by the day. Demonetisation and GST have further put the nails in the coffin of small and medium enterprises. These are the sectors that were creating most of the jobs. Therefore, there are no jobs for the people today. As a result, the people are helpless. The only recourse in this situation is to provide them with some free distribution to keep their body and souls together. It must be clearly said that this is not the best way to achieve human welfare, but given the march of new technologies and our infatuation with cheap goods, there seems to be no possibility of creating jobs. Therefore, in the present times, we



It must be clearly said that this is not the best way to achieve human welfare, but given the march of new technologies and our infatuation with cheap goods, there seems to be no possibility of creating jobs. Therefore, in the present times, we have to necessarily adopt some kind of free distribution to secure the minimum welfare of people

have to necessarily adopt some kind of free distribution to secure the minimum welfare of people.

The first objection to such free distribution is that this is not financially sustainable. The government does not have enough revenue to provide free cash distribution in a substantial manner. The issue here is slightly different. The government expenditures take place in three ways: One, free distribution of cash or kind; Two, government consumption; and three, government investment. If we have to increase the expenditures on free distribution, then we have to reduce either government consumption or government investment. If the reduction is made in government consumption, then free distribution becomes sustainable. On the other hand, if the reduction is made in government investment, then indeed free distribution becomes unviable. Therefore, free distribution is itself viable.

The second objection is that free distribution is misuse of tax money. Indeed, the taxes are paid mostly by the upper classes. The use of tax revenue for providing free distribution to the people involves transfer from the rich to the common man. Now, this is part of the welfare state. The government has provided that corporations will have to spend part of their profits in "Corporate Social Responsibility" programmes. Similarly, if the government uses the tax revenue for providing free distribution to the people, then it also is like the Corporate Social Responsibility.

The real issue in free distribution is

whether we distribute in terms of cash or kind. The distribution in kind is the same as providing subsidies on fertilisers and food grains. The idea is that by providing subsidies on specific goods we encourage the people to increase the use of those particular goods. For example, in 1960s when the country was facing food shortage because of drought, the provision of subsidies on fertilisers was made so that the farmers would be encouraged to use more fertilisers and increase production. But this was an emergency situation.

Similarly, when the government provides free education, the underlying idea is that people would be encouraged to send their children to the schools. The presumption in both these cases is that the people are themselves fools and they do not understand that necessity of either using fertilisers or of sending their children to school. This idea does not seem to be correct. The fundamental basis of democracy is that people are wise enough to be able to choose the Prime Minister of the country. If they are competent to choose the Prime Minister, how can they not be competent to decide to use chemical fertilisers and provide education to their children?

My sense is that the farmers would have used fertilisers even if the government did not provide subsidies on fertilisers in the 1960s because it would have been profitable for them to increase production of food grains. The real reason, therefore, for distribution in kind is not that the people need to be goaded in a particular direction. The real

reason is that the bureaucracy gets huge benefits when distribution in kind takes place. For example, the bureaucrats get opportunities in buying, storing and selling the food grains and in making of ration cards in the public distribution system. So, the distribution in kind is actually a smokescreen to protect the interests of the bureaucracy.

We should therefore, abandon this whole idea of distribution in kind and move towards distribution in cash so that people can get enough income to keep their body and souls together and they can then use their income wisely as per their own wisdom to obtain education, fertilisers and whatever may be their need.

In conclusion, the ideal approach is to change the economic model and move it towards creation of jobs. If that is not possible, then the second level solution is to go for cash distribution and empower the people to use the money as per their own requirements. The third level solution is to go for distribution in kind, which provides more benefits to the bureaucracy and less to the people. In this election time it is imperative that the parties move from promising free distribution of laptops and bicycles to free distribution of cash.

(The author is former Professor of Economics at IIM, Bengaluru)

(The opinions expressed in this column are those of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of The Hans India)

Hollow claims to a responsible state

DC PATHAK

PAKISTAN Prime Minister Imran Khan on January 14 unveiled the public version of what is claimed to be 'the first ever' codified National Security Policy (NSP) of Pakistan, defining the direction the country should take in the next few years. It was projected as the outcome of a full civil-military consensus, culmination of the untiring work of the officials of the National Security Division over the 'past seven years' and 'a proud moment' for all Pakistanis.

Khan spoke of the dire need of a 'multi-prong strategy,' pointing out that the country had since its inception focused on military security because of 'an insecure environment' created for it by 'a neighbour that is seven times bigger,' and tries to make out that Pakistan would now work for economic security, strong presence of the 'rule of law' and regional peace.

The open part of the document is no doubt rhetorical in content – replete with platitudes like 'pushing national cohesion through an inclusive national discourse,' 'prioritising equitable economic development' and 'reintroducing regional connectivity to realign the country's foreign policy.' It clearly contends, however, that India is the principal adversary of Pakistan and ventures into an explicit criticism of the Indian regime under Prime Minister Narendra Modi for allegedly pursuing 'divisive policies. Projecting India as the main threat, it contends that prospects of violent conflict with it have grown because of a regressive and dangerous ideology

Projecting India as the main threat, the National Security Policy (NSP) of Pakistan contends that prospects of violent conflict with it have grown because of a 'regressive and dangerous ideology which is gripping the collective consciousness in the immediate neighbourhood.' Khan has openly framed Indo-Pak relationship in Hindu-Muslim terms



which is gripping the collective consciousness in the immediate neighbourhood.'

Three clear readings can be made from what the Pak Prime Minister said in the presence of the top brass of his country's military establishment, and these would add to the security concerns of India.

First is the uninhibited 'communalisation' of Indo-Pak relations by Imran Khan who has for some time been vocal about the issue of 'minority rights' in India under the BJP regime. The second is the total absence of any criticism of extremists and radicals operating out of the territory of Pakistan with faith-based motivation. And lastly, the policy document carries an imprint of Sino-Pak strategic alliance that has given a new geopolitical profile to Pakistan.

Keeping up its belligerent posture towards India, Pakistan alleged

that the 'rise in Hindutva-driven politics in India is deeply concerning and impacting Pakistan's immediate security. References to the seven years of study that went into the framing of NSP shows that Pakistan is targeting the rule of Prime Minister Modi in this context. In short, Pakistan maintained that normalising ties with India will have Kashmir at its core.

Anti-India lobbies have been active on these lines within India and abroad, but it is unprecedented that Khan has openly framed Indo-Pak relationship in Hindu-Muslim terms. This is an enlargement of the Pak stand of regarding Kashmir as a 'Muslim' issue. The security policy refers to 'our diverse cultural heritage' in terms of accepting various segments of Islamic spectrum – from 'revivalism' of Islamic radicals who subscribed to Emirate to Islamism of the advocates of a Re-

public run on the concept of 'sovereignty of Allah.' This is why Pakistan has never faulted the militant outfits of Islamic extremists and radicals and reserved its condemnation of 'terrorism' only to raise an allegation that it is India that is behind the domestic turbulence in Pakistan.

Within the Muslim world, Pakistan remained a source of strength for the block led by Saudi Arabia but is now for some time getting identified with an emerging group including Turkey and Malaysia that does not hesitate to criticise the US and as a conscious policy showed willingness to adjust with Islamic radicals for whom the US-led West was the prime enemy.

Recent developments in Afghanistan add to India's concern on threat from Islamic terrorists. The call of Jihad given by Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS for political reasons,

to 'bring back the lost glory of Islam' consequently had many takers too. The democratic world needs to have an effective strategy to handle this rising threat to its security.

Finally, there is a foreign policy shift in Pakistan broadly corresponding to the emergence of Sino-Pak strategic alliance cemented by the CPEC that provided an upper hand to China in this axis and a gradual drift of US-Pakistan relations in a direction where Pakistan was able to show recalcitrance toward American line on many vital issues like terrorism, Afghan Emirate and Kashmir.

Pakistan is evidently banking heavily on its alliance with China in securing its own geopolitical importance for the world, having its sway in Afghanistan for maintaining its 'strategic depth' there after entering into a 'give and take' with China in regard to any apprehension that China might have of an outside interference with China's doings in Xinjiang and achieving an equilibrium with both China and Russia over the situation in Afghanistan.

The National Security Policy announced by Khan with such fanfare is meant to create the impression that Pakistan is devoting to internal economic growth and better domestic governance – its real aim is to project the line that a much graver threat to Pakistan's security is posed by India under Prime Minister Modi. India has to suitably take this into account in dealing with the Sino-Pak axis that is now becoming very active against this country.

(The writer is a former Director of Intelligence Bureau)



LETTERS

Lay focus on leprosy eradication

World Leprosy Day is celebrated annually around the globe on the last Sunday of January to raise awareness of the disease and call for an end to the social discrimination against people suffering from leprosy. Each year, around 2,00,000 new cases are reported globally. India is home to the highest number of leprosy patients in the world. On average, 57 people per 10 lakh population in India are diagnosed with the disease. Today an effective treatment exists in the form of multidrug therapy, and with early detection and treatment, the disease can be cured without complications. Many people across the globe continue to suffer from this curable disease due to a lack of medical care. We must join hands to fight against the disease for its elimination.

Dr Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, Hyderabad

Schools resumption a welcome move

The decision of Telangana government to reopen schools has left a ray of hope and relief for many students and teachers. Online classes are quite ineffective and unproductive for the genuine development of the students. Covid pandemic has ruined the academic education. All educational institutions will have to enforce all Covid safety norms and the management and the staff of all schools should follow Covid protocols strictly. The authorities concerned in every district should render full support to the management of all educational institutions.

Santhini P, Karimnagar

II

The government of Telangana keeping in view the opinion of experts that it makes no sense in keeping the schools shut any more after it is established that virus has no dangerous signs to affect the lives is a step in the right direction. Most of the urban poor and rural households have no internet connectivity with the result they are unable to take online classes. However, it should keep a close vigil on students so that they follow Covid-appropriate behaviour so that educational institutions function smoothly without any interruptions.

KR Srinivasan, Secunderabad

Politicalisation of armed forces

A propos "Dazzling drones light up sky" (30 Jan). From my childhood I have always enjoyed watching Beating Retreat. I don't want to be cynical, but I am sorry to say this time around apart from the drone and laser show, this year's beating retreat ceremony was a damp squib as even the standard notes were jarring including "Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo" which was always touching to hear in the solo voice of Lata Mangeshkar. Moreover, in the name of Azai Ke Amruth Mahotsav, the last half an hour except the image of Gandhiji and our Map, it was like the government "beating its own drum" and thus it was not all looking like a military ceremony. It looks like it is the beginning of politicalisation of our armed forces.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

Jagan fulfils another electoral promise

THE Jagan Mohan Reddy government in AP has fulfilled one more election promise by creating 13 more districts. It will certainly serve the purpose of decentralisation and geographical convenience. It is known fact that there is a long demand for separate Konaseema district in East Godavari and 50 years fight for Palanadu district in Gunturu district. The exercise has honoured the towering personalities like Alluri Seetharama Raju and NT Rama Rao by naming after them Paderu and Vijayawada districts respectively besides giving due respect to spiritual centres like Tirupathi and Puttaparthi.

Pratapa Reddy Y, Tiruvuru

II

WITHOUT exception and with no lengthy explanation, everyone says in the entire country since Independence that Rayaseema is the most backward region in India. Hence, this region demands special treatment. As a beginning, I request AP CM to create 3 more new districts with Headquarters at, Guntakal, Madanapalli and Kavali as part of the Greater Rayalaseema.

Matti Reddy, Tirupati

A life-saving mission

In what can be termed as a passenger-friendly and life-saving mission, the Road Transport and Highways Ministry has issued a notification to introduce fire alarm and suppression systems in inter-city passenger buses and school buses. Fire protection systems would also be installed in the passenger compartment of buses meant for long distance travel and in school buses. During a fire mishap the heat and smoke in the passenger compartment will be controlled by thermal management devices which will provide additional evacuation time to occupants to exit the vehicle without rush and panic. The ministry should now think of a similar system in smaller vehicles too.

M Pradyu, Kannur

thehansreader@gmail.com



Sack arrogant ministers, demands K'taka BJP MLA

DAVANAGERE: M.P. Renukacharya, senior BJP MLA and staunch follower of former CM B.S. Yediyurappa, has said that more than 15 arrogant cabinet ministers in Karnataka should be sacked.

Speaking to reporters on Sunday, Renukacharya said, these ministers are not responsive. "I have given a list of arrogant ministers to party President Nalin Kumar Kateel and CM Bommai. They should be sacked in the interest of the party and the government," he maintained.

"One of the ministers whom I tried to contact didn't receive my calls. His personal secretary said that the minister has tested positive for Covid and he is under quarantine. Later, he was found attending cabinet meetings. I spoke about the issue with CM Bommai," Renukacharya explained.

Yediyurappa's kin suicide case: Don't know what pushed her to end life: Husband

BENGALURU: The Karnataka Police have recorded the statement of Dr Neeraj, in connection with the suicide case of former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa's granddaughter Dr Soundarya. Dr Neeraj, Soundarya's husband in his statement said that the couple shared a good bonding, there was no crisis between them and he is not able to understand what pushed Soundarya to the verge of committing suicide, police sources said on Sunday. Soundarya committed suicide by hanging from a ceiling fan in her flat leaving behind her 9-month-old male baby on Friday. Dr Neeraj has said that he led a cordial life with Soundarya. He claimed that they did not quarrel or had any difference of opinion among themselves.

Dr Neeraj has further stated that the incident has shocked him and he is not able to understand what led her to commit suicide.

Read more at

<https://epaper.thehansindia.com> (Bengaluru edition)

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

More of the same?

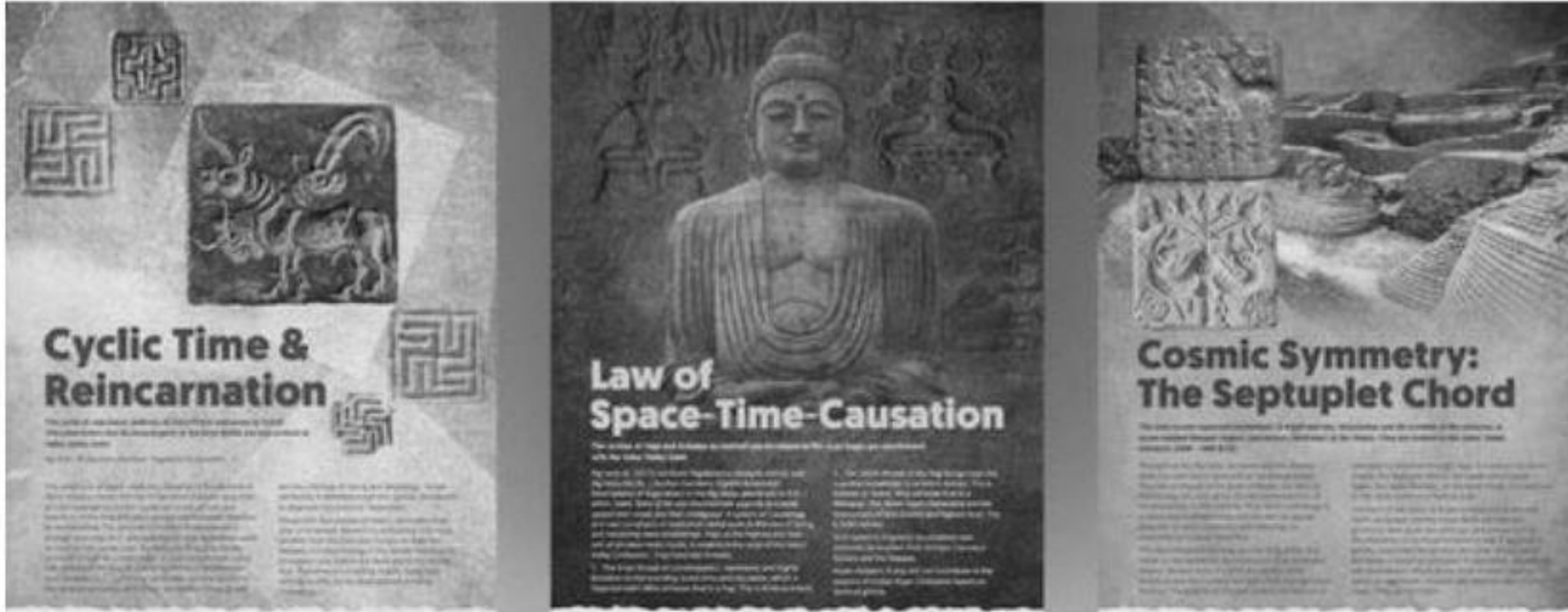
US President Joe Biden finds himself in a particularly galling situation regarding his administration's China policy. Because it's not just his political foes who are panning his handling of a rampant Beijing; the searing criticism is coming from the simpatico. Perhaps the perils of giving into the left cabal in the Democratic Party have come to bite Mr Biden in the fleshy parts. For, he is being accused by pro-establishment policy makers, sections of the media, and party lawmakers of effectively following what has been derisively described as a 'Trump Lite' approach towards China that continues, according to them, to be destructive and unimaginative. The tough line on China being followed by Mr Biden, thankfully saps the bombast of his predecessor, is justified by his officials as one that has strong bi-partisan support. According to foreign policy expert Jeffrey A. Bader, when asked to distinguish its China strategy from that of its predecessor's, the Biden Administration says it favours a multilateral approach of rallying allies, in contrast to the unilateralism of the America First practitioners. "Yet, it is intellectual laziness to justify policy on the basis of bipartisanship rather than formulate a (new) one. In no other instance, whether it's US policy toward Iran, Ukraine and Russia, or EU-NATO, has the administration sought to duplicate Trump's policy," he writes. Scholars such as Mr Bader quote opinion polls to assert that Democrats do not have a visceral dislike of China which Republicans do and argue that in taking an uncompromising stand, President Biden is guilty of continuing to pursue a Trump-era policy under the guise of bi-partisanship at the expense of grassroots Democratic views. What these critics from within fail to recognise is that politicians usually have their ear to the ground and whatever opinion polls may claim, Mr Biden is attempting to keep the Democrats from lurching to the left when it comes to China. On the substantive issues, he has done well to jettison the incendiary and provocative language of his predecessor while continuing to insist that meaningful cooperation, as opposed to transactional economic and trade ties, with Beijing would be possible only if there are fundamental changes in its hegemonic approach and undemocratic state apparatus. Further, by recognising and calling out the Chinese desire for domination and gearing up international diplomacy including strengthening the Quad, launching AUKUS, doubling down on its East Asia security alliance, and keeping its strategic focus on the Asia-Pacific to ensure the Communist Party of China doesn't have a free run, Washington feels it is on the right track. The strategy of "decoupling" from China by continuing a high tariff regime, validating the FBI's sharp focus on Chinese and Chinese-Americans conducting research at American universities especially in sensitive dual-use technologies, and closing down various exchange programmes including with the Centre for Disease Control given the data-fudging by the Chinese which was blatant during the coronavirus pandemic, are apt too. Crucially, President Biden has indicated that acceptance of the One-China Policy is not sacrosanct given the aggressive moves by Beijing against Taiwan. Trump Lite or not, this is a policy approach which needs to be supported by all sensible sections of the American establishment.

Soldier returns

Till a couple of days ago, the world knew Burkina Faso as a geographical expression in Africa. But this week's coup signifies the return of military strongmen to the volatile region. There is little doubt that the new wave of uprisings occurred after democracy had seemingly become entrenched in the region. Less than five months after soldiers in fatigues appeared on national television in Guinea to announce that they had removed President Alpha Condé from office, the spectacle was repeated on Monday in Burkina Faso, as the military proclaimed the overthrow of head of state Roch Kaboré. Which is not to forget the double-putsch in Mali, where army officers deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020. They promised the regional bloc Ecowas that they would organise elections the following month, but in May 2021 they staged a second takeover to reassert control over the transition and later set out plans to stay in power for almost five more years. West Africa was a region where constitutional multi-party civilian politics had become the norm. Almost all countries were at least formally democratic, even if some elected Presidents, once in office, twisted the rules to perpetuate their stay in power. Now three members of Ecowas (the Economic Community of West African States) are under the command of men in uniform. Is the long-forgotten era of the military strongman making a comeback? In Burkina Faso, as in Mali, it is the jihadist security crisis that has clearly exerted a destabilising toll. The relentless reports of Islamist attacks fuelling popular anger on streets and resentment among soldiers who feel they are being sent out, too lightly armed, underpaid or even underfed, to sustain the struggle against militant groups that take no prisoners are a flashpoint. This week's Ouagadougou putsch is an outburst of exasperation from the lower and middle-ranking soldiers who risk their lives on the frontline in a brutally uncompromising conflict. Feelings had become particularly intense since a 14 November jihadist attack on the Inata gendarmerie garrison in northern Burkina Faso that left 53 of the 120 troops dead. Some in Burkina Faso want Russian forces to replace the French - as they have in Mali. Demands for a more effective security strategy had built up through last year, and President Kaboré overhauled first his government and then the military command in a bid to regain the political momentum and restore some stability to the battered northern and eastern provinces. Over the past two years, more than 1,000 schools have downed their shutters and 1.5 million people have fled their homes to escape the violence, some consigned to begging for money or food on the streets of the capital. More than 2,000 people have lost their lives. Burkina Faso is virtually a powder-keg, a recipe for the soldier to step in.

A Terrible Bargain

Professor Joy Sen researched and conceptualized the publication of a 2022 calendar by IIT-Kharagpur (IIT-K) titled "Recovery of the Foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems." In addition to months, dates and days, this calendar carries a narrative of our past. In particular, the narrative attempts to convince the reader that the creators of the vast Harappan civilization were also the authors of the Rigveda, and that motifs of Harappan seals are alluded to in the Hindu sacred texts. In this attempt, many incorrect or obsolete claims have been made



The IIT-K calendar essay declares that "glaciers of Mount Kailash is the source of two important river Valley Civilizations", Indus and Brahmaputra. This is not correct. Brahmaputra originates from the Manasarovar lake region, and Indus from the Bokhar Chu glacier in the northern slopes of Mt Kailash. The essay further claims that the "tributaries of Indus as mentioned in the Rig Veda are sourced to the Siwalik ranges in the Central-Eastern Himalayas". This is also not correct. Rigveda is familiar with the entire Indus river system. Western tributaries of Indus like Kubha [Kabul], suvastu [swat], and Gomti [Gomal] are mentioned in addition to the Punjab rivers. No river in the Indus system arises in the Shivalik range.

The essay claims that "the entire antiquity of Indian Vedic Civilization" was deliberately limited within 2000 BCE "to best accommodate an Aryan Invasion Myth leading to a split of Vedic culture and the Indus Valley Civilization!" When Vedic texts were being interpreted, archaeology and genetics were still into the future. Rigveda repeatedly refers to Indra as purandra, the destroyer of forts. It was assumed that the forts that Indra targeted were located in India. However, when Harappan sites were excavated, it became clear that no structures matched the Rigvedic description of the forts. The scholarly consensus now is to attribute the Harappan decline to environmental issues.

The essay states that "the objectives of the Aryan Invasion is one of aggression, genetic superiority by race and skin color." Aryan "invasion theory" is a dead horse, the flogging of which perpetually yields rich ideological dividends. The key question is whether the Aryans came from outside the subcontinent or not. If they did, it is a minor matter whether they are to be called invaders or immigrants. Rejection of the invasion hypothesis does not automatically make Aryans the Harappans.

The essay declares that there is "striking similarity between millions of words evident in Indian languages and others in the European Tree of Linguistics," an inordinate exaggeration. On a more sober note, the introduction of Sanskrit into Europe, availability of large number of old manuscripts, and development of philology as a science led to the postulation of an Indo-European family of languages. Within this family, two branches, the Indic and the Iranian, produced literature, Rigveda and Avesta, respectively. These two texts are so closely related linguistically that one cannot be studied without the help of the other. The differences in grammar are very small. One can find verses in the oldest portions of Avesta which by well-established phonetic substitutions can be turned into intelligible Sanskrit. Sanskrit terms like Arya, asura, hotr, kshetra, Nabhanedishta, Prthu, Vtrahana, yajna, Yama have Avestan counterparts. Any theory on Aryans to be admissible, leave aside acceptable, must first and foremost satisfactorily explain the Indo-European linguistic commonalities and Indo-Iranian literary similarities. Rigveda is familiar

with metal (copper) and spoked wheel. The latter as a technological invention can be dated to 4000 BCE. Rigveda cannot be older than this date. The IIT-K calendar essay claims to bring "the Vedic Culture and the Indus Valley Civilization (7000 BCE-1500 BCE) under one fold; 7000 BCE is still Neolithic era. If Aryans, the carriers of Vedic culture, were present in India at such an early date, this has serious implications: all Indo-European speakers must also be placed in India and introduced to copper and spoked wheel before dispersal.

Quite improbably, if Harappans were Aryans, Zarathushtra must also be stationed in India. The Zoroastrian texts, however, do not mention India, there is no indication of familiarity with Indus, and constantly refer to Central Asia. In a recent interview ("IIT's Aryan thrust baffles scientists," The Telegraph, 28 December 2021), Professor Sen accused geneticists of propagating ideas of Aryan invasion in migration and population genetics studies. This is blatantly false. As we



know, genes are our inherited endowment. Individuals who have a set of common ancestors will have similar genetic endowment. A group of individuals with a different set of ancestors will have some shared and some unshared genetic characteristics with those descended from a separate ancestral group. Indeed, these shared and unshared genetic characteristics provide pillars for inferring ancestral components of contemporary population groups. Further, since genes move with people, the patterns of frequencies of genetic characteristics in extant population groups can help estimate directions and extents of migration admixture using specific population genetic frameworks. Random genetic changes caused by various environmental factors accumulate; their frequencies usually vary across geographical regions.

In the geographical region where one or more genetic changes have arisen, the frequencies of these changes are high. These changes are carried to other regions as people migrate from this region. However, in the recipient regions their frequencies are expected to be lower. If there is continued migration, the frequencies of these changes are expected to consistently decrease as one moves away from the region or origin of these genetic changes. Using this framework of expectations, there is unequivocal evidence that some "genetic signatures" ~ constella-

tions of specific genetic changes ~ that arose in Central Asia were carried by migration of people to India. One genetic signature, "U2e" is found widely, in low and variable frequencies, in Indian population groups. The epicentre of this signature is in Western Eurasia (including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), as evidenced by its high frequency in that region. The inference from these data is that migrants from Eurasia (Indo-European/Aryan speakers) entered India about 4000 years ago and admixed with the indigenous populations of India, descendants of those who arrived in India on a wave of migration from out of Africa about 65,000 years ago. Similar evidence can be found in respect of variation in the genomic signature called R1a1a. Recent studies based on DNA isolated from fossils have confirmed that migrants from the Kazakhstan area (Eurasian Steppe) had entered India, but the date of entry was estimated to be more recent, about 2000 BCE. Population genetic studies have neither provided evidence of any Aryan "invasion" nor are these studies helping propagate the "invasion myth." Objective analyses of genetic data from living and long-dead individuals have revealed that people from Central Asia had entered India between 2000 and 4000 BCE, not 7000 BCE as claimed in the IIT-K calendar.

The Calendar Essay also claims that the "system of Yoga and Kshema as realized and developed by the Arya Sages are synchronous." It says that Rigveda (Mandala 10, Hymn 167, Verse 1) mentions "Yogakshema-vishayaih karma". It does not. Similarly, the phrase "Yogebhi Kshemebhi" is said to figure in Rig Veda (Mandala 7, Hymn 36). Here the verse number is not given. A search did not reveal this phrase in the Rig Veda. So this is also likely to be false. The IIT-K essay takes note of the racist theories of the Nazis, but plays havoc with European history. It talks of "The Two World Wars, 1914-1945" as if these were two innings of a single match. There is a gap of 20 years between the two wars during which Hitler with his hatredfulness had risen. The racist ideology of Aryanism is not an issue in the First World War. And yet the essay declares: "More than 120 million civilians and soldiers were killed and slaughtered between 1914 and 1945 in the name of European definition of Aryan invasion!" The essay expends considerable verbiage condemning colonial invaders. And yet in its map of India it calls the river Ganga "the Ganges."

There is ample evidence that Indians have contributed concepts and objects to others, but there is no reason to be uptight about accepting that others have also contributed to our culture. Assertions that Aryan speakers were "superior" are subjective and baseless; there is no reason for us to continue to debate it. In a classic case of double-speak, this kind of distortion of ancient history and archaeology is being designated "Recovery of the Foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems". If the so-called recovery belittles rigorous scholarship, ignores scientific data, and anoints IIT's face black, it is a terrible bargain.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

Demographic imbalances

The census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics concluded on November 25. The head count revealed that the population of Nepal was increasing at a slow pace, in fact, the slowest in the last 80 years.

It is growth nonetheless, but the question is whether it is to be taken positively or as an indication that could spell disaster for the country in the years to come.

In most developed countries, projections of a fall in population signal economic woes.

Statisticians are quick to inform the administration of the economic challenges the government will need to face concerning labour shortages and a possible impact on the housing market.

After an arduous two weeks, the enumerators gathered much-needed information which showed a modest increase in the population by 0.93 percent.

Are the authorities worried about possible labour shortages that may affect economic output? It is highly doubtful.

The administration has failed miserably to retain the youth and provide a stable, meaningful environment.

Instead of being able to reap the

THE KATHMANDU POST

youth demographic dividend, Nepal is in the business of exporting skilled and unskilled talent abroad in exchange for precious foreign exchange.

While there is nothing wrong with ensuring that citizens find jobs overseas, relying on it ultimately does not bode well for a country.

And the hallmark for development has always been in retaining the populace to build one's country.

This lack of policy to retain the youth has led to a mass exodus of young people from the towns and villages, leaving only the elderly, women and children to ensure that they remained a functional place. Those unable to find employment abroad were drawn to the cities.

Thus, it may be fair to assume that the administration's short-sightedness concerning the development of remote regions in Nepal has led to this imbalanced distribution of population in the country.

Lest we forget that the Maoist insurgency acted as a catalyst for the imbalance, but what has the administration done in the last 15 years after securing a peace deal?

Possibly even decentralisation of vital administrative functions would help persuade people to fan out across the country, but there have been no such steps.

The census shows a parallel between a drop in the hill population and an increase in the Tarai belt population.

If this trend continues, it has consequences on two fronts in particular ~ politics and the economy and a change in socio-economic behaviour.

On the economic front, most of the arable land in the Tarai region would have to make way for construction, constricting agricultural output further and adding strain to the existing infrastructure.

And on the political front, an increase in the Tarai population could pave the way for reduced electoral constituencies in the hills and, in turn, further affect development in the hills and contribute to the existing imbalance.

It is not the rate of population that should be ringing the alarm bells for the administration, but rather the lack of policies to correct any of the existing demographic imbalances.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

When proxies join battle

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Ballistic Houthis" (28 January). The Saudi-led coalition, of which the UAE was a part, started bombing Yemen in 2015, hoping to swiftly dislodge the Houthis rebels from Sana'a and reinstate the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Almost seven years later, the Iran-backed Houthis, who were holed up in northern Yemen and began counterattacks with missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia, have expanded the war all the way to the Gulf coast of the UAE. Monday's drone attacks on Abu Dhabi by the Houthis were a message to the Emiratis. It may not be a



coincidence that the attacks were carried out at a time when the UAE-backed forces have been making slow gains in Yemen's conflict against the Houthis. But the UAE's involvement in Yemen has had many turns. It quit the Saudi-led coalition in

2020 as the war had hit a stalemate. Since then, the Emiratis have provided tactical support to the Southern Transitional Council, a separatist body in southern Yemen that drove the Saudi-backed forces loyal to President Hadi out of Aden. The dynamics changed again when the Houthis began pushing into territories outside their stronghold, especially Marib; if they took Marib, they would be a step ahead to push into the south. A Houthi strike to scare away the Emiratis from Yemen could trigger the opposite reaction from Abu Dhabi, which now has powerful proxies in the south. The

cycle of violence spells tragic news for Yemen's 30 million people. Unfortunately, the parties and their regional backers are keen on escalating the conflict rather than finding a solution. If the fighting over the last seven years holds any lesson, it is that there can be no military solution to Yemen's problems. To dial down tensions, there have to be talks, not only between the rebels, separatists and the government but also between their backers - Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. If these regional powers agree to rein in their proxies and work towards rebuilding Yemen, that would also help them restore stability and security in the Arabian Peninsula. Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 28 January.

HIDDEN AGENDA

SIR, The proposed amendments to the rules of the Indian Administrative Service by the Centre are against the spirit of federalism. With the amendment, the Centre wants to break the state's hold over all-India service officers working under them, particularly in matters related to deputation to the Centre. Of late, the issue of deputation has got a political colour. The Centre and those state governments that are ruled by rival parties are crossing swords over the postings of a few IAS or IPS officers, vitiating the atmosphere. Now the Centre wants to take away the choice of the state and of individual officers regarding deputations on the plea that it does not adequate number of officers. It's nothing but a lame excuse. The Central government has introduced lateral entry to fill some vacancies. It can increase the recruitment of officers directly. Instead, it wants to go against the principles of cooperative federalism, may be with some hidden agenda.

Yours, etc., Dr D V G Sankararao, Vizianagaram, 21 January.

Why Russia is so eager to control Ukraine



ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY
AND ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

A geopolitical crisis is looming large over the eastern border of Russia. There has been a massive military build-up by Russia close to Ukraine. The histories of the two nations are linked and until 1991, they were part of the USSR. Since independence in 1991, Ukraine had a pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovych, whose ambitions were aligned with Russian interests. The situation changed with 'The revolution of dignity', popularly known as the 'Maidan revolution', where a series of protests erupted across the nation during 2013-14, following Yanukovych's refusal to join political association and a free trade agreement with the European Union. The elected government was ousted, and power shifted towards the current pro-West Volodymyr Zelensky.

Following these incidents, the Crimean Peninsula, a geostrategic region in southern Ukraine, with the port of Sevastopol, was annexed by Russia on 18 March 2014. The annex-

ation was claimed by Russia as a mandate of citizens of Crimea, who are mostly Russian in origin.

Since that incident, bilateral relations between the two nations suffered. On 15 December 2018, the Kiev church severed its ties to the Russian orthodox church as per the decree of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This clearly showed the determination of the nation to break out from its former 'Soviet' roots, distancing itself from Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The situation got worse with Ukraine's growing proximity to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia was the successor to the erstwhile USSR, both in the Security Council of the United Nations and in its global presence. Since World War II, the Soviet Union had tried to protect its vulnerable western front by bringing Eastern European nations within its iron curtain. By 1945, Joseph Stalin, the then communist dictator of USSR, had realised that the open fields of western Russia would be difficult to protect by military might alone.

The initial success of Hitler's

Operation Barbarossa was due to the plain land geography of the Russian heartland. It is devoid of any mountains or any natural barriers. The reason for the dual-front war strategy of Hitler may have revolved around control of the oil-rich Caspian, Volga and Caucasus regions overlooking the Russian heartland. The situation was contained by exemplary Soviet resistance at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43. Some estimates say that 27 million Soviet lives were lost in World War II.

The situation in Ukraine is echoing warnings similar to those voiced before World War II. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost most of its Eastern 'buffer lands'. Poland, the Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) and Germany are pro-US and linked with the NATO alliance, which was originally an anti-USSR pact. If Ukraine also slips out of Russian influence, NATO will get a foothold in the Volga region and can threaten Russia's control over its hydrocarbon rich areas.

This global crisis is taking its toll over ordinary Ukrainians. A war

between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces has been waging in Eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, collectively called the Donbas region, since 2014. It is already proved to the world that the separatists are supported by Russia. Between 13,100 and 13,300 lives have already been lost in this futile civil war since 2014. The current military build-up of Russia alongside the Ukraine border accounts to more than 100,000 soldiers. The world's powers, including the USA, are fearing a Russian annexation of the region in similar fashion as the Crimean Peninsula.

These geopolitical instabilities point towards a common issue - the dependency of the world on hydrocarbons. Russia's paranoia revolves around its hydrocarbon resources which account for \$ 250 billion worth of exports in 2021. More than 40 per cent of these exports go to EU countries. This adds another dimension to the Ukraine crisis. With this dependency of Europe on Russia's hydrocarbons, it cannot support Ukraine in case of any imminent crisis.

Though EU and US uphold and defend democratic governments across the globe, the energy dependency on Russia makes them incapable of taking any meaningful steps to resolve Russian illegal occupation in Crimea in 2014 or in the recent military crisis in eastern Ukraine.

With climate change impacts battering the world, global powers are trying to distance themselves from carbon-intensive hydrocarbon energy. By limiting dependency on hydrocarbons, major world powers will be less bothered by politics in their neighbouring nations. The world will be a more peaceful place as superpowers will not use their economic and military might to scare smaller nations under their banner, just for the sake of safeguarding their hydrocarbon wealth.

Let's move towards renewables and nuclear energy to make the world a peaceful and clean place for all to live and flourish.

The writers are, respectively, Associate Professor and Dean at the Jindal School of Environment and Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Alien and intimate

Mornings are glorious in Santiniketan. I was visiting Santiniketan in the sixties and staying in the home of the Vice Chancellor of Viswa Bharati University. There was a sizable lawn next door and, early one morning, as I woke I saw a man going around and around in a circle.

As I walked up to him, I saw a tall, bearded foreigner and was about to say Good Morning in English. He pre-empted me, by speaking in Bengali, and that too sardonically, "Finally, you are awake!" He justified the dig with his next sentence, coupled with an elaborate gesture of his arm, "Bright morning!"

Paul Detienne had displayed his three most characteristic plays in the very first moment of our encounter. He spoke Bengali better than a native. He loved sarcasm. His arms, like his face, were not just expressive, they were dramatically demonstrative.

These were not features one expected in a Jesuit missionary. But Detienne seldom did anything very expected. When he said he was Belgian, I quickly suggested, "Why don't we talk in French? I want to improve my French conversation." He countered, "But I want to improve my Bengali. I'd rather we talk in Bengali." After some haggling, we reached a deal. He will speak to me in Bengali; I will speak in French.

That created what Thurber



Illustration: Debabrata Chakrabarty

would have called "a hullabaloo of misunderstanding." Since I worked in an office near Park Street and he was often there for his work, our paths crossed frequently, and we stopped and talked at street corners. We attracted attention. Passersby stopped and chided me, "What's wrong with you? That sahib is talking Bengali and you are talking some gibberish. Can't you be polite and talk to him in English?" One time, when we went to the Flury's cafe for some tea, two persons, after hearing our conversation from the next table, came

to help me, "It is all right if you don't know English. Just tell us what you want to say in Hindi, and we will translate it for him in English."

Detienne relished such confusion. He would pull their leg and say, "English is a far cry for him. He can't even speak Bengali well. I am trying to teach him a little bit."

Sometimes he would drop by my office. If I was busy, he would not waste his time, but talk instead with my secretary, my assistant, or even the receptionist. In short order he knew their names, where they lived,

whether they were married, what they liked to eat. One time my assistant made the mistake, while serving him tea, of using the word 'sugar' instead of the Bengali equivalent, and Detienne said, "If you are a Bengali, and you don't know the Bengali word for sugar, you need to improve your language. If you know the word, but choose to use a word from another language, then you need to improve your idea of yourself." He said it gently and with a smile, but he detested the practice he had noticed of Indians mixing English words while speaking an Indian language.

I took him home to meet my parents and my brothers. He told Ashis, "I have a better beard than yours," and he deliberately poked Pritish by mispronouncing his name as British. My mother wanted to know about his family and Detienne disclosed that all his brothers, six of them, were priests in different countries, mostly Africa, except one. His mother had apparently said that she needed one near her and would not let him join the Jesuits. The youngest brother was to get married, and Detienne wanted the bride to wear a sari, a Benarasi, for the evening reception. My mother dictated the steps involved in wearing a sari; I translated her words into French and my secretary typed them out. We helped Detienne buy a beautiful sari and he carried it to Brussels. But my mother's instructions or my translation was poor, and the bride had to seek emergency help from the Indian Embassy



before the reception. But, reported Detienne, the bride looked gorgeous, and he was the hero of the evening.

A heavy price for my nomadic life is the number of friends one lost in pre-internet days. When I connected with Detienne again after twenty-five years, he had mellowed somewhat, but he still retained his proclivity for sarcasm and dramatic gestures. He was a literary celebrity, for he had produced a stream of witty, enjoyable books that had made him a best-selling Bengali author, a literary lion. I took it as a great compliment when one or two remarked that some of my own writing reminded readers of the flavor of Detienne.

I have a whole collection of Detienne's books. I woke up early this morning, made a cup of coffee and walked out on the deck with a Detienne book. I looked at Detienne's picture on the cover and half expected him to jump out, make an oversized gesture and say, "Finally, you are awake!"

I turned the pages and, toward the end, this is what I came across:

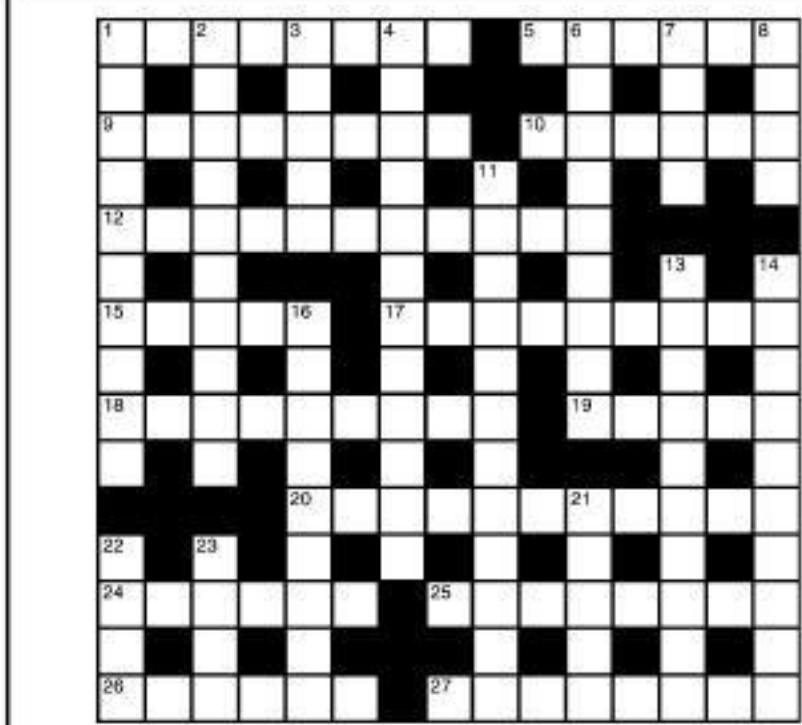
"My time has come to leave. I have finished all that I had to say. But not quite.

I will hope to see you again."

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com

CROSSWORD

NO 29165



ACROSS

- 1 Stuck up small head by mistake (8)
- 5 Uproar behind you and me (6)
- 9 State has plenty of time and means (8)
- 10 Stick poster in this place (6)
- 12 Meet and greet ghetto revolutionary (3,8)
- 15 Poisonous beast consumed by jerk (5)

- 17 Following overdose music producer, born in Sultanate, finds fixer (3-3,3)
- 18 Searched and managed to fire journalist (9)
- 19 Begin letter without introduction (5)
- 20 Brief special vehicle branch of the police (6,5)
- 24 Arouse interest in article about vigil (6)
- 25 Original member of family left out after bit of

- controversy (8)
- 26 Attempt to embrace man with love in ideal situation (6)
- 27 Stretches back to get steamy photograph (8)
- DOWN**
- 1 Kills merriment aboard ship (10)
- 2 Public dismissal is too much (10)
- 3 Do butchers extract all

- nutritious offal first of all? (5)
- 4 Frame guides showing ways to access multiple places (8,4)
- 6 Suggestion from subordinate, tense individual (9)
- 7 Support lord vocally (4)
- 8 Cook ineffectual politicians upset (4)
- 11 Republican and Democrat droned on about keeping

- house plant (12)
- 13 Clumsy American couple thrive without Flo (10)
- 14 Factor in dirt engine churned up (10)
- 16 Loudly regret returning after tea with posh driver (9)
- 21 Second party for rascal (5)
- 22 Women behind drift (4)
- 23 Stun and partially confound a zealot (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

100 YEARS AGO OCCASIONAL NOTE

There seems to be a disposition in parts of England, notably Manchester and London, to follow the lead which has been set in America by what is known there as the Life Extension Institute. The basic idea of this institute is that members enroll themselves to secure medical attendance not when they are sick, but while they are well. Prevention is better than cure. Each member of the institute is periodically overhauled by specially appointed examiners according to standardised methods, and he is also entitled to the advice of a consultative board of recognised authorities in the various departments of medicine and hygiene. In order that strict professional secrecy may be observed medical histories, if members so desire are recorded at headquarters under a simple number. The service is available on payment of a fixed annual subscription, which does not, however, include domiciliary visits. In England, such a scheme should appeal specially to the middle classes, who at present get little benefit from either the hospitals or the National Insurance scheme, and who not only have to pay dearly for medical attendance when they are ill, but are often put off calling in medical aid till the illness has reached an advanced stage. The reasonable principle that the doctor should have a proprietary interest in health rather than in disease has been observed in China from time immemorial. It has been curiously slow in making its way into modern Europe.

NEWS ITEMS NEW FEATURES IN TRIAL OF ARMSTRONG

One of the principal new features in the Armstrong trial was the evidence of Nurse Kinsey, who attended Mrs. Armstrong. She said she suggested a whole-time nurse as there was fear of suicide. Nurse Kinsey stated that Armstrong and his wife were on affectionate terms. Dr. Hincks stated that with the facts known today his opinion was that Mrs. Armstrong's death was due to chronic arsenic poisoning. As regards his treatment of Major Armstrong, Dr. Hincks claimed professional secrecy, but on being overruled stated that Armstrong had contracted venereal disease. He mentioned a conversation in which Armstrong questioned him regarding the amount necessary for a fatal dose of arsenic. Dr. Hincks said he was flabbergasted by the questions.

SERIOUS RIOT AT SOLOGNA

A telegraphic report from the District Magistrate, Pabna, states that on January 27, he was present at Sologna hat, thana Raiganj, with an armed force under the Superintendent of Police and a Deputy Superintendent, for the purpose of preventing intimidation and picketing. Some volunteers who were picketing were arrested, whereupon a crowd, estimated at 2,000 strong, surrounded the party and threatened them with violence. The Magistrate, Superintendent endeavoured to quiet the mob but without success. The Deputy Superintendent was hit on the head and knocked senseless and the Magistrate and Superintendent were both assaulted. The mob were warned that if they did not disperse the police would open fire, but the only reply was a volley of stones. The police then fired blank cartridges without effect.

ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES OF INDIAN TIMBER

In the unavoidable absence of Mr. Montagu, Sir William Meyer presided today at the meeting of the Royal Society of Arts, when a paper by Mr. Alexander Howard, of a firm who are agents for the Government of India timbers in Europe, was read in his absence by his partner. The paper pointed out that the British market was beginning to recognise more fully the economic advantages of the use of Indian as well as foreign timbers. The Bank of England, at the new buildings in Finsbury Circus, had had the whole of the decorative woodwork made of Indian timbers and various firms were following that example. Experience gathered from the innovation of sending teak here in logs, instead of sawn, had convinced Mr. Howard of the advantage of marketing timbers in this form.

THE DISCONTENTED ELEMENTS

Speaking at the East African dinner in London tonight, Mr. Churchill made an important reference to the political problems of East Africa. He pointed out, as a curious result of the war, that the discontented elements in African and Asiatic countries seemed to think that they had only to express the wish that Britain should lay down the Government and Britain would comply. It was high time it was made clear that this was not the rule Britain intended to follow. He added, however, that French administrators of native populations took the greatest care to mingle with the natives and understand intimately their feelings in a manner which the more aloof and stand-off British official was not accustomed to adopt.



Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

Come clean on Pegasus

The NDA government owes an explanation to the people on the latest media revelations that it had acquired Pegasus spyware from an Israeli company to snoop on political rivals. A fresh political storm has hit the government following the damning expose by 'The New York Times' daily which reported that Pegasus and a missile system were the 'centerpieces' of a \$2-billion deal of sophisticated weapons and intelligence tools firmed up in 2017 during Narendra Modi's visit to Israel, the first by any Indian Prime Minister. The latest revelations raise disturbing questions over the conduct of government agencies in the entire episode. On the floor of Parliament last year, the Defence Ministry had categorically stated that it had not made any transaction with the NSO Group, the Israeli developer which has claimed that it sells its products only to government agencies. The 'NYT' investigative report, which comes ahead of the crucial Budget session, is expected to provide much ammunition to the opposition parties. Last year, an investigation by a global consortium of media outlets showed how the Israeli-made malicious spyware was used by governments around the world to spy on dissidents, political rivals, activists and journalists via their mobile phones. More than 1,000 phone numbers in India were among the nearly 50,000 selected worldwide as possibly of interest to clients of the NSO Group. The Pegasus matter is currently being monitored by a technical committee, comprising experts in computer science, cybersecurity and digital forensics, appointed by the Supreme Court.

Overruling virtually every argument made by the Centre, the apex court had said privacy is not the singular concern of journalists or social activists but of every citizen. Pegasus can switch on a target's phone camera and microphone, as well as access data on the device, effectively turning the phone into a pocket spy. There is a need to get to the bottom of the truth on who ordered the purchase of this cyber weapon, how were the targets selected and who got the surveillance reports. Companies such as NSO operate in a market that is almost entirely unregulated, enabling tools that can be used by authoritarian regimes as instruments of repression. If true, the reports of spying on political leaders, judiciary, media, members of Election Commission and Supreme Court amount to subversion of democracy and flagrant violation of the rule of law and the fundamental right of citizens to privacy. What is more disconcerting is that India does not even have a law for the protection of data privacy. Instead of trying to gloss over the seriousness of the latest media expose, the government must undertake surveillance reforms to protect citizens from illegal hacking and stop using spyware in policing and security.

The latest revelations raise disturbing questions over the conduct of government agencies in the entire episode

Just like 2017, the BJP will form the government in 2022. Lotus will bloom in all the nine Assembly constituencies of Bareilly and the BJP will win over 300 seats across the State to form the government. He (Akhilesh) is dreaming 'Mungerilal Ke Haseen Sapne'. His government encouraged goons and mafia



Keshav Prasad Maurya
UP Deputy Chief Minister

They made certain proposals. We made certain proposals. Unfortunately, there was no meeting point. I acknowledge that both sides had compulsions. Nevertheless, we are and will remain friends. After the elections, we will continue to explore opportunities to work together with NCP and Shiv Sena



P Chidambaram
Senior Congress leader

The North's latest moves are a challenge toward the international community's efforts to denuclearise Korean Peninsula, stabilise peace and find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear standoff. The North should stop its actions that create tensions and respond to the dialogue offers by the international community



Moon Jae-in
South Korean President

There is not one country we've sold to, not one... that the US does not sell to, or that Israel doesn't sell to. So it's a bit hypocritical to say it's okay to sell F-35s and tanks and drones, but it's not okay to sell a tool that collects intelligence. ...A company like NSO is on [a US blacklist] is an outrage



Shalev Hulio
NSO Group CEO

[Correct Dose]

Moving the needle in healthcare

Union Budget presents a glimmer of hope that can redefine and strengthen healthcare priorities and systems



DR SASWAT KISHORE MISHRA

Covid-19 has thoroughly exposed our shambolic state of healthcare infrastructure and human capital. After the brutal onslaught of the Delta variant, India showed terrific resilience and it seemed that our economy was limping back to normalcy. But suddenly we find ourselves amid the third wave, once again plunging us into a state of fear and uncertainty.

While our economy is projected to grow at 8.7% in 2022-23 by the World Bank, the union Budget 2022-23 presents a glimmer of hope that can redefine healthcare priorities and strengthen health systems across the continuum of India's rural-urban setting. The impending question, however, is how can the union Budget for the next fiscal year move the needle in the healthcare sector?

Stronger Workforce

In 2021-22, Rs 71,269 crore was allocated for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). An additional amount of Rs 35,000 crore was separately assigned for Covid vaccination. In the first supplementary demand for grants, another Rs 17,000 crore was allotted to MoHFW, taking the total allocation to Rs 88,269 crore. However, until November 2021, just Rs 44,899 crore was utilised, ie, about 63% of the Budget estimate of 2021-22. This brings into question the absorption capacity of States as far as the healthcare ecosystem is concerned. The utilisation rate depends on the capacity that exists within the health systems to utilise it efficiently. Indian healthcare systems have been crippled not only with inadequacies in capital infrastructure but also the unavailability of a multi-layered, multi-skilled health workforce at different levels.

Of late India has been spending more on infrastructure. However, infrastructure will remain underutilised if not met with complementary human resources.



Hence, the government should invest in building up the health workforce and strengthening district hospitals. The healthcare sector emerged as the fourth largest employer in 2021. The government should seize this unique opportunity presented by an expected rapid growth of the healthcare market to leverage its direct impact, multiplier effects and distributional benefits.

PMJAY Allocation, Innovation

In 2021-22, the government allocated Rs 6,400 crore to Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY). A study by the 15th Finance Commission estimated that the total costs (Centre and States) of PMJAY could range between Rs 66,000 crore and Rs 1,60,089 crore in 2023, accounting for inflation and considering all targeted beneficiaries are covered. The government must up the ante on PMJAY allocation considerably given its bearing on out-of-pocket health expenditure made by consumers and assuming that the demand for non-Covid care is likely to increase in future.

It is ironic that India currently holds a global market share of only 1.5% by value (14th rank in the world) despite accounting for nearly 10% of the global pharmaceutical production (3rd rank in the world). Pharmaceutical exports from India stood at \$24.4 billion in FY21. They flourished at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.2% during 2015-16 and

2020-21. But this was largely driven by exports of generic drugs.

To capture a greater market share of the global pharma by value, India needs to move on from generics and invest more in drug innovation through R&D. But the Gross Expenditure on R&D (GERD) in India has almost stagnated between 0.6% and 0.7% of GDP between 1995-96 and 2019-20. Moreover, in advanced countries, the private sector carries out the bulk of the R&D contributing nearly 70% to GERD. In India, however, the government is both the primary source of funding and so also its primary user with the private sector contributing less than 40% to GERD. The government needs to adequately incentivise the private sector to invest in R&D.

Private Participation

As part of their CSR, the government recently allowed corporates to invest in technology business incubators or contribute to research efforts carried out by institutions and national research laboratories. But this may not be enough. If India were to ramp up GERD to a level proportionate to the size of its (a \$3-trillion) economy, the private sector expenditure on R&D must rise to prominence. The government should consider reversing the current weighted tax deduction from 100% to 200% to boost the R&D ecosystem. In addition, the government should consider offering the

benefit of 15% corporate tax rate to those companies which spend more than 10% of their revenue on R&D.

In terms of allocation for Covid vaccination, the government should allow the industry to meet the demand for additional vaccines, after delivering on its current commitments on universal vaccination for the target groups. Since the vaccine supply has clearly outpaced the demand in India, the vaccine budget is likely to come down considerably. Therefore, the focus should be more on the development of novel vaccines and the export market which would also enhance India's global image.

The overall public health expenditure in the country merely increased from 0.9% of GDP in 2015-16 to 1.17% of GDP in 2020-21. Further, the Economic Survey 2020-21 points out that India ranks 179th among 189 countries in prioritising healthcare in the government budget. However, the National Health Policy, 2017, draws a bead on increasing public health expenditure to 2.5% of the GDP by 2025. The Finance Minister's presentation of the union Budget 2022-23 will, in fact, typify whether the targets are merely figurative or India is actually prepared to move the needle in the healthcare sector.

(The author is Assistant Professor, Centre for Health Care Management, Administrative Staff College of India [ASCI], Hyderabad. Views are personal)

IT IS IRONIC THAT INDIA HOLDS A GLOBAL MARKET SHARE OF ONLY 1.5% BY VALUE (14TH RANK IN THE WORLD) DESPITE ACCOUNTING FOR NEARLY 10% OF GLOBAL PHARMACEUTICAL PRODUCTION (3RD RANK)

It is worth taking calculated risk, for a loser has nothing to lose



Letters to the Editor

We invite your views and comments at
letters@telanganatoday.com

Headwinds ahead

This refers to the edit 'Maharaja comes home'. The Tata Group is highly respected and commands a lot of goodwill among the people of India. Therefore, all are hoping they would manage to successfully turn around the ailing carrier. The entire aviation sector has faced turbulence since the past few years with some going down under. Others are just managing to keep their heads above water. In this scenario, it is not going to be easy for the Tatas to restore Air India to its past glory. A successful turnaround would set a template for future disinvestments and the privatisation programme of the government would gather pace.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Right decision

The decision of the Telangana government to reopen schools has brought a ray of hope and relief to many students and teachers. Online classes are quite ineffective and unproductive for the genuine development of students. Educational institutions must enforce all Covid safety norms, and the management and the staff of all schools should follow Covid protocols strictly. The authority concerned of every district should render full support to the management of all educational institutions in this regard.

Santhini P, Karimnagar

On a sticky wicket

The Pegasus controversy has come back to haunt the Centre ahead of the Budget session. While the Opposition termed it treason and accused the Centre of deceiving the House, the government rubbished the claim, saying a Supreme Court panel was monitoring the issue. However, the revelations could put the ruling dispensation on a sticky wicket.

NJ Ravi Chander, Bengaluru

Priyanka's U-turn

It is intriguing as to what made Priyanka take a U-turn within hours rather than being assertive that she is the CM face. She perhaps doesn't realise that her dilemma would be infectious to her voters and motivate them to dilly dally when they press their choice on the EVM. Assuming she can't make it, then she has to only take a simple decision later on whom to support if the non-BJP parties muster a simple majority. She should know that a loser has nothing to lose. Hence, it is always worth taking a calculated risk. She knows that she is the oxygen concentrator to the Congress that is literally on a ventilator. Alternately, she can agree to have a pre-poll alliance even if she has no choice of calling the shots based on the track record of their two-decade drought the party has been facing. She has to prove her own slogan 'ladki hoon, lad sakti hoon' in letter and spirit.

D Nagarjuna, Hyderabad

India the hotspot

the guardian

Cut the cussing: The Indian man on a mission

On a cold January afternoon, women gather on the veranda of a government-run nursery in Sarmathla village of Haryana. The men and boys mill about, reluctant to join the women, until Satyaprakash, a social worker, encourages them to sit. The speaker, Sunil Jaglan, begins with a question, "Raise your hand if you have used cuss words...?"

The New York Times

India schools stay closed, hopes fade for a lost generation

For years, India has been counting on its vast pool of young people as a well-spring of future growth, a "demographic dividend," as many liked to put it. Now, after two years of the pandemic, it is looking more like a lost generation. Hundreds of millions of students across India have received little to no in-person instruction with schools intermittently shut.

FINANCIAL TIMES

James Murdoch in talks for stake in India's Viacom18

James Murdoch and former Disney executive Uday Shankar are in late-stage talks to acquire a stake in Viacom18, a media and entertainment business that is joint-owned by Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries and ViacomCBS. Valuing Viacom18 at about \$4bn, the deal to acquire almost 40 per cent would bring \$1.6bn of fresh investment to the broadcaster.

FIRST COLUMN

BANK RETIREES' PENSION WOES

The Finance Minister must walk the talk on this critical issue



S **KALYANASUNDARAM**

When the Special Leave to Appeal (C) No(s). 5561/2016 was taken up by the Supreme Court on January 20, bank retirees were hopeful of getting some favourable orders for their pension updation, which is lingering for three decades. But to their disappointment, the case was directed to be listed after three months as the counsel appearing for the respondent(s) including Indian Banks' Association, submitted that the Committee considering the representation/claim of the petitioners and similarly placed persons is yet to be reconstituted.

Until 1993, the bank employees were having contributory provident fund scheme without any pension scheme. On October 29, 1993, an industry-level settlement was arrived at between Indian Banks Association and Bank Employees unions and this paved the way for introduction of pension scheme in lieu of Contributory Provident Fund as in RBI. A similar joint note was signed with federation representing officers



also. Para 12 of the said settlement provided for formation of a small committee consisting of representatives of IBA and unions to work out details on similar lines as RBI pension regulation and Central Civil Services Pension Rules applicable to Central Government employees.

The said Small committee said in 1994: "Formula for updating pension should be on the lines of the same given in the Reserve Bank pension scheme. Any change therein should be introduced only after mutual agreement."

However, though Reserve Bank of India has permitted updation of pension for their employees, the bank pensioners are drawing their pension without any revision for the past three decades.

When the matter was represented to the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, she has expressed her concern in an interview in October 2020 and again in a talk the following month: "I want bank employees to be given their due. A lot of pensioners are waiting for very long time. Yesterday, I had meeting with Rajkiran Rai of IBA. I spoke to him, too. We need bank employees to be attended to, particularly their families and the pension of retired employees"

Though it was informed a committee has been formed by Indian Banks Association, nothing has happened on the ground. When Government employees' pension is paid out of every year's tax receipt - it is a tax on people. Bank retirees' pension is paid out of profit generated by banks. Adequate provision has already been made to pay upto the last pensioner as per existing pension rules. If pension updation is conceded, only additional amount has to be appropriated out of profits. It is not necessary that provision has to be made at one go as the RBI may permit to amortize the expenditure over a period of five or more years.

Without any updation of pension, the bank pensioners in their 70s, 80s and 90s are having a miserable life. The retirees are paying three months of their pension just to have medical insurance as the banks are simply arranging group insurance but leaving the premium payment to individuals.

The past retirees are drawing a pittance as pension. Persons retired as general managers in the past are drawing lesser pension than a clerk who is retiring now on account of non-revision of pension.

Above all, the Indian Banks Association has not recognized any of the Retirees' Association and there is no body to represent the retirees with the banks. Employees' unions represent only working staff and they have their own issues to discuss and settle.

Even after one and half years, the Finance Minister's concern has not been addressed by the banks. Senior retired bankers expect her to walk the talk.

(The writer is a retired banker. The views expressed are personal.)

Cut I-T, create more jobs to drive economy



SHIVAJI **SARKAR**

FM has to prioritise nation's growth and the promised \$5 trillion economy and involve and inspire the Indian private sector to create quality jobs

People have a major expectation. Two years back on September 20, 2019, less than 40 hours before prime minister Narendra Modi's Houston event, the government announced a massive corporate tax rate cut, lowering the base rate to 22 per cent from 30 per cent, and to 15 per cent from 25 per cent for new manufacturing companies. Till such time individual and tax rates were in sync.

Now people want that synchronisation is re-established. The individual income tax rates remain very high at 42 per cent and 30 plus 3 per cent. It robs an income tax payee of a lot of his or her income. The aspiration is that it be lowered to 20 to 22 per cent, possibly to around 17 per cent to help generate demand. The aspiration is because of the difficult three years of Covid-19 uncertainty, job losses, income contraction and severe inflation at 14.6 per cent.

The Finance Minister has her problems of constricted finances, not the desired growth or rather uneven growth instead of a high trajectory that could have generated jobs, increased demand, boosted production and paved the way for demand.

The FM should also think of incentivising savings by asking RBI to raise interest rates. If she does, it would bring back the sustained growth pattern and strengthen Indian families come out of the crisis.

If this happens, the government would not have to resort to free food, edible oil and other doles to 80 crore people or 61.54 per cent of the population. It is a benevolent approach but could have been avoided if the families had the financial strength to face the crisis.

The FM now should through various policy formulations try to empower the families. It may help the country reduce these expenses in the next four to five years helping the country to invest in many projects and create demand.

The budget would invest in many metro, infra projects, healthcare, railways and ports. It also may take up the issue of regulating crypto currencies. Last year, the new National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID), with a capital base of ? 20,000 crore and a lending target of ? 5 lakh crore over a three-year horizon was set up. In five years, it targets Rs 111 lakh crore investment.

NaBFID chairman KV Kamath says that it would require Rs 80 lakh crore in 2022-23 to kickstart big ticket projects like high-speed railways, airports, ports, highways, river interlinking for the national infra pipeline. Infra is critical and risky both. Highway investments may go up by 35 per cent. The ASEAN had gone bust with high infra investment. It aims to make it up by further asset sales of the PSUs.



THE FM MAY OPEN A NEW LEAF. INDIA HAS THRIVED WITH A MIXED ECONOMY. THE PSUs HAVE THE CAPACITY TO START A COMPETITIVE ECONOMY THAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR ABHORS. NO NATIONAL ECONOMY CAN THRIVE WITHOUT COMPETITION WITHIN. MONOPOLISED PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SECTOR WOULD CAUSE INBREEDING LEADING TO POOR PERFORMANCE

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



It has to lay special emphasis on agriculture. Procurements are on the rise but still unable to satisfy farmers. The budget proposes to increase loan limit to Rs 18 lakh. Various infra funding, healthcare, agriculture, small businesses would depend heavily on banks, which are certainly not so comfortable. As per RBI, banks have Rs 8.35 lakh crore NPA. Even there are plans to allow youth to have loans from banks for entrepreneurship. Looks good. But MUDRA loans' record is not that bright. Bad debts for Mudra loans have spiked for PSBs, and, at the end of 2018-19 (FY19), stand at 9.3 per cent of advances. There has been 71 per cent jump in the number of MUDRA loan accounts that have turned non-performing assets (NPA) in Gujarat in 2021.

The Budget has also to refocus on jobs and changing lifestyles to defuse a social time bomb. Two recent incidents indicate the magnitude of the impending crisis. One is the death by freezing of a Gujarati family of four while trying to illegally enter the United States in order to escape their adverse economic realities in India. The other is the recent round of protests over railway jobs in Bihar and UP where millions applied for roughly 40,000 vacancies. It is a grim reminder that the sheer size of unemployment.

The unemployment rate rose a four-month high to 7.9 per cent in December 2021. It stood at 7 per cent in November last year and 9.1 per cent in December 2020. But jobs were shrinking even before that in 2019 and earlier. World Bank says that India has the highest total unemployment rate at 21.01 percent for the 15-24-year-old population.

The jobs have to be the priority in a country where the number multiplies every day. The covid19 lockdown is the immediate cause. Blaming any government for this criticality is not wise. As a nation somewhere the political parties are found to be clueless. The NITI Aayog supposedly tasked to suggest like its predecessor Planning Commission is not apt in hitting the nail on the head.

The Gujarati family was apparently well off with a teacher's job and sundry other chores. It could pay \$2.5 lakh for their dream travel through agents for illegal entry to the US. What sparked them like many Gujaratis and Punjabis rushing to El Dorado may be aspirational "lifestyle". In 2007, Babubhai Katara, MP, was caught trying to smuggle a Punjabi woman and her son for Rs 30 lakh to the US. His party suspended him.

What triggered Bihar and UP problem is lack of jobs. Once private sector jobs were considered well-paid. The seventh pay commission changed that. Now for years the corporate, including the IT, are not creating the required number of jobs. And jobs fetch lower wages and remain insecure.

Bihar has about 13 per cent unemployment. UP had 5.41 per cent unemployment in May-August 2021 against 3.75 per cent in March 2017. The job strategy has to change. An interesting aspect is that because of the Narendra Modi government's less interference in PSU operations, even in the difficult Covid times, 171 PSUs continued to have good profits despite better salary structure. This indicates that proper salaries can be paid even during crisis periods and profits can be achieved. But that also calls for reviewing the PSU disinvestment policy. The world has seen the failure of the global private sector for unethical practices since the 2007-08 Lehman meltdowns.

The FM may open a new leaf. India has thrived with a mixed economy. The PSUs have the capacity to start a competitive economy that the private sector abhors. No national economy can thrive without competition within. Monopolised private or public sector would cause inbreeding leading to poor performance. She has to be innovative enough to help create rural farm and non-farm jobs that make the rural economy viable and lifestyle attractive to stem rural migration.

The private sector also has a tendency to employ less and pay less. If jobs are to be a priority this policy has to be given up. The PSUs can deliver if encouraged. The FM has to think in terms of the nation's growth and a promised \$5 trillion economy. In the new scenario, she has to involve and inspire the Indian private sector to create quality jobs and make them capable of competing with their international rivals.

POINT COUNTERPOINT

WHY WAS BHATTACHARJEE SUDDENLY CHOSEN BY THE BJP? THE MOVE WAS AIMED AT SECURING LEFT VOTES IN THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS. —TMC SPOKESPERSON KUNAL GHOSH



BHATTACHARJEE HAS CONTRIBUTED TO SOCIETY AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS. THE DECISION WAS OBVIOUSLY TAKEN WITHOUT ANY POLITICAL MOTIVE. —BENGAL BJP PRESIDENT SUKANTA MAJUMDAR



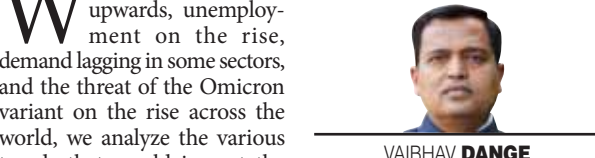
Budget: Building a case for the infrastructure sector

For post-pandemic recovery to gain momentum, the upcoming Budget must frontload infrastructure investments

With inflation trending upwards, unemployment on the rise, demand lagging in some sectors, and the threat of the Omicron variant on the rise across the world, we analyze the various trends that would impact the direction, the government would have to take with the upcoming budget.

Infrastructure sector is a key driver for the Indian economy. The sector is highly responsible for propelling India's overall development and enjoys intense focus from Government for initiating policies that would ensure time-bound creation of world class infrastructure in the country. Infrastructure sector includes power, bridges, dams, roads, and urban infrastructure development.

Over the past seven years,



VAIBHAV **DANGE**

(The writer is an independent expert & commentator on infrastructure and economy. The views expressed are personal.)

infrastructure in India has expanded at rapid pace significantly bringing change in the lives of citizens and boosting the local economy. While the infrastructure construction record of MODI government has been undisputed, the government shall have to ensure this year too budget gives impetus to this pace of infrastructure development in the country.

While there have been some signs of economy coming back on growth trajectory, it should be emphasized that as the threat of a third Covid wave looms large, the economic recovery remains fragile. Therefore, in ascertaining that any recovery gains momentum, the upcoming Budget must frontload infrastructure investments.

This is particularly needed because the states contribute



Industry associations have already recommended that public investments in agri-infrastructure be increased while healthcare expenditure as a percentage of GDP should be raised to 20 per cent for building hospitals, training institutions and suchlike across India.

Given the Centre's focus on its Atmanirbhar Bharat mission, infrastructure development can be vital in moving steadily towards achieving these goals. The Centre will be better placed in raising funding investments for the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP). Projects worth Rs 44 lakh crore are already being implemented as part of the Rs 111 lakh crore NIP, with the latter amount slated to be spent by 2024-25.

Meanwhile, projects worth Rs 22 lakh crore (or 20 per cent

of NIP) are under development stages. But proper and timely implementation is indispensable if ambitious objectives are to be met. The NIP framework currently comprises 39% investment by the Centre, 40 per cent by states and 21 per cent from the private sector. Considering the present market conditions, any shortfall from either of the other partners may require that the Centre fill the deficit for NIP goals to remain on track.

Significantly, under NIP, among others, Rs 25 lakh crore has been allocated for the energy industry, Rs 20 lakh crore for highways, Rs 16 lakh crore for irrigation, rural agriculture and food processing, Rs 16 lakh crore each for Railways and mobility, respectively, and Rs 14 lakh crore on digital infrastructure.

Given the Government's thrust on infrastructure spending to revive the economy, the FY2023 budgetary outlay remains crucial to complete the Government's ambitious Bharatmala and allied programmes in a timely manner. Budget is excepted proposed increase capital outlay by 25-30 per cent. With an increase in the budgetary allocation the pace of asset monetisation is expected to get momentum. Markets are also expecting a clear funding roadmap for the ambitious NIP and asset monetisation pipeline for NMP is spelled out in budget. The availability of long-term infrastructure financing continues a challenge, given the problems faced by commercial banks of asset-liability mismatch and high share of stressed assets.

It is estimated that weak infrastructure imposes a huge cost on business to the tune of 3-4 per cent annually. That means, an infrastructure thrust directly boosts GDP growth by around 3-4 per cent. That is because infrastructure investment has a huge multiplier effect downstream. Finally, The infrastructure sector expects Budget 2022-23 continues government's focus on Infrastructure and as suggested by Rakesh Mohan committee addresses Sustaining spending on physical infrastructure, Monetize income-earning infrastructure assets, Develops robust and dynamic debt market for infrastructure funding and Special incentives for use of modern technology. This shall almost guarantee growth that finance ministers expects this year.