



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

Act now or face extinction soon

The State of the Climate report details the defining challenge that humanity faces. Nations need to take action

Much has been written about the year 2023 and all the temperature records it broke. The latest State of the Climate report by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) confirmed that the year was the warmest on record, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45 °C above the pre-industrial baseline, and that it was the warmest 10-year period on record. Every day of the year, nearly one-third of the global ocean was gripped by a marine heatwave; by the end of 2023, over 90% of the ocean had experienced heatwave conditions; extreme ice melt in western North America and Europe drove the global set of reference glaciers to the largest loss of ice; and Antarctic sea ice extent was by far the lowest. The report, however, has made it clear that the crisis is much more than about high temperatures.

The crisis has become "The defining challenge that humanity faces", WMO secretary general Celeste Saulo said, as witnessed by the growing food insecurity, population displacement, and biodiversity loss it has brought about. The number of food-insecure people has more than doubled from 149 million before the pandemic to 333 million in 2023. Weather hazards continued to trigger displacement, and raise the costs of food production with farmlands destroyed. While some of these parameters, updated after the pandemic and with two wars raging on, may not be the direct result of climate extremes, the sudden spikes have been triggered by these extremes. Temperatures will continue to rise for many years to come, WMO warned, with concentrations of three main greenhouse gases showing a continued rise after reaching record levels in 2022. The report also highlighted the unusual warming in areas such as the Northeast Atlantic, which did not correspond to typical patterns of warming associated with El Niño, and has puzzled scientists. But there is a glimmer of hope: Renewable energy capacity additions increased by almost 50% from 2022 driven by solar radiation, wind and water cycle.

The report is just a confirmation — a document for history books — of what humanity faced all of last year. It needs to be seen as a "Red Alert" for a society facing a threat to its existence as changes to the fundamental Earth systems speed up. It is also a now constant reminder of the urgent need to cut emissions drastically. UN secretary general António Guterres rightly said the records are "chart-busting" — the Y-axes for several scales were extended this year to accommodate the higher values set last year. Whether this rhetoric spurs action is to be seen.

A manifesto for federal politics

The political ambitions of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) are mostly confined to Tamil Nadu. However, it has always seen itself as a flagbearer of India's federal politics and constitutional provisions that protect the balance of power between the Centre and states. The DMK manifesto released on Wednesday suggests that the party takes its historic legacy seriously and believes its federal stance can also be an electorally attractive position.

The DMK manifesto promises to restrict the powers of governors, restore statehood and hold elections in Jammu and Kashmir, conduct population, caste and poverty census every five years, and scrap the National Education Policy 2020 and the Army's Agnipath recruitment scheme. These positions are drawn from the party's own experience in office and Parliament, of repeated scraps with the Centre over turf. In fact, it defined the DMK's parliamentary politics in the 1960s and '70s, especially after the Centre began to weaponise Article 356 to dismiss non-Congress governments. The Sarkaria Commission on Centre-state relations looked at these federal concerns in depth.

They receded into the background in the 1980s with the weakening of the Congress and the rise of regional parties. The Telugu Desam, CPI-M, National Conference, and Asom Gana Parishad among others were allies of the DMK in articulating a federal politics that found its parliamentary voice in the third fronts of the late 1980s and '90s. That these agendas are back in circulation suggests the re-emergence of old federal faultlines. This is the outcome of BJP's unitarian political vision, which, despite the talk of cooperative federalism, is perceived to favour centralisation in governance, including in subsidies and taxation. These issues call for a deeper conversation.

BEYOND THE BYTE

Rajdeep Sardesai



Elections 2024 is a match of unequals

The Opposition is in disarray. However, it deserves the benefit of a level playing field at the time of elections

The 2024 election bugle has been sounded but the traditional *band-baja* buzz is missing. This could be partly because a general election is more a marathon than a sprint, spread over two and a half months in excruciating summer heat. The lack of excitement is more likely because the outcome seems preordained: Never before in recent memory has there been a consensus on the inevitability of the result. Barring the most miraculous twist in fortune, Narendra Modi is set to emulate his *bete noire* Jawaharlal Nehru and win three consecutive five-year terms. But while the result appears a foregone conclusion, here is the nagging question: Is there really a level playing field in what is meant to be a free and fair democratic battle?

There is little doubt that the Opposition is in disarray. The INDIA bloc has been badly fractured, struggling to deal with the numerous contradictions that lie within. Except for Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, there is no major state where the alliance has held firmly together. The Congress

mirrors the state of a rudderless Opposition with Rahul Gandhi embarking on a nationwide *yatra* at a critical juncture while his party struggles with alliance permutations.

And yet, even a bedraggled Opposition deserves the benefit of a level playing field at election time. Take the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is legally empowered to conduct the elections in a fair and even manner. A neutral umpire is not just meant to be fiercely non-aligned but must be seen to be so. Sadly, that constitutionally mandated role has come under increasing scrutiny. In 2019, election commissioner Ashok Lavasa's dissent note on a series of clean chits given by the ECI to the Prime Minister (PM)'s allegedly divisive speeches was not even placed on record and he was eventually shunted out from the election body. Now, in 2024, the government has negated a Supreme Court order by ensuring its total supremacy in appointing election commissioners. Even the elongated election schedule raises troubling questions: Why, for example, does Maharashtra with no history of electoral violence have a five-phase poll? Is it to only allow the PM as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s star campaigner to crisscross the state in every phase?

The diminishing credibility of the ECI reflects a larger institutional corrosion in which official conduct rules

are being tested. For example, the Centre's move last year to get top officers to spread awareness of the Modi government's achievements as *rath prabharis* during a Viksit Bharat Yatra sparked controversy over the unashamed politicisation of the bureaucracy. Another order from the ministry of defence asked soldiers on leave to promote government schemes as soldier-ambassadors. In effect, the lines between a ruling party and government have been blurred.

The weaponisation of central investigating agencies, in particular the Enforcement Directorate (ED), has ensured that Opposition leaders remain on tenterhooks. The arrest of Delhi chief minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal late Thursday in the alleged Delhi liquor scam is a part of this pattern. With the Bharat Rashtira Samithi leader K Kavitha also arrested in the liquor case, ED's looming presence is spreading a growing sense of disquiet in Opposition ranks. The Income Tax department is just as proactive: It has frozen the accounts and sought recovery of ₹100 crore from the Congress over alleged discrepancies in its 2018-19 tax returns.

Moreover, as details of electoral bonds have revealed so far, there appears to be a correlation between coercive action by agencies and bond donations, a *quid pro quo* that smacks of unseemly deal-making. As many as



Here is the nagging question: Is there really a level-playing field in what is meant to be a free and fair democratic battle? **AFP**

14 of the top 30 donors are companies who faced investigative action in the period when bonds were purchased suggesting that monies might have been paid as "protection" from prosecution. That more than 50% of these bond monies went to the BJP is less surprising: The party is the dominant party nationally and has huge access to resources, be it in cash or bonds. But when one party has more spending power than all the rest put together, it does create a financial muscle mismatch that skews the overall campaign. Just look at the multi-media blitzkrieg of the Modi government and the picture becomes clearer.

Which brings us to the media itself, a large section of which appears to have abandoned any pretensions of playing the role of watchdog and demanding a measure of accountability from the ruling establishment. A survey conducted in April 2019 ahead of the general elections by Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), the premier TV viewership monitoring agency, shows that Prime Minister Modi received three times more TV airtime than his political adversaries, most of it suitably adulatory. Expect the balance to be even more heavily weighted in favour of the frontrunner

this time. It isn't as if Modi wouldn't win without a fawning media. Or he would lose without the institutional capture of the State. The fact is the PM is a domineering personality, a larger-than-life figure whose energetic presence and muscular leadership easily connect with vast multitudes across a subcontinental size country. A *vishwaguru* to some, a Hindu priest to others, from a delivery-oriented administrator to a nationalist icon, the *Ayayga toh Modi hi* (only Modi will win) chant symbolises a polity where all dissenting voices are being squeezed out. But even in a match where the winner is almost certain, the other side deserves equal space on the pitch. Denying them that basic opportunity is to do a grave disservice to democracy.

Post-script: A more reassuring note was struck during the recent ECI press conference. When asked to respond to hate speech violations of the model code, the chief election commissioner assured that "no matter how renowned a politician is" action would be taken. Will the Commission walk the talk?

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The controversy over Sangeetha Kalanidhi

What was the Academy thinking? As I write this, a growing number of eminent musicians including, and beginning with, Ranjani-Gayatri, Trichur Brothers, Vishakha Hari, and Dushyanth Sridhar have withdrawn from performing in the Music Academy's 2024 season. Chitravina Ravikiran has returned his Sangeetha Kalanidhi award. You could argue that their arguments for taking this stance are flawed — there was no need to draw Periyar's name into the debate. But united they stand against the Academy's decision to give this year's Sangeetha Kalanidhi award to polarising and polemic musician TM Krishna.

The problem is that Krishna's public persona is that of a self-righteous scold — and nobody likes that. His admirers revel in the fact that he has upended the conservative world of Carnatic music by singing songs by new and hitherto unheard-of authors (Kuvempu, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Tagore and more) in new and radical locations — on a public transport bus and amongst fisherfolk.

Well, guess what? Everything that Krishna has done in the name of revolutionising Carnatic music has been done before. Except it was done with quiet albeit firm grace and a respect for tradition, consensus and community. The list of musicians who advanced and evolved Carnatic music is long but one commonality is that they are linked by tradition and a respect for what Indian poetries called *auchitya* or appropriateness.

Take my guru, Sangeetha Kalanidhi RK Srikantan. He once told me in the quiet confines of his modest home that *ragas* had an innate proportion. He mocked performers who told up "thukkada" *ragams* and made them the main *ragam* of the concert. He did not name names — that wasn't his style. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, who wrote the magisterial book, *History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music*, championed Tamil composer Papanasam Sivan, worshipped the music of Dhanammal, and helped ML Vasanthakumari and her mother notate the *krithis* of Purandara Dasa. New directions in music, all of them, done without fuss or diatribe.

Musical stalwarts like Ariyakudi Ramanujayyengar and Veenai Dhanammal were no less revolutionary in their desire to change the format and structure of Carnatic music. But they earned the respect rather than the revulsion of their fellow musicians. How did Ariyakudi do it? How did he carry people along when he decided to alter the way Carnatic music was performed pretty much forever — given that most musicians except Krishna have adhered to this tradition so far? In an article for *Sruti* magazine, Ariyakudi's student, Alleppey Venkatesan describes the process by which Ariyakudi decided to drastically reduce the expansive hour-long *raga alapana* that were the norm in those days. "...he successfully prevailed upon his violinists never to exceed his own duration of *raga alapana*, even if the violinist happened to be a senior artist like Malaikottai Govindaswamy Pillai... He quietly asserted the primacy of the singer and his prerogative as to time management for the success of the concert." Talk about revolutionising the form without inviting deni-

gration from your fellow musicians.

In his 1938 presidential address to the Madras Music Academy, Ariyakudi explained his thought process. He began by noting the Urdu origins of the word, *kacheri*. As explained by scholar Lakshmi Subramanian in her book, *New Mansions For Music: Performance, Pedagogy and Criticism*, Ariyakudi laid down a list of prescriptions of how to perform music but "these expressed the collective wisdom of a generation of musicians". In other words, you have to carry people along — which Krishna does not seem to want to do.

Is it because he is a rabble-rousing self-serving iconoclast who seems to seek publicity above all else? I am not sure; I don't think so, but I don't know what to make of him. Krishna fancies himself as a revolutionary, but he is an inconsistent reactionary whose argument is "anti-whatever the norm is" rather than cogently thinking through the evolution of music. He is incongruent in his stance, which is fine for an artist, but not if you want to establish a legacy that changes the status quo. Surely, there are those in the musical fraternity whom Krishna respects. Why couldn't he have created an informal *adda* with his musical peers and tried to persuade them of his ideologies much like Ariyakudi and others before him did? Instead, Krishna chose disdain and the path of social media rather than building consensus.

I have met Krishna a few times. I last met him at my friends, Valli and Ramesh Swamy's house. He was light, playful and informal, relishing the home food after singing at the Odukathur Mutt to a packed house. Ramesh told me that Krishna never charges a rupee for his concerts for Unnati — the organisation that they run. He is a gifted musician — no more gifted than the others who have taken up cudgels against him, but no less either. But there appears to be a lacuna inside him that I cannot fathom, something that his music doesn't seem to fill. Isn't music enough, I once asked him at an author evening in Bengaluru and he basically said No, for him, it wasn't.

Although I don't agree with the conservative ideals of Anglo-Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke (I fall more on Mary Wollstonecraft's side in that debate), I agree with Burke's thesis that "society is but a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born". In choosing a maverick path for its own sake, in drawing attention to the cult of personality rather than the strength of his ideas, and in his incongruent and inconsistent arguments, Krishna has decided to ignore the dead — the ancestors and elders of this grand Carnatic music tradition — and has, unlike previous innovators of the form, muddled the waters without providing a clear path for "those yet to be born".

In giving the award to a musician who disdains and insults his musical fraternity and doesn't respect the gradual evolution from tradition and modernity, the Madras Music Academy may well have reduced its stature, invited questions about its motives, and, you could argue, made itself a subject of derision amongst those who love Carnatic music.

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KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA | MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE IMF



When central banks and governments play their roles, we have seen better control of inflation and lower financial stability risks. We must preserve and strengthen central bank independence

India needs to douse its many water fires

World Water Day (WWD) is observed on March 22 every year, to spur action on protecting water for future use. WWD 2024 revolves around the theme "Leveraging water for peace", which deals with water's role in global harmony. In many countries, communities and families below the poverty level are also without safe and easily accessible water. Clean water access, thus, is a stepping stone to economic growth.

Globally, the water picture is far from rosy. One in three people already live without access to safe drinking water, and by 2050, about 5.7 billion people will be living in areas where there is no access to water for at least one month a year. By 2040, global water demand is expected to increase by more than 50%. Given how extreme weather events impact water availability, if global warming is restricted to 1.5 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial level, related water stress could be halved.

Out of a total of 192.7 million households in India, 144.5 million (March 5, 2024) rural households have received tap water connections. The states/Union Territories (UTs) that achieved 100% connections in rural areas are Haryana, Telangana, Gujarat, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Goa, Puducherry, and Arunachal Pradesh. Rajasthan (47%) and West Bengal (45%), on the other hand, haven't achieved even 50% tap water coverage.

Once access to water is ensured, rural households can use the time spent earlier for water collection on productive engagement. Analysis of Jal Jeevan Mission data shows that the employment generation potential during the construction stage of tap water connections is on average 5.99 million person-years in direct employment, and 22.2 million person-years in indirect employment. The operation and maintenance stage adds another 1.1 million person-years in direct employment annually.

Water can help fight poverty too as it plays a critical role in ensuring food security. Agriculture accounts for more than 70% of water consumed in the country and the employment of the poor in this sector helps in alleviating poverty. Irrigation helps raise crop intensity and per hectare yield, which consequently expands the need for labour and contributes to employment generation while raising rural real wages.

Resolving water disputes and conflicts among states over sharing of water from interstate rivers can ensure peace. Since Independence, conflicts among states in this regard have

been on the rise. These have often acquired political overtones, as seen in the case of Cauvery water sharing between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and in the case of the Sutlej link canal dispute between Punjab and Haryana. High water demand spurs conflicts between states, and there is little realisation that water resources are finite.

Amicable water sharing will bring peace among the countries too. For instance, the 1960 Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan has settled some of the issues, as has the Ganga Water Treaty 1996 between India and Bangladesh.

There is a need to accelerate tap water coverage in states/UT where the progress is not satisfactory. Empowering Nari Shakti for interactive decision-making through *paani samitis*, and

water and sanitation committees should be the guiding principle for water access. Agricultural water use has been on the rise over the years, with a low use efficiency of about 40%. Crop diversification, changing the crop calendar, enhancing water use efficiency through the use of drip and sprinkler irrigation, and better agro-economic practices should be adopted extensively to conserve water. The water saved can then be reallocated to other high-demand sectors for spurring employment and poverty reduction.

A basin authority should be set up for every river in India, with its jurisdiction extending across states. Statutory powers should be given to such authorities for sustainable water management.

In the absence of such authority, the Inter-State River Water Disputes (ISRWD) Act, 1956 should be reviewed. A Bill to amend this Act is under the consideration of Parliament, which proposes to empower the Union government to constitute a dispute settlement committee for amicable settlement of disputes among states. The Bill calls for the setting up of an Inter-State Water Dispute Tribunal for adjudication of water disputes with multiple benches and mandates that the tribunal's order will have the same force as that of a Supreme Court order, which is binding on the parties. The progressive amendment of the ISRWD Act should be given priority in the coming years for peaceful resolution of water disputes.

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