



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

THE REAL PROBLEM IS NOT WHETHER MACHINES THINK BUT WHETHER MEN DO. — B. F. SKINNER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In post-pandemic classroom

It must be centred around joyful and creative learning, join dots between children's lives and education



UMA MAHADEVAN DASGUPTA

HOW SHOULD SCHOOLS reopen after the pandemic closure? In the midst of discussions about learning deficits, remediation, accelerated learning, and so forth, what is clear is that it should not be business as usual. Education is not a race. It is a child's journey to fulfilling his potential. Reopening schools should be an opportunity to rethink the teaching and learning process itself.

Santiniketan, the experimental school started by Rabindranath Tagore, offers some lessons. Tagore once wrote a short story about the education system. A little bird was fluttering about happily — until a king noticed it. The king ordered that the bird needed to be taught properly. What followed was a long and painful Procrustean sequence of events: A golden cage, textbooks, batons. The education industry thrived; the bird did not. "Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper." Eventually the bird fluttered to the floor of the cage and died.

Tagore became one of India's foremost philosophers of education. As a child, he had dropped out from formal school and was taught at home. For him, education meant much more than rote learning: "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence." He dismissed any pedagogy that sought to cut children off from the world around them: "We are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of their earth to teach them geography, of language to teach them grammar." Tagore put his philosophy into practice at Santiniketan, or the "Abode of Peace".

One of the students at this school in rural Bengal was Amartya Sen. In his memoir *Home in the World* (named after Tagore's classic novel of the freedom movement, *Ghare Baire* or 'Home and the World'), Sen writes about his years at Santiniketan. In the Dhaka school where he began his education, he had not at all been motivated to study. Contrary to the principal's expectations that all his students should "shine", he had ranked 33rd in

a class of 37.

In 1941, due to fears of possible Japanese bombing of the cities, Amartya was sent to Santiniketan. Here, he discovered the freedom of learning at his own pace. There was no pressure to excel in terms of grades or exam performance. This was immediately liberating: "I became what would count as a good student only when no one cared whether I was a good student or not." Indeed, there seemed to be an inverse relationship between grades and originality. A teacher remarked about another student that she was "quite original, even though her grades are very good".

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls," wrote Tagore in *Gitanjali*. He disliked barriers of every kind, believing that education should not be separated from everyday life. Classes at Santiniketan were held outdoors, under an assigned tree, unless it was raining, or if the lesson needed a laboratory. Carrying small mats, students sat on the ground; teachers sat on cement seats.

Santiniketan's approach was to help the whole child to learn through exploration — art, music, curiosity, and the careful observation of nature. The environment was stimulating. There was no corporal punishment. "School was fun in a way I had never imagined school could be," writes Sen. The atmosphere of freedom and thoughtful reasoning shaped his educational attitudes, including his response to inequities around him: For example, by running night classes for tribal children from neighbouring villages.

It was in this environment that the boy's eyes were opened to the terrible Bengal Famine of 1943, which took three million lives. Sen recalls his grandmother reading out an analytical magazine piece about the food crisis. He estimates that about one lakh destitute people passed through Santiniketan on the way to the city during that time. "The continuous cries of help — from children and women and men — ring in my ears even today, 77 years later."

The memory would later lead to Sen's pathbreaking research on famines, in which

he showed that famines do not occur in functioning democracies.

There are many lessons here for the Indian education system today. Joyful and creative learning should not be an indulgence meant only for privileged children. Every child should be able to learn in an atmosphere that is free, reflective and affirming. They should be able to relate new concepts to what they are already familiar with in their own lives.

Karnataka's Vidyagama programme, which began with a group of committed teachers creating informal, outdoor learning circles or "vataara shaale" during the pandemic — where children gathered with a teacher for in-person teaching in small groups, in outdoor community spaces; not bound by blackboards and textbooks, but learning interactively, through stories and activities — has been acknowledged as an alternate model of teaching and learning. If integrated into regular schooling, such learning environments can bring new life into our education system, not only during Covid but also beyond, in normal times.

The pandemic itself can be a starting point for inquiry-based learning: Children can be encouraged, within the safe space of the learning circles, to discuss what they saw, experienced and learned during the pandemic.

Rather than being cooped up inside small, cramped schoolrooms through the day, extending lessons into outdoor spaces, where feasible, will also improve ventilation, which is perhaps next in importance only to vaccination during the continuing pandemic.

Symbolically, too, an open classroom presents itself to fresh winds and ideas. In Gandhi's words: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

To reopen schools, we should really open up our education system.

The writer is in the IAS. Views are personal

BAN IS A BAD IDEA

Instead of using UAPA against inactive Hurriyat, Centre needs to urgently get going on reviving political process in Valley

THE REPORTED PLAN to ban both factions of the All Party Hurriyat Conference under provisions of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) will go down as another ill-judged step by the Centre in Jammu & Kashmir. It comes at a time when the main imperative in J&K is restarting the political process and piercing the vacuum created since the abrogation of Article 370 and division of the state into two Union Territories. In any case, a ban is never a good idea. It drives the sentiment underground, where it grows under the radar, and can surface more powerfully than before. The Hurriyat is also a spent force. That much was clear from its inability or unwillingness or both to protest the August 2019 changes made by the Centre in J&K.

The Hurriyat is no monolith and the churn within has often risen to the fore. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, among the founding leaders of the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, and until last year, head of the headline pro-Pakistan faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, is ailing and bedridden. His resignation from the chairmanship in June 2020 came in the wake of a bitter power struggle between him and the PoK chapter of the Hurriyat, going back to 2018 over the alleged sale of seats in Pakistani medical colleges to Kashmiri students. Geelani replaced the convenor in PoK, and handpicked his successor, who in turn was ejected by the Pakistani security establishment for not falling in line. It was soon after this that Geelani stepped down, saying that the PoK chapter had become corrupt, more interested in cosying up to the powers that be. Other hardliners in the Geelani Hurriyat are in jail. The moderate faction of the Hurriyat, led by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, was seen by the establishments in both India and Pakistan to be in a position to win support in Kashmir for the bilateral peace process that began in 2003. That was a moment to build on, for the Indian state to bring into play, once again, its famed ability to turn rebels into stakeholders. But that skill, encouraged by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, seems to have been replaced now with a take-no-prisoners approach and a preference for blunt instruments like the UAPA. The Modi government's refusal to recognise the moderates among the separatists had led to Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, for instance, joining hands with Geelani during the 2016 agitation in Kashmir.

What could be the purpose, then, of banning these two inactive organisations, in which even Pakistan has lost interest, unless it is to give the impression that the government has a larger plan for the Valley, of which there has been little or no visible sign thus far. Banning the Hurriyat may help the government score some points outside Kashmir. But those toying with a ban on Hurriyat should be paying more attention to Kashmir's proximity to what is unfolding in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's involvement in it. A revival of the political process with mainstream parties should be at the very top of the agenda in Delhi now.

MANDAL IN KAMANDAL

Kalyan Singh was a product of, and contributed to, change in the BJP's politics, with all its tumult and contradictions

THE POLITICAL CAREER of Kalyan Singh, the former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, who died on Saturday aged 89, reflects the ebb and flow of the BJP's electoral fortunes since its formation in 1980. His spectacular rise in the 1990s and marginalisation in the 2000s coincided with the BJP's own transformation from a cadre-based party that talked of Gandhian socialism to a mass outfit that championed Hindu nationalism during a period of political upheaval in northern India.

Singh was well poised to ride the crest of the two ideas that had captured the zeitgeist of the decade — Mandal and Mandir — and occupy office in Lucknow as the BJP's first CM of UP. Along with Uma Bharti, he was the prominent face of the BJP's own Mandalisation process, through which the party had tried to shed its image of being a caste Hindu outfit and embrace a pan-Hindu identity with a support base that included large numbers of backward castes. Born in a Lodh-Rajput family, Singh's rise to office was viewed as representative of the empowerment of OBCs within the rubric of Hindutva politics, which also neutralised the political edge that Lohiaite groups had gained on the ground, post Mandal. As CM, he presided over the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a moment that shamed constitutional democracy, but also irreversibly changed the contours of the country's politics. It also cost Singh his office. When the tide that rose with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement fell and equations within the BJP changed, Singh found himself dispensable to the party though he had become CM a second time in 1997. Singh quit the BJP in 1999 (and in 2004) to float his own outfit only to realise that he could at best be a caste leader and dent the BJP's electoral fortunes, but would need the support of his chief political adversary in the '90s, Samajwadi Party supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav, to win even his own Lok Sabha seat.

Singh returned to the BJP after more than a decade at the political fringes, but like Bharti, was a much diminished leader with little or no influence within the party on his return. It only seemed to confirm that leaders like Singh and Bharti commanded influence as products of a moment and movement, which overtook them, left them behind. Their relegation also suggested that OBC empowerment in the BJP could only exist as a current within the main course of Hindutva politics. However, the churn that Singh was a part of, and contributed to, has not ceased. It continues to shape the electoral and ideological contours of India's politics.

MACHINE LAW

Australia, South Africa have recognised AI as inventor. International patent law needs to catch up

IF YOU PRICK them, they do not bleed; if you tickle them, they do not laugh and for now, they do not revenge. But Artificial Intelligence, in more and more jurisdictions, can now invent, create — and file patents. DABUS, a "creativity" machine, has been recognised as an inventor for a type of food container that improves grip and heat transfer. It might be easy to dismiss this development as another way for corporations to protect profits or fear it as yet another step towards the AI apocalypse. But the problem — and the subsequent need for patent protection — is not merely one of technology.

Ryan Abbott, a law professor at the University of Surrey, has been campaigning for the better part of a decade to grant AIs near-person status in international patent law. While the EU and US patent laws still do not allow AI to be regarded as an owner, there is increasing pressure on these countries to do so. And there is some merit to the argument that Abbott and his colleagues are making.

AI can perform calculations, analyse data and even generate novel ideas and systems at a far faster pace, and in greater volume, than human minds. In practice, this could mean, for example, that the vaccine for the next pandemic is discovered by a thinking machine. For the West, particularly the US, development and deployment of AI is something that will have to be undertaken on a much larger scale to compete with China both strategically and economically. However, without adequate patent law, where and how AIs are deployed by corporations and individuals could be limited. That's really the rub of it: While the inventor may be artificial, the owner is still human — often greedily so. The law is yet to catch up, in most places, with the reality of how much thinking and innovating machines now undertake. And without legal clarity on IP and patents, there will always be someone who gets an undue advantage.



CHAKSHU ROY

MORE SCRUTINY, LESS SPEED

The legislative process must not succumb to political expediency

THE RECENT Monsoon Session of Parliament is proof that the speed of passing laws trumps their rigorous scrutiny in our legislative process. These pages have been replete with statistics about the two Houses passing laws in the din in a matter of minutes. Our national legislature has similarly enacted laws even during previous administrations. The repetition of such legislative functioning is appalling, especially as both government and Parliament continue making the same mistake. In our parliamentary system, a majority of laws originate from the government. Each ministry decides the path its legislative proposals will take from ideation to enactment. For example, last year, the Shipping Ministry requested public feedback on the two bills — Marine Aids and Inland Vessels — it piloted during this session. This mechanism enables the strengthening of the legal proposal through stakeholder inputs before being brought to Parliament. However, ministries expedite their bills by not putting them through a similar pre-legislative scrutiny process.

Another way for the government to fast track legislation is through the ordinance route. The Constitution empowers the government to make a law when Parliament is not in session, and the situation requires immediate action. Over the years, successive governments have exploited the spirit of this constitutional provision. Governments have promulgated an ordinance a few days before a parliamentary session, cut a session short to issue one, and pushed a law that is not urgent through the ordinance route. But the executive sometimes fails to follow through on the legislative urgency. For example, last October, it issued an

ordinance to set up a commission for air quality management of the national capital region. But during this year's Budget Session, it missed the deadline for getting parliamentary approval for the getting parliamentary approval for the ordinance. The government had to re-promulgate the ordinance after the Budget Session. Parliament then passed the bill to replace the ordinance in the din during this monsoon session.

Bringing in law through the ordinance route also bypasses parliamentary scrutiny. Logic would suggest that the legislature rigorously examine a hurriedly-enacted law to ensure its intended purpose is not compromised. But parliamentary committees rarely scrutinise bills to replace ordinances because this may take time and defeat the issuing of the ordinance. But this does not always result in the desired outcomes. Over a year ago, the government promulgated the three farm ordinances. There was pandemonium in Rajya Sabha over the demand to get them examined by a parliamentary committee. Since then, disruption in Parliament on the farm laws continues, and the statutes have been kept in abeyance by the Supreme Court. Over the last few years, bills like GST, Consumer Protection, Insolvency and Bankruptcy, Labour Codes, Surrogacy, and DNA Technology have benefited from parliamentary committees' scrutiny. Their closed-door technical deliberations, inputs from ministry officials, subject-matter experts, and ordinary citizens have strengthened government bills.

Unnecessary urgency in getting laws passed by Parliament does not result in their immediate implementation. For the law to work on the ground, the government is sup-

posed to frame rules. Last year the Cabinet Secretary twice requested the personal intervention of secretaries heading the Union ministries to frame regulations for bringing into force the laws made by Parliament. He wrote, "delays in notifying subordinate rules/regulations adversely affect the timely implementation of Acts and defeat the purpose for which they were legislated." Before the Monsoon Session, he wrote a follow-up letter on similar lines to his colleagues.

Our country needs a robust lawmaking process, one that does not bend to executive urgency or succumb to political expediency. The government must ensure that it identifies the gaps in our legal system proactively. All its bills should go through pre-legislative scrutiny before being brought to Parliament. The legislature, on its part, should conduct in-depth scrutiny of government bills. A simple debate on the floor of Parliament should not be enough for the legislative institution to stamp its approval. Mandatory scrutiny of bills by parliamentary committees should become the rule and not the exception. Hurriedly-made and inadequately-scrutinised laws hardly ever achieve their desired outcomes. Our statute books are full of examples of laws that have either failed or had unintended consequences. Enacting statutes without proper scrutiny also wastes the legislature's time when the government approaches Parliament to amend such laws. But the unmeasurable cost of a poorly-made law is in the loss of opportunity to an entire nation that has to comply with it.

The writer is head of outreach, PRS Legislative Research



AUGUST 24, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

ASSAM STALEMATE

THE TALKS BETWEEN the Assam agitators and the government on the foreigners' issue were adjourned for a week on August 23. The next round of talks will be held in Delhi. The four agitation leaders who participated in the talks will fly back to Gauhati to report to the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad executives. This was the 13th round of talks between the two sides. The main obstacle seems to be that the government wants to keep some of the entrants to the state in the period between 1961 and 1971 due to the commitments made earlier. The stand of the agitators is that all of them should be dispersed.

INDO-FRENCH TALKS

INDIA AND FRANCE have agreed that no solutions which involve pre-conditions can end conflicts and tensions in most parts of the world. The French foreign minister, Claude Cheysson, arrived in Delhi on a two-day visit. According to External Affairs Ministry sources, he has held wide-ranging talks with Foreign Minister PV Narasimha Rao on a variety of international issues, including that on Afghanistan.

DACOITS NABBED

TWO IMPORTANT MEMBERS of the Chhaboram Gang which was responsible for

the massacre of nine police personnel and three civilians were arrested by the Kurawali police in Uttar Pradesh. According to another report from Mainpuri, more than a dozen persons have been arrested for harbouring members of the Boora Bengali gang, responsible for the murder of nine persons in Jarela village on August 12 and that of Anar Singh who had participated in the Natthapur carnage

ENGLISH CHANNEL FEAT

TWO BLIND ENGLISHMEN, Nigel Verbeek and Gerald Price, made the first crossing ever of the English Channel on water skis, raising thousands of pounds in aid for the blind.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"What is certain is that the past week has witnessed a historic and devastating defeat for Britain, for the Biden presidency, for Nato, for the west, for democracy, for moral decency and for universal human rights." — THE OBSERVER

On Kabul, Delhi must wait

Strategic patience coupled with political empathy for Afghan people, and an active engagement will continue to keep Delhi relevant in Kabul's internal and external evolution



AS THE TRAGIC chaos at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul continues, two interconnected political negotiations unfolding are likely to determine Afghanistan's immediate future. One is focussed on building a new political order within Afghanistan and the other is about gaining international recognition for the incipient Taliban-led government.

Notwithstanding the current triumphalism in Pakistan at "overthrowing" the US-backed order in Kabul and "pushing" India out of Afghanistan, Delhi can afford to step back and signal that it can wait. For one, Rawalpindi is some distance away from establishing a new political order dominated by the Taliban. Then there is the challenge of securing the international legitimacy of a Pakistan-backed order in Afghanistan and sustaining its future.

Neither of these tasks is easy. Pakistan's own experience points to the pitfalls. Consider the last time Rawalpindi celebrated its victory in Afghanistan. After Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Kabul government led by Najibullah and backed by Moscow, resisted the full-scale offensive by the Mujahideen and Pakistan for three years before collapsing.

But Pakistan took another half-decade before gaining reasonable control over Afghanistan through the Taliban. But before Pakistan and the Taliban could translate their victory into long-term geopolitical gains, the world came down like a ton of bricks on Afghanistan after the 9/11 terror attacks. The Taliban government melted away by the end of 2001, as quickly as the Ashraf Ghani government did this month.

The Pakistan army can surely pat itself on the back for its patient support of the Taliban over the last two decades and bringing it back into Kabul. But how is it faring on the two unfinished tasks in Afghanistan—constructing a credible government and securing international legitimacy for it?

More than a week after President Ghani fled Kabul, there is no government, let alone an inclusive and internationally acceptable one, in sight. Before Rawalpindi can get the Taliban to share power with other groups, it has to facilitate an acceptable accommodation between different factions of the Taliban.

Power-sharing and the distribution of the spoils of war are always difficult for any victorious coalition. It is likely to be harder among the fractious Pashtun tribes.

Then there is the problem of including the non-Taliban formations in the new government. There are some efforts in that direction by the Taliban but they remain inconclusive. Meanwhile, the Taliban is yet to convince the broader population of its good intentions. Thousands of Afghans are desperate to escape from a future with the Taliban. Some opponents are regrouping to organise military resistance.

The talk on "inclusive government" is easy; but getting there, if ever, will take much time. But for the Taliban and Pakistan, there is little time—they are eager for early recognition and legitimacy. That brings us to the international



CR Sasikumar

dimension of the current crisis in Afghanistan.

The international community has set some broad conditions for the recognition of the Taliban-led government. Besides an inclusive government at home, the world wants to see respect for human rights, especially women's rights, ending support for international terrorism, and stopping opium production. The Taliban leaders have said all the right things on these issues, but the gap between their promises and performance on the ground is real.

While the international community appears united in its demands on the Taliban at this stage, Pakistan will hope to get some of its traditional friends like China and Turkey or new partners like Russia to break the current international consensus.

Pakistan and the Taliban, however, know Chinese and Russian support is welcome but not enough. They need an understanding of the US and its allies to gain political legitimacy as well as sustained international economic assistance. The US has already frozen Afghanistan's financial assets—worth nearly \$10 billion—and some Western banks are blocking remittances into Afghanistan. These pressures make the current dire economic situation in Afghanistan increasingly unbearable.

The West, too, needs the Taliban to facilitate the evacuation of its citizens from Kabul and, sooner rather than later, deliver humanitarian assistance, the demands for which are rising rapidly in the West. In other words, there will be much room for engagement between Kabul and the world and Pakistan sees itself as the critical interlocutor.

After decades of covert support to the Taliban, Pakistan has now come out into the open by carrying the Taliban on its political shoulders. Rawalpindi is telling the world that the Taliban has changed and means no harm to anyone. It has promised the Taliban goodies from the rest of the world quickly. Pakistan can surely reap many rewards if it can manage this high-wire act.

Like in all high-risk gambles, the potential for failure is large. If the Taliban does measure up to international demands, it would no longer be the political beast that we have known. For the Taliban, which is so deeply committed to a vigorous religious ideology, a significant internal and external reorientation will be wrenching and divisive. But the Pakistan army has never been shy of taking risks—its record of success,

The Pakistan Army's quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan harks back to the 'forward policy' school that sought to actively control the territories beyond the Indus. Delhi, in contrast, stayed with a rival school in the Raj that called for 'masterly inactivity'—a prudent approach to the badlands beyond the Indus. 'Masterly inactivity' is not a passive strategy. It recognises the futility of trying to control Afghanistan. It demands conserving one's scarce resources and deploying them at the most appropriate moment and location.

however, is poor.

Contrary to the widespread perception, India has never been in strategic competition with Pakistan in Afghanistan. India's lack of direct geographic access to Afghanistan has ensured that. Geography is also the reason Rawalpindi and Delhi pursue vastly different strategies towards Afghanistan.

Both their strategies have roots in the 19th-century policies of the Raj. The Pakistan Army's quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan harks back to the "forward policy" school that sought to actively control the territories beyond the Indus. Delhi, in contrast, stayed with a rival school in the Raj that called for "masterly inactivity"—a prudent approach to the badlands beyond the Indus.

"Masterly inactivity" is not a passive strategy. It recognises the futility of trying to control Afghanistan. It demands conserving one's scarce resources and deploying them at the most appropriate moment and location. It is about coping with the multiple contradictions within Afghanistan and focusing on subtle and indirect approaches.

Pakistan's forward policy seeks political dominance over Afghanistan in the name of a "friendly government" in Kabul. Delhi's strategy seeks to strengthen Kabul's autonomy vis-à-vis Rawalpindi and facilitate Afghanistan's economic modernisation. If Rawalpindi's quest for hegemony makes Afghans resentful of Pakistan, Delhi's support for Afghan sovereignty makes India always welcome.

The Afghan values that India supports—nationalism, sovereignty, and autonomy—will endure in Kabul, irrespective of the nature of the regime. Strategic patience coupled with political empathy for Afghan people, and an active engagement will continue to keep Delhi relevant in Kabul's internal and external evolution.

In the 1990s, Pakistan and the Taliban had a free hand to shape Kabul's future as the world turned its back on Afghanistan after the Soviet troops withdrew, but they failed quickly and miserably. This time around, the world is deeply concerned with Afghanistan's internal and external policies under the Taliban. That gives Delhi far greater room than in the 1990s to deal with the current situation in Afghanistan.

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The lost decade

UPA inherited an economy with strong fundamentals, but badly mismanaged it. India is now moving on



IN KAUN BANEGA Crorepati, contestants in a tricky spot had the option of "Phone a friend". During the UPA government (2004-2014), this term assumed a new meaning. Thousands of crores of unsecured loans were dish out by public sector banks to the likes of Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi on a mere phone call. In some cases, defaulters managed to get new loans to pay off old debts.

I had written a piece in 2014 that a "Swachh Bharat" campaign for cleaning the Indian banking system of non-performing and restructured loans worth \$100 billion would be required and that this would be a Herculean task. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman delivered just the remedy in this year's budget—a bad bank and an asset reconstruction company to resolve the non-performing loan issue and push lending to entrepreneurs.

Such was the extent of Congress's benefaction to their *khaas aadmi* that the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went on record saying "as far as the charges of corruption are concerned, coal block allocation as well as 2G spectrum allocation were both in the era of the UPA-1. So, the people of India do not seem to have paid heed to all these charges of corruption which are levied against me or my party." The 2010 CWC scam, the 2013 Augusta Westland chopper scam and the many others would later compel Singh to hope that history is kinder than the mandate of the people of India.

Such was the magnitude of these missteps that 2004-14 has been called "India's lost decade", with the UPA government favouring short-sighted electoral gains over long-term national interest. The UPA inherited an economy with strong macroeconomic fundamentals from the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA, but, in 2014 left behind a high fiscal deficit, spiralling prices and stalled public works projects.

India chose the visionary, strong and resolute leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to undertake bold decisions like the abrogation of Article 370, the introduction of GST, and a peaceful solution to the Ram Jannabhoon issue, in the greater interest of the nation.

India also embarked on an unprecedented scale of urban transformation spending over Rs 11.5 lakh crore in the past seven years compared to just Rs 1.57 lakh crore between 2004-14. Under the NDA government, the length of National Highways has gone up by 50 per cent from 91,287 km (April 2014) to 1,37,625 km (as on March 20, 2021). The impact of the Modi government's focus on infrastructure development and economic rejuvenation can be gauged from India's ascent in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business 2020 list to its highest-ever ranking of 63.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN UNTRUTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Reading our freedom struggle again' (IE, August 14). In the article, the writer, Rakesh Sinha claims that Mahatma Gandhi did not break his silence on the hanging of Bhagat Singh. This is entirely untrue. The fact is that Gandhi not only broke his silence but also drafted a powerful resolution which was adopted by the Congress and also wrote a piece in *Young India*, dated March 29, 1931, condemning the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his comrades.

L.S Herdenia, Bhopal

UNSCIENTIFIC GOVT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'An irrational turn' (IE, August 23). The National Science Chair's consternation for pseudoscience being peddled in the university courses is unequivocal. But his criticism of ancient cosmetic surgery being exemplified in Ganesha with an elephant head ought to have recalled that this was lauded as an achievement of advanced transplant surgery by no less a figure than Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

L.R Murmu, Delhi

JUDGE ON GROUND

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Undoing judicial feudalism' (IE, August 23). The judiciary at the district level plays a very important role in actualising the constitutional prescription in Article 38. Increased literacy and awareness have led to increased litigation, and the judiciary at the grassroots level is the face of the justice system to the common people who are unconcerned with the pyramidal structure and hierarchy of the judiciary. The justice-dispensing system has to

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When the late Arun Jaitley assumed office as finance minister in 2014, he had to first deal with unpaid subsidies amounting to more than Rs 1 lakh crore. We inherited a subsidy programme which had many leakages. The transformational DBT-PAHAL programme has helped in weeding out 4.49 crore dummy LPG connections and along with our "Give it Up Campaign" has saved the national exchequer Rs 71,301 crore. Total gas connections have more than doubled to over 29 crore, while over 8 crore free connections have been given to the needy under the Ujjwala Yojana.

Yet, one of the most debilitating repercussions of such short-sighted decision-making remains the long-term oil bonds worth Rs 1.44 lakh crore issued in lieu of under recoveries to OMCs. The current government has paid over Rs 70,000 crore in interest in the last five years on the oil bonds itself. We'll still have to pay an interest of Rs 37,000 crore by 2026. Despite interest payments, over Rs 1.30 lakh crore of the principal is still pending.

Notwithstanding this burden, the rise in fuel prices has been hugely exaggerated. While the price of benchmark crude oil has risen 362 per cent since 2020, the 30 cent rise in petrol prices between 2014-2021 is the lowest in comparison to any seven-year period in the past four decades. Also, while tax collections per litre by the Centre on petrol and diesel have remained the same in the last one year, tax collections by state governments have been rising as they are on an *ad-valorem* basis.

Today, 42.83 crore bank accounts have been opened under the PM Jan Dhan Yojana, 1.98 crore families have a roof over their shoulders thanks to the PM Awas Yojana, 2.81 crore households have electricity due to the Saubhagya yojana, 11.29 crore toilets provide access to sanitation under the Swachh Bharat Mission, 8.03 crore women have free LPG connections under the PM Ujjwala Yojana, 4.5 crore families are getting tap water after the launch of the Jal Jeevan Mission, 1.99 crore free medical treatments have been availed under Ayushman Bharat, free food-grain was provided to 80 crore during Covid-19 and more than 10 crore farmers have received over Rs 1.5 lakh crore directly into their bank accounts under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana. As we mark India@75, India is running the world's largest vaccination programme with more than 57 crore people having received the vaccine.

On the occasion of Azadi ka amrut mahotsav, the Prime Minister has given a clarion call for Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayaas for achieving saturation of all welfare schemes so as to not leave a single Indian behind. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "The present is determined by our past actions, and the future by the present." Guided by the forward-looking vision of the Prime Minister, we do not work today for holding onto the reins of power tomorrow. We strive forward with the responsibility and mandate of fulfilling the glory that India can be proud of 25 years from now.

The author is Union Minister for Petroleum & Natural Gas and Housing & Urban Affairs

IDEAS ONLINE

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REMEMBERING KULDIP NAYAR: MEERA DEWAN

HOW OPIUM RESURRECTED THE TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN: ANUBHA GUPTA

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acknowledge the special role played by the judicial officers at the level, despite resource scarcity and lack of adequate manpower.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

NO CONFIDENCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Return to unfreedom' (IE, August 23). The Taliban's record with regards to women's rights has been abysmal and fears over rollback of these hard-won rights have been mounting. Visuals reporting white-washing of a hoarding displaying women is a telling gesture. Proclamations of lists of young women to be offered as "gifts" in marriage to Taliban fighters is another horrifying instance. Schools and colleges for women are closing. While the Taliban may have claimed to adopt a moderate stance, their policies do not inspire confidence.

Ila Raikar, Mumbai

Democracy's missing middle

We need citizens' assemblies for deliberation in cities, districts, states



THERE IS DISENCHANTMENT with political parties and with institutions of electoral democracy in the US and Europe. There is hardly any open-minded deliberation in elected assemblies divided along party lines about urgent problems such as increasing inequality, environmental unsustainability, and invasions of citizens' privacy by both private and government agencies. The monsoon session of the Indian Parliament ended with members standing on tables, throwing files around. Citizens who appealed to the Supreme Court were asked to desist from public discussions about matters placed before the court.

Democratic governance is "government of the people, for the people, and by the people". Elections by citizens of representatives to assemblies provide governments of the people. Therefore, the right to vote, freedoms for citizens to stand for elections, and the conduct of fair elections are fundamental for democracy. But not enough for deep democracy.

All governments are expected to perform for the people. This is necessary for the survival of authoritarian governments also. Sadly, even elected assemblies can lose sight of their accountability to citizens in between elections. Therefore, citizens must have a right to information about their governments' performance, and the Right to Information was a good step for strengthening democracy in India.

However, information must flow the other way too: Governments must listen to citizens. When they don't, citizens must have the right to protest, albeit peacefully. Governments can crimp citizens' rights by limiting protests to

avoid public inconvenience to sites and methods which can be ignored or by curbing protests as threats to national security. This can be fatal for democracies.

While the right to information and protest may mitigate weaknesses, they do not reduce the fundamental weakness in the representative method of democracy. That is insufficient governance of the people by the people, which requires stronger institutions for participation by citizens themselves in democratic deliberations about matters of public policy.

The internet and social media have opened public spaces for people to raise issues. At the same time, members of elected assemblies are whipped and bound by anti-defection laws to vote along partisan lines. There is little inclination, either on social media or in elected assemblies, to listen to other points of view. The problem for governance is the "missing middle"—between spaces for public opinion below, and constitutional forums such as elected assemblies and courts at the top—to find democratic solutions to citizens' problems. Therefore, building a middle layer of institutions for democratic deliberations amongst citizens has become essential for democratic governance.

Kalyso Nicolaidis, chair of global affairs at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, says, "Consent of the governed is about more than periodic elections or referenda. The process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been for the last 200 years: A struggle to expand the franchise. This time around, it's a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through

the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all its forms."

A civil society movement, Citizens for Europe, has proposed a solution. They say, "To overcome mistrust towards the EU and address socio-economic and environmental challenges ahead, we need more inclusive and innovative instruments of participatory democracy. In that perspective, we are asking for the creation of a permanent transnational forum for deliberation and citizens' participation: A European Citizens' Assembly."

Citizens for Europe also caution that: "Online consultations have proven to be powerful support instruments for agenda-setting and transnational deliberation—as shown, for instance, by WeEuropeans and WeMove. However, we also find drawbacks to purely online methods, such as the risk of accentuating ideological cleavages and excluding groups affected by the digital divide." The framers of the US Constitution were worried in the 18th century, long before the internet, about the quality of discussions in citizens assemblies. In the Federalist paper No.55, James Madison wrote, "had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob." It is not enough to set up citizens' assemblies. Citizens' meetings, online or offline, must be designed to enable citizens to listen thoughtfully to other points of view.

It is time for the next step in the evolution of democratic institutions. Citizens assemblies for democratic deliberation should be formally established in cities, districts and states. They