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## THIS WORD MEANS

## VACATION BENCH

During the summer vacation, the Bench that will hear urgent matters in Supreme Court



Summer vacation has set in; SC also takes a winter vacation. File photo

ON MAY 9, the Supreme Court notified its annual summer holiday from May 13, and listed the judges who will occupy the Vacation Benches for hearing urgent matters during this period. Dividing the vacation into periods and listing a number of Division Benches, the notification said: "Under Rule 6 of Order II of The Supreme Court rules, 2013, Hon'ble the Chief Justice of India has nominated the following Division Benches for hearing of urgent miscellaneous matters and regular hearing matters during the summer vacation for the period (First Part) from May 13, 2019 to May 20, 2019, May 21, 2019 to May 24, 2019, May 25, 2019 to May 28, 2019 and for the period (Second Part) from May 29, 2019 to May 30, 2019, May 31, 2019 to June 2, 2019, June 3, 2019 to June 5, 2019, June 6, 2019 to June 13, 2019..."

A Vacation Bench of the Supreme Court is a special bench constituted by the Chief Justice of India. The court takes two long vacations each year, the summer and winter breaks, but is technically not fully closed during these periods. Litigants can still approach the Supreme Court and, if the court decides that the plea is an "urgent matter", the Vacation Bench hears the case on its merits. While there is no specific definition as to what is an "urgent matter", during vacations the court generally admits writs related to *habeas corpus*, *certiorari*, prohibition

and *quo warranto* matters for enforcement of any fundamental right.

Rule 6, which is mentioned in the notification, states: "The Chief Justice may appoint one or more Judges to hear during summer vacation or winter holidays all matters of an urgent nature which under these rules may be heard by a Judge sitting singly, and, whenever necessary, he may likewise appoint a Division Court for the hearing of urgent cases during the vacation which require to be heard by a Bench of Judges."

The High Courts and trial courts too have Vacation Benches to hear urgent matters under their jurisdiction.

Vacation Benches become significant in important political cases. During the last summer vacation, when the Karnataka Assembly results were announced, the decision to invite the BJP by Karnataka Governor was challenged by the Congress before the Vacation Bench. The urgent matter was heard on May 18, 2018 and the court passed an interim order to conduct a floor the very next day. The interim order played a key role in setting off events relating to government formation.

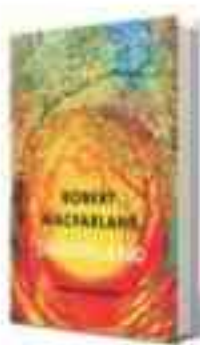
CJI Ranjan Gogoi himself will be heading the Vacation Bench from May 25 to May 30. This will be in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of the Lok Sabha election results, scheduled on May 23.

## TIP FOR READING LIST

## THE WORLDS BENEATH OUR FEET

THROUGHOUT LITERATURE, from mythology to modern fiction, the underworld has been projected as dark and fearsome. As the writer Robert Macfarlane points out in his latest book, this is reflected in language itself — "height is celebrated but depth is despised. To be 'uplifted' is preferable to being 'depressed' or 'pulled down'." In *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, Robert Macfarlane describes his journeys into the worlds beneath our feet — from the depths of Greenland's glaciers to the underground networks by which trees communicate, from Bronze Age burial chambers to the rock art of remote Arctic

sea-caves. Some of these accounts are frightening. As historian and author William Dalrymple notes in his review for *The Guardian*, "In a cave system in the Mendips, a rope thrown down as an escape route becomes entangled behind the belay boulder; only the necessity to regain the surface forces Macfarlane to risk his life climbing up it." Dalrymple notes that "the tales of adventures are only a takeoff point for discussions of deeper concerns: the relationship between man and landscape, the instability of time and place, and perhaps above all, the fragility of all we are and all we create."



ANIL SASI  
NEW DELHI, MAY 12

ON FRIDAY, the United States decision to raise tariffs to 25% on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods took effect — a move that potentially impacted goods trade in more than 5,700 product categories, and sparked another round of tariff wars between the world's two largest economies.

On Saturday, Washington slapped a new round of tariffs on almost all of China's remaining imports. These tariffs applied to an even broader range of traded goods — estimated at about \$300 billion.

US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said in a statement that President Donald Trump had "ordered us to begin the process of raising tariffs on essentially all remaining imports from China". Trump had said Friday that the two sides were close to reaching a deal, but China had attempted to renegotiate.

The Chinese side continued to sound hopeful. "Negotiations have not broken down," Vice Premier Liu He, China's chief negotiator in the talks, said Saturday. "...I think small setbacks are normal and inevitable during the negotiations of both countries. Looking forward, we are still cautiously optimistic," Liu said.

In contrast, US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin told CNBC that there were currently no trade talks scheduled with Beijing.

## Origin of the dispute

The US and China have been slugging it out since Trump slapped heavy tariffs on imported steel and aluminium items from China in March last year, and China responded by imposing tit-for-tat tariffs on billions of dollars worth of American imports.

The dispute escalated after Washington demanded that China reduce its \$375 billion trade deficit with the US, and introduce "verifiable measures" for protection of Intellectual Property Rights, technology transfer, and more access to American goods in Chinese markets.

In a report earlier this year, the IMF noted that the US-China trade tension was one factor that contributed to a "significantly weakened global expansion" late last year, as it cut its global growth forecast for 2019.

## Impact of latest move

The biggest Chinese import sector impacted by the fresh round of tariff hikes is the \$20 billion-plus category of Internet modems, routers, and other data transmission devices segment, alongside printed circuit boards used in a number of US-made products. Furniture, lighting products, auto parts, vacuum cleaners, and building materials also face higher levies.

Analysts say the tariffs could hamper the rebound in the US economy, with consumption likely to be hit, as these tariffs would be



China's Vice Premier Liu He and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer at the office of the US Trade Representative in Washington Friday. Reuters

## US TRADE IN GOODS WITH CHINA

Year	Exports	Imports	Balance
2019*	25,994.4	105,973.9	-79,979.5
2018	120,341.4	539,503.4	-419,162.0
2017	129,893.6	505,470.0	-375,576.4
2016	115,545.5	462,542.0	-346,996.5
2015	115,873.4	483,201.7	-367,328.3

\*January-March

Source: US Census Bureau. All figures are in millions of US dollars on a nominal basis, not seasonally adjusted unless otherwise specified

## US-CHINA TRADE &amp; INVESTMENT FACTS

**US GOODS & SERVICES** trade with China totalled an estimated \$737.1 billion in 2018. Exports: \$179.3 billion; imports: \$557.9 billion; deficit: \$378.6 billion

**CHINA IS CURRENTLY** the US's largest goods trading partner with \$659.8 billion in total (two-way) goods trade in 2018. Exports: \$120.3 billion; imports: \$539.5 billion; US goods trade deficit: \$419.2 billion

**TRADE IN SERVICES** with China (exports and imports) totalled an estimated \$77.3 billion in 2018. Exports: \$58.9 billion; imports: \$18.4 billion; US services trade surplus: \$40.5 billion

**911,000 JOBS** (estimated) were supported by US exports of goods and services to China in 2015 (latest data

available), according to the US Department of Commerce; 601,000 supported by goods exports; 309,000 by services exports

**US FDI IN CHINA** (stock) was \$107.6 billion in 2017, a 10.6% increase from 2016. US direct investment in China is led by manufacturing, wholesale trade, finance and insurance

**CHINA FDI IN THE US** (stock) was \$39.5 billion in 2017, down 2.3% from 2016. China's direct investment in the US is led by manufacturing, real estate, depository institutions

**SALES OF SERVICES** in China by majority US-owned affiliates was \$55.1 billion in 2016 (latest data available); sales of services in the US by majority China-owned firms: \$8.3 billion

Source: USTR

paid by American consumers and businesses. Also, this exacerbates the uncertainty in the global trading environment, affects global sentiment negatively, and adds to risk aversion globally.

The higher tariffs could lead to the repricing

of risk assets globally, tighter financing conditions, and slower growth. The trade tensions could result in an increasingly fragmented global trading framework, weakening the rules-based system that has underpinned global growth, particularly in Asia,

## Atlas of human body: what's in it, and why

ANJALI MARAR  
PUNE, MAY 12

ON FRIDAY, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) launched 'MANAV: Human Atlas Initiative', a project for mapping every tissue of the human body to help understand better the roles of tissues and cells linked to various diseases.

## What it covers

The comprehensive map of the human body, every tissue accounted for, will be created from all available scientific literature. The programme will seek to provide better biological insights through physiological and molecular mapping, develop disease models

through predictive computing, and allow for a holistic analysis and finally drug discovery. The aim of the project is to understand and capture human physiology in two stages — normal stage and disease stage. DBT has invested Rs 13 crore, shared between two institutions in Pune — National Centre for Cell Science and Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research — while Persistent Systems Ltd has co-funded the project with Rs 7 crore, and is developing the platform.

## How it will be created

Students will be trained in annotation and curation of the information that will form the online network. Students in their final year of graduation and above in biochemistry, biotechnology, microbiology,

botany, zoology, bioinformatics, health sciences, systems biologists, pharmacologists and data sciences can sign up. The network is also open for students with a science background but not necessarily involved in active scientific research. The MANAV team has encouraged colleges and universities to register as teams. Initially, the programme will accommodate colleges that operate under the DBT Star College scheme.

Once registered, student groups will be assigned research papers or literature, and trained in annotation and curation using specialised tools. Student groups will be evaluated from time to time and their annotations reviewed by trainer scientists. Workshops are being organised to train teachers who can then train student groups. Initially, the project will

focus on curating information on skin tissues.

## Why it matters

This collated data can be useful for future researchers and clinicians and drug developers, who finally handle human bodies in disease conditions. The platform will also impart key skills to the student community in reading scientific literature — in this case on individual tissues — and perform annotation and curation. Such a database will come in handy in tracing causes of a disease, understanding specific pathways and ultimately decoding how the body's disease stage is linked to tissues and cells. The teams will also study any potent elements or molecules that have never been used in the form of drugs, to target specific cells or tissues.

## Do 'Russian poplar' seeds cause May illness in Kashmir? The fears, the science

BASHARAT MASOOD  
SRINAGAR, MAY 12

IN MAY every year, hospitals and doctors in the Kashmir Valley find themselves treating a high number of patients, especially children, with respiratory diseases. The patients complain of sore throat, cold, cough and fever. While a common cause is pollen shed by various plants, the spike in illness has often been attributed to a phenomenon during this season — the shedding of fluffy cotton-covered seeds by poplar trees, commonly known as "Russian poplars". Three years ago, this led to the Jammu & Kashmir High Court ordering chopping of all Russian poplars in the Valley. Scientists, on the other hand, have concluded that the seeds from these trees do not cause allergy.

## The tree

Experts say "Russian poplar" is a misnomer as the tree has nothing to do with

Russia. It was introduced in Kashmir in 1982 under a World Bank-aided social forestry scheme. The tree is a Western American species known as Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) in the US. Over the years, people in the Valley have started to prefer the "Russian poplar" over the native Kashmiri poplar for its quick growth — 10-15 years to reach full size compared to 30-40 years for the Kashmiri poplar. By official estimates, the Valley today has 16-20 million of the non-Kashmiri species. Used to make wooden boxes for transportation of apples and other fruits from the Valley, poplar trees are a Rs 600-crore industry. Every year, the fruit industry in the Valley needs at least 300 lakh wooden boxes. The high-quality wood is also used in veneer and plywood.

## Illness season

With the onset of May, the "Russian poplars" shed their seeds covered in cotton-like material. The cotton-covered seeds can be seen in the air, on the ground and in wa-



Poplars in Bandipora; the seeds are often held responsible for illness. Shuaib Masoodi

ter-bodies. Around the same time, patients complaining of respiratory diseases swell many times. People have been blaming the seeds for the respiratory diseases.

## High Court intervention

In 2014, a Srinagar resident approached the High Court with the complaint that his neighbour had planted "Russian poplars"

near his home and pollen from the trees was causing allergy in his family, especially his ailing mother and his children. The applicant sought removal of the trees. The court banned sale, purchase and plantation of the female "Russian poplars" in Srinagar.

In May 2015, the court directed all Deputy Commissioners of the Valley to chop "Russian poplars" across Kashmir, saying the health of the general public is of "paramount importance". "It is a common knowledge that pollen seed of Poplars is adversely affecting health of general public, mostly of elderly people and children. The pollen seed of these trees has given rise to chest diseases in Kashmir, which can become life threatening for them," the court observed. Citing Article 21, the court also observed: "The right to life can become meaningful, only if a person is healthy."

In May 2016, the court sought compliance of its order. Following the directive, lakhs of "Russian poplars" were cut down in various parts of the Valley, especially Srinagar



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

AFTER FANI

Having minimised cyclone's ravages, Odisha government's challenge is to restore livelihoods, build resilience

THE ODISHA GOVERNMENT did a creditable job in minimising the immediate impact of Cyclone Fani, which made landfall in Puri 10 days ago. Besides disaster relief workers and police, the state's administration roped in civil society volunteers to evacuate millions of people, who were moved to cyclone shelters. It warned fishermen to not venture towards the sea and summoned personnel and equipment to clear roads and remove uprooted trees and other debris. But the challenge posed by Fani is not yet over. The cyclone has left behind a trail of devastation and suffering in 14 districts of Odisha. According to official records, more than a crore people have been affected, almost all the kuccha houses have been razed, rendering nearly 50 per cent of the people in these districts homeless, electricity and water supplies have been hit, most of the standing paddy crop is lost and sources of livelihood, including coconut orchards and fish boats, have been destroyed.

Like in its efforts to warn people about the cyclone, the Odisha government has involved the civil society in the rehabilitation effort. It has launched a web portal for crowd funding projects for this purpose. Women's self-help groups have been roped into the endeavour. The state government has also announced subsidies to restore agrarian livelihoods and assistance to fisher people to buy new boats and fishing nets. However, to restore the fishing economy, the government needs to look beyond the boat owners. Those who do not own boats will not have work till the vessels destroyed by the calamity are repaired or replaced. Landless agricultural labourers will, similarly, need employment before work on the fields resumes. As it reaches out to the people whose lives and livelihoods have been ravaged, the Odisha government's priority should also be to ensure that social inequalities are not aggravated in the cyclone's aftermath. It should act immediately on reports that the post-Fani stress has found expression in the deepening of caste fault-lines and conflict.

Odisha is no stranger to severe cyclones. However, these storms usually occur in the last quarter of the year. Cyclones in April-May are much weaker than those that are formed in October-December. Fani has been ascribed to global warming by some experts. These are still early days for the science that links unseasonal high intensity storms to the very warm sea surface temperatures in the Indian Ocean. But, increasingly, climate scientists are coming around to a consensus that global warming will precipitate extreme weather events — like Fani — in the Indian Ocean. Odisha's response to the cyclone shows that the country has the scientific acumen to assess the intensity of such events — and the administrative resolve to minimise loss of lives. The challenge of Odisha, and other coastal states, is to ensure that peoples' suffering because of the vagaries of nature is minimised.

DIDI'S OWN GOAL

Banerjee is being seen as a spirited voice of Opposition. Invoking the law against a funny meme undermines her own standing

WHILE THE MAHAGATHBANDHAN in Uttar Pradesh spearheads the electoral push of the Opposition, it is Mamata Banerjee who has emerged as the voice of the fightback to the ruling party in West Bengal. She has repeatedly engaged with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rhetoric, and whatever the outcome of the election, she has made the electoral battle more lively, more riveting. She has also caught the ear of those who are uneasy about a single party becoming the axis of power. But those who watch her stake out the oppositional space are unlikely to be comfortable about Banerjee herself exhibiting intolerant and authoritarian behaviour in her own state.

Priyanka Sharma of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) in West Bengal was arrested on Friday for posting a morphed image of actor Priyanka Chopra at the red carpet of the recent Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Gala in New York. Banerjee's face had replaced Chopra's, who was dressed for the occasion in a bizarre outfit and hairdo. There is nothing obscene about the image, and guests at the gala traditionally choose their outfits from the shelf over the top. Both the original and the morphed image have travelled widely on social media, and have been received in good (though perplexed) humour. Certainly, the picture shared by Sharma does not appear to constitute sufficient grounds for inviting stringent provisions of criminal law, which have been slapped on her.

Even earlier, though, Banerjee has shown a disinclination to be amused when the joke is on her. In 2012, she had reacted sharply to a completely harmless cartoon based on a scene in a children's film by Satyajit Ray, which she interpreted as a death threat and an attempt to outrage the modesty of a woman. Jadavpur University chemistry teacher Ambikesh Mohapatra had not originated the cartoon, he merely shared it. But he was beaten up by political goons and arrested under serious provisions of the law, including the infamous Section 66A(b) of the Information Technology Act, which was later struck down by the Supreme Court. As a consequence, a Bengali cartoon that had hardly been seen outside the state was shared by millions of people, and an online movement court-ing arrest with humour began in West Bengal. It is surprising, and dispiriting, that Banerjee has forgotten that lesson, especially now, when she is courting a national image as an opponent of authoritarian and intolerant politics.

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



ASHOK GULATI

Perils of over-promising

For all their talk on farm distress, on agriculture, BJP, Congress show they have not learnt from past failures

WE OFTEN FEEL proud of our democratic system. But it also has a shortcoming, which has been magnified in the current election season. The conversation today is not about what the BJP/NDA promised in its manifesto of 2014, and how far they have been able to deliver on their promises. Accusations and counter-accusations are being hurled on who was/is more corrupt — of course, without much proof. The gloves are off and the battle for power is bayonet to bayonet. Our political system seems to have reached a new low given that political parties petitioned the Supreme Court against the Election Commission. They requested the Court to ask the EC to act against violations of the Model Code of Conduct. I hope things will return to normal after the elections are over. The real issues will haunt the government that assumes office after the elections

In this article, we focus on the key issues that confront the food and agri-sector, including those pertaining to farmers' incomes.

In 2014, the BJP manifesto promised to implement the Swaminathan Committee report, especially its recommendation on minimum support prices (MSPs) being 50 per cent above the costs incurred by farmers. For four years after assuming office, the party never talked about this promise. In the fifth year, the government raised MSPs to 50 per cent above costs, but the reference cost was lowered from comprehensive cost (C2) — implied in the Swaminathan formula — to Cost A2+FL (paid out costs plus family labour). Cost A2+FL is about 38 per cent lower than Cost C2. Farmers saw through the trick and felt cheated. And when market prices remained 10 to 30 per cent lower than the announced MSPs for most crops, farmers lost any hope of getting remunerative prices for their produce.

Meanwhile, the government changed the goal post to doubling farmers' incomes by 2022-23. From whatever little I have learnt about agriculture in my professional life, I can say confidently that the government cannot even reach the halfway mark of this target

by 2022-23 with the set of policies that have been followed in the last five years. It pains me that ministers, bureaucrats, and even many academics talk about this target in an uncritical manner. Either they don't understand the challenges faced by the country in agriculture or they are simply fooling people. There is a famous saying: "You can fool all the people for some time, some people all the time, but not all the people all the time"

My humble assessment of the government's performance is that it suffers the perils of over-promising. In the food and agri-space, the government hasn't achieved half of what the BJP manifesto had promised. Let me cite a few more examples.

One of the major promises in the BJP's 2014 manifesto was reforming the foodgrain management system. In fact, the manifesto explicitly talked about unbundling the Food Corporation of India (FCI). Has this promise been unfulfilled? Of course not. The ills of the grain management system remain where they were in 2013-14, with one notable change: The introduction of the POS (point of sale) machines at a large number of fair price shops.

The government claims that it has weeded out 2.75 crore fake ration cards. But then why has the PDS offtake not fallen? In fact the PDS offtake has been gradually increasing, and so has procurement. The stocks with the government have also increased. On April 1, the grain stocks were more than double the buffer stocking norms, reflecting high economic inefficiency.

The government claims that it has weeded out 2.75 crore fake ration cards. But then why has the PDS offtake not fallen? In fact the PDS off-take has been gradually increasing, and so is procurement. The stocks with the government have also increased. On April 1, the grain stocks were more than double the buffer stocking norms, reflecting high economic inefficiency.

The food subsidy in the 2019-20 budget is Rs 1.84 lakh crore. What is less known is that the outstanding dues of the FCI have been mounting — they are Rs 1.86 lakh crore. The FCI has been asked to borrow to keep the wheels running. The amount due from the agency has touched Rs 2.48 lakh crore. The upshot of all this is that the system pertaining to foodgrains remains as messy as it was in 2013-14 and the fiscal deficit figures in the Union Budget are murky. There has been no major overhauling of the FCI despite the

sweeping reforms suggested by the Shanta Kumar Panel, which was instituted by the prime minister himself.

Take the case of public irrigation. After two successive droughts in 2014 and 2015, the government identified 99 projects that were at advanced stages of completion, and vowed to complete them by December 2019. The Long Term Irrigation Fund (LTIF) of Rs 40,000 crore was created with the NABARD to help states to complete these projects in time. But the BJP manifesto of 2019 states that so far, only 31 of these projects have been completed. Our research reveals that command area development has taken place in only six projects. In other words, farmers have received water in their fields in only six of the 99 projects. That's the pace of progress in drought-proofing the country.

One can go on and on to show how the achievements in most projects fall way short of the promises in the BJP's 2014 manifesto. But my purpose here is to be not too critical, but to show the challenges in the food and agri-space. When a political party cannot deliver even half of what it promises, what would one call that? A failure? An over-promise? Or an attempt to fool people? You can pick your answer.

This problem is not just with the BJP, but also with the Congress. The party's manifesto of 2019 promises an all-India loan waiver, Rs 72,000 per year income support to the bottom 20 per cent of population (NYAY), higher MSPs and so on.

Instead of discussing these promises — and holding the government to account — our political discourse has veered towards emotive non-economic issues of caste and religion. This weakens the foundations of the democratic system. But who cares? Elections are all about grabbing power. It is only coincidence that every party promises to serve the poor!

The writer is Infosys Chair professor for Agriculture at ICRIER



RADHA KULKARNI

HOW MARVEL FAILED CAP

Disappointingly, 'Avengers' couldn't go beyond queerbaiting

THE RELEASE of *Avengers: Endgame* reaffirmed the common knowledge among fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that a number of characters would reach the completion of their story arcs. And the movie has managed to unravel the character of one of its key figures — Captain America. While certain fans are extremely satisfied, there are others like me who are less than pleased. We are frustrated with Marvel because of the "queerbaiting" surrounding Captain America. His story, spanning a trilogy and four *Avengers* movies, has never revolved around a romantic partner, as his selflessness and the need to stand up for what is "right" has kept his stories packed with conflict and action, preventing him from pursuing any steady romantic interest.

In his first movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, he meets Peggy Carter, who is not (yet!) reduced to simply being a love interest for Cap. A competent and resilient woman, Peggy refused to be the damsel in distress, and moved on with her own life when the hero went missing. She eventually became the co-founder of SHIELD, which would later become a major organisation in the MCU. Even when Captain America turned up, 70 years later, she expressed no regret or desire to change the life that she lived in his absence.

*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* generally steered clear of a female romantic interest for Cap. However, it introduced a new variable — Bucky Barnes, Captain America's long-lost, childhood best friend, who turns up as a brainwashed assassin in the 21st cen-

tury. Unlike Peggy, Bucky did somewhat fit into the damsel role, eliciting strong displays of loyalty for Captain America. Being such an integral part of the Cap's life, many MCU fans saw Bucky as a potential love interest. Over the span of his trilogy, Cap continued to prioritise Bucky over everything else — fighting the government and even the rest of the *Avengers* in order to protect him. By the end of the trilogy, Cap-Bucky had become an extremely popular pairing.

However, it became clear that Marvel's insistence on romance only goes far enough to include straight couples. In a brash attempt to downplay the Captain's possible homosexuality, he was pushed into a contrived romance with Sharon Carter — none other than Peggy Carter's niece.

As fans made their disapproval of this pairing clear, Marvel changed tactics and resorted to a strategy that a vast majority of Hollywood loves — queerbaiting. It refers to a marketing technique used by creators of fiction to hint at, but not actually depict, a same-sex romance. This is done in order to draw audiences attracted to the prospect of such a relationship. At the same time, it does not require the creators to face any potential backlash that the depiction of such a relationship may cause.

Marvel has been promising its fans greater representation for years, but has so far done almost nothing to act on it. After the release of *Avengers: Infinity War*, fans were told to expect LGBTQ+ characters in future movies. As *Avengers: Endgame* neared, the directors of the movie revealed the inclusion

of a gay male character in the movie. However, this long awaited gay character merely turned out to be one of the directors, in nothing more than a glorified cameo.

Marvel screenwriters and directors have utilised the Cap-Bucky pairing for years during press tours and interviews — fans have even started the online campaign #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend: This stemmed from a press interview in which Samuel Jackson (who plays Nick Fury in the MCU) dubbed him as "The first LGBT Captain America".

And when *Avengers: Endgame* released, it came as the last straw in denying the LGBTQ+ community the representation it deserves within the MCU. The Cap's worldview — learning to live without a war — could have easily been lent a relevant edge by having Cap retire into a peaceful life in the 21st century with Bucky. Instead, he is, literally, sent back in time to be with Peggy Carter — erasing her life, family and accomplishments, and effectively reducing her to a prize for the hero of the story. Captain America, the paragon of "American values", can under no circumstances be in a same-sex relationship. This illogical and unnecessary conclusion points to Marvel following conservative values implying that any "real family" — for Cap or otherwise — must be that between a man and a woman. For a character that was originally created to fight for inclusivity, this closure is a massive failure on Marvel's part.

The writer, 18, is based in Pune and has just finished school

MAY 13, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO



**CPI VS COMMUNALISM**  
THE COMMUNIST PARTY of India is to launch, with the cooperation of other parties and organisations, a nation-wide movement against the danger of communalism. This was one of the decisions taken by the central executive committee of the party which met in New Delhi from May 8 to May 10. A communique on the meeting alleged that "the RSS-Jana Sangh combine" had become desperate because of increasing political isolation and was reverting to "Muslim-baiting". Explaining the committee's decision, the CPI general secretary, C Rajeshwara Rao, said the attack on the students of Aligarh Muslim University was preplanned.

**LABOUR PROTESTS**  
AT EVERY RAIL head and bus stand in the Santal Parganas hundreds of people wait for some conveyance to move out to the neighbouring districts of West Bengal. Most of them go on this seasonal migration with their families as agriculture provides them virtually no employment at home in summer. For the first time this season, such migration is being challenged by activists of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), who are stopping buses crammed with the unemployed and starving labourers. Landlords and contractors from the Bengal districts are being mobbed, beaten and warned, it is reported.

**PUNJAB COPS HELD**  
A NUMBER OF ring leaders of protesting policemen in Punjab were rounded up in a pre-dawn swoop, as the unrest took a turn for the worse with a clash between the protesters and loyalists at Mukatsar in Faridkot. There were reports of demonstrations by uniformed men at more places. In the Mukatsar clash, a deputy superintendent of police and an inspector were injured. The Border Security Force units were pressed into service at main trouble spots of Bhatinda, Sangrur and Patiala districts as the Director of Intelligence Bureau, S N Mathur, continued his consultations with the state authorities here for the second successive day.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Pakistani state must not continue to abjure its duty to those victimised by the blasphemy law."  
—DAWN

## Vacation stories

A reporter remembers Rajiv Gandhi in Lakshadweep, how he tried to balance Congress old guard and the 'wiz kids'



P RAMAN

MAKHAN LAL Fotedar was the one who tipped me of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's new year holiday in Lakshadweep. The entire political class was aghast when *The Indian Express* broke the story about his previous week-long revelry in Andamans in 1987. In the Gandhian tradition, a holiday for a politician was a sin. Swatantra Party leader P. Iloo Modi was derided for his elitism and lavish lifestyle. Indra Gandhi was a 24/7 prime minister. It was such grounding that made it a cultural shock for the Congress traditionalists.

"They will finish the Congress," Kamalapati Tripathi, at his bungalow opposite 10 Janpath, told us the next day. Congress workers will not tolerate such "angrezi" culture, he burst out in sheer desperation. The same sentiment had prompted Fotedar to leak the story. When asked for details, he told us to contact E. Ahamed, who later became deputy speaker of the Lok Sabha. Ahamed confirmed Rajiv Gandhi's visit. AICC joint secretary Mullappally Ramachandran, who was deputed to make arrangements for Rajiv Gandhi's party, said the PM's programme in Lakshadweep had three components. First was a meeting of the annual Islands Development Authority. Then, there was a Union cabinet meeting, also attended by Narasimha Rao. The rest of the time was for the New Year celebrations by the PM's group.

Delhi's grapevine had juicy stories about Rajiv's friends, family and foreign in-laws revelling aboard *INS Viraat*. Some talked of security risk. After the event, we continued to chase the story for a month - from the party apparatchik, naval sources to local organisers. Each source denied it. While the PM and his wife travelled aboard *Viraat*, the other guests were ferried by Pawan Hans air-line: This was confirmed by the airline. Some in the entourage chose to go by the regular ferry service. Then we had the version of a most unlikely source - an attendant at the mess who was present onboard. His assertion made us abandon the wild goose chase.

Things changed 11 years later when the 12th prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, broke the tradition. For him, the annual holiday was a right. He went to Kumarakom and Manali, often with his controversial son-in-law. The holiday stigma briefly re-

turned once again, in 2016, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi mocked "Pappu" for enjoying holidays abroad after every election campaign.

However, Rajiv Gandhi's fishing expedition in Lakshadweep had another dimension. It symbolised the Congress old guard's dislike for the way the Gen X had hijacked the party. It was clearly a clash of generations. Rajiv's "Doon pals", some of them with professional management background, had taken control soon after he was sworn in as PM. Arun Nehru rode roughshod over the AICC campaign committee for the 1984 elections. He rejected truckloads of printed posters made ready for distribution. Under him, for the first time, a political party assigned the advertisement job to a professional agency - Rediffusion. AICC's publicity committee chairman, Shrikant Verma, called this writer to his home to narrate how the "computer boys" were messing up things. They produced two dozen cassettes and flooded constituencies with *bindis*, *billas* and badges. In Rajasthan, he said, women who wore the *bindis* developed allergy. For much of this was novelty, and the old guard dismissed them as commercialisation. Despite all such outbursts, the "computer boys" had the last laugh. It was a landslide victory for the young PM in 1985.

After the election, Arun Nehru joined the cabinet, Arun Singh worked with Rajiv as parliamentary secretary, and Suman Dubey became additional secretary in the I&B ministry. Mani Shankar Aiyar resigned from foreign service to be with Rajiv. All this disturbed the traditional Congress leaders. True, the old guard continued to occupy positions in AICC, parliamentary party and PCCs. The "wiz kids" presence was limited to Delhi's corridors of power. Yet, their presence was strong. In hindsight, none of this led to any serious policy schism within the party. An embarrassing situation did occur on the eve of the Talkatora AICC. A resolution drafted by a wiz kid was found objectionable by the Congress Working Committee (CWC). Arjun Singh and Sanat Mehta were told to redraft it before placing it before the AICC.

From the beginning, Rajiv seemed keen on balancing both sides. He did not disturb the old guard. For instance, along with Arun Singh, traditionalist Oscar Fernandes was also made a parliamentary secretary. By early 1988, the old guard had firmly re-established themselves both in the Congress organisation and the government. Even before Rajiv Gandhi's tragic death in 1991, the "Doon pal" phenomenon was on the wane.

The writer was special correspondent with *The Indian Express* covering the Congress when he broke the story in 1987

## Once upon a PM's holiday

Looking back, one thing stands out: Enough questions were asked of Rajiv Gandhi when he was in power. Today, more questions are asked of the Opposition



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

fifths majority in Parliament (won in the 1984 election) did not mean that the media was falling in. The Bofors scam had already started unfolding in April of 1987, and from there on, it was all downhill. All too quickly, it was open season.

Reading the archives of those years was a reminder that all you heard in the newsroom of that period was Fairfax, Thakkar commission, Bofors, Snam Progetti, cabinet meetings in Sariska and holidays in the Andamans one year, Lakshadweep the next. In fact, the question then was not about *INS Viraat* standing by as the prime minister and his large entourage holidayed on Bangaram, but why a holiday at all. "The system of year end holidays and holding of Cabinet meetings in tourist resorts, something prevalent in the affluent West, emerged on the Indian scene only after Mr Gandhi became Prime Minister," an early report in *The Indian Express* pointed out. A cartoon in this paper summed up the national feeling then: Rajiv sitting under a coconut tree on an island in the Arabian Sea, saying: "Ah! To get away from it all!" and India responding with a sigh and a question: "When?" Not that Rajiv did not hit back. There were no proxy troll armies to create an atmosphere of intimidation. But months after the Lakshadweep holiday, came the Anti-Defamation Bill of 1988, which had to be abandoned in the face of a backlash from the newspapers that came out in one voice against it. There were raids on the premises of *The Indian Express*, ostensibly to look for evidence that the newspaper had evaded customs duty. For those of us present in the office that day, the manner in which hundreds of armed CRPF and Delhi police personnel took position inside and outside the Delhi office seemed way out of proportion for a tax eva-

sion raid. A strike at *The Indian Express* just before the 1989 elections, calling for higher salaries, was also blamed on the Congress.

It may not have been his intention, but in talking about an event that occurred more than 30 years ago, detailed painstakingly in news reports of the time, Prime Minister Modi has reminded the media how important it is to speak truth to power and question those who hold high office.

Enough questions were asked of Rajiv Gandhi when he was in power, so much so that he was defeated in the 1989 elections. He is history now. Cabinet minister Arun Jaitley said the other day that the Congress has been reduced to a "fringe" party. But many still question the Congress party and its present day leaders as if this is 1987, or as if it is the Congress that has ruled the country over the last five years.

Few questions have been asked of Modi; fewer have been allowed to ask those questions. Unlike Rajiv Gandhi, who despite facing a hostile media, was game enough to hold press conferences - it was at one such press conference at Vigyan Bhavan that he sacked then foreign secretary A. P. Venkateswaran - the present prime minister has had little for the media except in these final weeks of his term when he has given interviews.

But PM Modi has shown us the mirror, provided us a timely reminder that we must ask questions of those who wield power. So, a question for you, Prime Minister Modi: Is it to deflect from the inadequacies and failings of your own five year term that you have dredged up a 30 year old prime ministerial holiday?

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## VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders - in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

## LENIENCY IN LANKA

IN ITS MAY 8 editorial, *The Island* has continued its unrelenting attack on the Sri Lankan government and President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. In the Sri Lankan Parliament on May 7, "government leaders were cock-a-hoop in Parliament. They bragged that most of the terror suspects had been arrested and normalcy restored". Yet, argues the editorial, it were these same leaders that "promptly denied" responsibility for the intelligence failures that led to the Easter Sunday attack and instead laid the blame at the feet of the police chief and defence secretary, both of whom have resigned since.

The editorial warns the president and prime minister that "it is too early to declare victory" and recaps the where the government has fallen short: "It is mind-boggling why the police did not try to prevent nine out of ten suspects, arrested over the Easter Sunday bombings, from getting bail. For some unknown reason, the suspects had not been taken into custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). They are no ordinary suspects, to begin with. Insan (or insane?) Seelawan, who joined NTJ leader Zaharan Hashim in carrying out suicide bomb attacks at Shangri-la Hotel, on 21 April, had handpicked them to work in his copper factory, which is believed to have

been used for manufacturing bombs."

Arguing that the police seldom grant bail to suspects under political pressure to do so, the editorial hints at a disturbing collusion from the powers that be. Its hawkish tone also cries foul at the "disturbing leniency" towards the terror suspects and even seems to question why those returning from ISIS camps in Syria haven't been detained: "Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe insists that the government could not take any action against several families, trained by the ISIS in Syria, upon their return to the country, because there is a lacuna in Sri Lanka's laws. (Some legal experts have pooh-poohed his assertion.) How will the government explain why the police did not use the existing tough anti-terror laws in dealing with the copper factory workers? It will have its work cut out to convince the public that its anti-terror action plan is copper-bottomed."

Finally, *The Island* calls for a probe "to find out why the police did not take action against the copper factory workers under the PTA".

## ASIA'S BLASPHEMY

WITH ASIA BIBI and her family having moved to Canada, after being granted asylum there, the May 10 editorial in *Dawn* says that "finally, a shameful chapter in this

country's (Pakistan) history has drawn to a close". Asia spent "eight years in prison for a crime she did not commit" and the case of blasphemy against her "catapulted one among millions of anonymous farmhands toiling on fields across the country into an enduring object of hate for the ultra right". Two prominent leaders, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated for expressing support for Asia.

The editorial argues that Asia's case took on "heightened significance" "because there was a woman at the centre of it, that too a Christian woman - in a patriarchal society where the minorities are already vulnerable to discrimination, even persecution". It then recounts other, perhaps less publicised cases of people, persecuted under the blasphemy law.

The message from *Dawn* is unambiguous: "The Pakistani state must not continue to abjure its duty to those victimised by the blasphemy law."

## MODI AND PAKISTAN

FARRUKH KHAN PITAFI, a Pakistani television host and columnist with *The Express Tribune* weighed in on the Indian elections on May 11, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the future of South Asia - all in the space of one article. Pitafi begins by recap-

ping some of the more softball questions in the "interview" that actor Akshay Kumar conducted with PM Modi. According to Pitafi, this was yet another attempt to change the course and discourse of the Indian election, one which has failed.

Pitafi then moves on to argue that the attempts to make Pakistan the "patsy" to distract from the NDA government's "abysmal economic performance have not worked. He enumerates the Modi government's "economically suicidal" measures like demonetisation and a poorly-implemented GST, and an abysmal macroeconomic picture.

So, who is good for Pakistan, India? "In neighbouring Pakistan, there are two schools of thought that would want to see Modi return to singhaasan. Those who genuinely believe that only a strongman in New Delhi could build peace between the two countries. Sadly, they are not fully appreciative of Modi government's economic incompetence or its readiness to use confrontation with Pakistan as a welcome diversion. The second group would like to see India being burnt down to the ground by Modi. Not a wise course because the sheer volume of Indian market means if it sinks it will most certainly take the region with it."

Pitafi ends by asserting that peace, and economic cooperation, are the only way forward.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### VEIL OF IGNORANCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'In the garb of religion' (IE, May 9). The practice of wearing hijab and ghoonghat has generated debate in our society for quite some time. While the conservative sections of Hindu and Muslim communities justify this pernicious practice on religious grounds, progressive sections describe it as inhuman and discriminatory. Religious scholars rarely condemn this practice, their criticism, if any, is lukewarm. However, there is no scriptural basis for this practice. The writer has cited two examples, one in Saudi Arabia and the other in Malaysia, where the stringency associated with this practice has been eased in tune with the changing times.

Ravi Mathur, Ghaziabad

### APPLY THE SALVE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Intimate enemies' (IE, May 10). Muscular policies on their own will not curb terrorism; conciliation and mediation by the political and civil society groups is imperative. The closing of the national highway in Jammu and Kashmir for two days a week inconvenienced people and did not do any good to the government's efforts of building bridges.

Pranay Kumar Shome, Kolkata

### GENDER AND CASTE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'No courts for women' (IE, May 8). Gender parity on the bench is not much of an answer to the questions that have been raised about the Supreme Court's integrity. There are two women judges in the SC, but no one from Dalit and Adivasi communities. The dilution of the SC and ST Act and curtailing of reservation in university appointments could have been prevented if these communities had adequate representation.

Basudev Mazumdar, Kolkata

### LISTEN TO NATURE

This refers to the editorial, 'Wake up call'

### LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, *The Indian Express* offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to [editpage@expressindia.com](mailto:editpage@expressindia.com) or sent to *The Indian Express*, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

### THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

(IE, May 9). Living in harmony with nature adds value to our life. The last decade has proved beyond doubt that human beings are responsible for the destruction of forests, oceans, over-exploitation of natural resources, and global warming. We have to learn from indigenous people to minimise the effects of climate change.

Vijay Singh Adhikari, Nainital

### BAD DISCOURSE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Hindutva's new lab' (IE, May 7). The country requires infrastructure and human resources for education, health and development. People in different parts of the country require job opportunities. The BJP and other parties should try to look at these issues, instead of hankering on temple-mosque. A sense of justice and fair play is important for the long term socio-economic well-being of people. How can that happen when a terror accused contesting election?

Saber Sardar, South 24 Parganas