

Broken tooth China's 'Two Sessions': A display of Xi Jinping's dominance and weakening State institutions

If the upcoming elections tell us anything at all about the news media, it is that it has become largely inconsequential during elections. Notions of being the fourth estate may sustain its morale but there are indications all around that the agenda-setting it might want to do will be limited in impact. The political class swamps the media real estate with advertising, and media-owners are so grateful for this that, in terms of visibility, the news often gets short shrift. About the only use that the Narendra Modi government demonstrates for the mainstream media is as a platform for advertising.

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The national broadcaster's role has been redefined to serve the cause of religious majoritarianism. It now does more consequential agenda-setting than ever before, the high point being showcasing the prime minister performing priestly duties at the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Last week, Doordarshan was pressed into service to offer a daily telecast at 6.30 am of the morning aarti from the Ram temple in Ayodhya. What is spent on political image-building is largely unquantifiable. The unfolding electoral bond revelations demonstrate that both the Centre and the state governments have not been shy of extorting from corporates to continue to win elections. Even a ruling party with considerable public legitimacy in terms of seats held looks to spend unprecedented sums of money in the next few months to continue winning.

The quantum of spending on advertising and other kinds of outreach is evident in the manic frequency of the 'Modi Ki Guarantee' advertisements on television, in the manpower deployed for social media outreach to the voter, and in the scale of the disinformation campaigns being mounted. However, since state governments also do a lot of spending which builds the prime minister's image, it is difficult to compute the overall cost. No realistic estimate of election outreach is possible or available. Except for some of the social media spending, which is small.

From Khrushchev to Putin, Russian's Reflexive Control theory has alarmed NATO

The Soviet premier's chilling message to American President John F Kennedy during the 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the precipice of a nuclear Armageddon.

However, the crisis was averted after an exchange of messages between the two leaders. Khrushchev eventually removed the R-12 MRBMs and R-14 IRBMs with thermonuclear warheads from Cuba and stopped the construction of their launch sites, but his military and diplomatic manoeuvres hit the bullseye. Kennedy promised never to invade Cuba and withdrew the PGM-19 Jupiter nuclear MRBMs from Turkey.

More than six decades later, Moscow again raised the possibility of a nuclear spectre several times, triggering fears of an "Armageddon" in Washington.

Vladimir Putin has threatened the use of tactical nukes during the Ukraine War five times and followed it up with some actions alarming NATO.

On 24 February, 2022, the day he launched his "Special Military Operation", the Russian president said, "Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance's infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory is unacceptable for us." Russia "has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country". On 21 September, he repeated his N-threat. "In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff."

On 30 September, Putin indirectly hinted at the use of nukes to protect Ukraine's illegally annexed regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia "with all the forces and means at our disposal".

In February 2024, when French President Emmanuel Macron didn't rule out the deployment of NATO troops in Ukraine, Putin said "Everything that the West comes up with creates the real threat of a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons, and thus the destruction of civilisation."

This month, Putin said that if American troops are deployed in Russian territory or Ukraine, Russia would treat the move as an intervention. "From a military-technical point of view, we are, of course, ready [for a nuclear war]," he said.

In some cases, Putin's actions indicated that he might resort to a tactical nuclear attack. On 27 February, 2022, he put the Russian Army's deterrence forces on high combat alert as top NATO officials were "indulging in aggressive statements directed" at Russia. On 25 March, 2023, Putin announced plans to deploy Russian tactical nukes in Belarus. In March 2024, Russia tested the nuclear-tipped RS-24 Yars ICBM, which travels at Mach 14 and has a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle.

One month after Putin's September 2022 threat, US President Joe Biden reacted on expected lines. "We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis," he said CNN's chief national security analyst and anchor Jim Sciutto's book The Return of Great Powers, released this month, claims that an "analysis and highly sensitive new intelligence" showed that Russia wanted to use a tactical nuke against Ukraine in 2022.

China's "Two Sessions" the biggest week-long annual conclave concluded recently on 11 March. The "Two Sessions" is a collective term, that refers to the concurrent plenary sessions of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an advisory body and the National People's Congress (NPC), the nation's top rubber-stamp legislative body. The event was attended by some 3,000 selected delegates of the Communist Party of China (CPC). As NPC meets only once a year, a standing committee of 175 handpicked members works full-time to formalise the policy decisions. Held at the Great Hall of People, the event is of immense significance as major national policies, plans and leadership changes are announced. The focus of this year's conclave was on addressing the multiple economic problems; in particular the ailing real estate sector, sluggish internal consumption and rising unemployment.

As expected, President Xi Jinping further consolidated his control over the Party and all the organs of Chinese society, The Chinese legislatures passed the revised Organic Law of the State Council - Chinese Cabinet; deemed to be an imperative to uphold the Party's leadership and revamp the governance mechanism. In reality, the revised law gives the CPC greater control over the State Council which oversees 21 odd ministries, thus significantly curtailing the latter's role. Ever since Xi assumed power in 2012, he has accorded top priority to security and strengthening of the Communist Party's hold across the board. To this end, several central party committees were created to oversee the functioning of ministries directly.

Another development which signifies the erosion of power of the executives was the cancellation of a customary press briefing by the prime minister, a norm which had been followed since 1993. The press conference was the only occasion when the media, both Chinese and international, had access to the top leadership. There were few possible explanations as to why it was called off. One could be the state of the Chinese economy, an uncomfortable and touchy topic. Former prime minister Li Keqiang had often hinted at the need for economic reforms. As Premier Li Qiang poses no threat to Xi, having been personally selected by the latter, it apparently indicates the downgrading of government institutions in

China's hierarchical power structure. During his address at the closing ceremony of the conclave, Zhao Leji, Chairman of the NPC Standing Committee stated, "Under the strong leadership of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, with Comrade Xi as the core, we must adhere to 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for New Era' as our guide and unwaveringly push forward the Chinese modernisation." This sends a clear message that Xi remains an undisputed paramount leader.

China has set an ambitious economic growth target of around 5 per cent for 2024, same as the last year. While delivering his maiden work report at the opening session of the NPC, Premier Li laid great emphasis on stability, on major projects, Li announced a plan to issue \$139 billion in ultra-long special government bonds.



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The annual defence budget has been increased by 7.2 per cent, to around \$ 230 billion. (in real terms, the figures are much higher as there is no breakdown of military spending and hidden aspects are not factored). Over the years, China's expansion of military expenditure has consistently outpaced its economic growth. Given the number of high-ranking military officials being removed from their positions either in the PLA or political bodies including Defence Minister General Li Shangfu possibly on corruption charges, defence budgetary allocations henceforth are expected to be under tight scrutiny.

There are numerous indicators like deflation, mounting internal debts and a high rate of unemployment among the youth. Unemployment is around 22 per cent and the frequent public protests substantiate that the Chinese economy is in a difficult state. Statements of Prime Minister Li "The Chinese people have the courage and wisdom to overcome any difficulties, or obstacles.....Will surely endure the storm, plough the waves and future

is promising" do not portray much confidence. There is an obvious disconnect between the official rhetoric and ground realities. Besides, there is also a glaring lack of attention to socio-economic restructuring, wealth redistribution and boosting wages. From the way things are being handled, it is evident that Xi Jinping is aware that the economy is not doing well. However, he does not perceive the challenges to be a crisis which merits immediate interventions. There appears to be no deliberate plan to achieve the set targets. The absence of large-scale stimulus or fresh strategies to address the property crisis, youth unemployment or recoup trillions of dollars in stock losses post-COVID only indicates the absence of urgency. The annual 'Two Session' event traditionally has been the Chinese prime minister and Central Government show. Ironically, more than ever, it was Xi Jinping all over the gathering. The Third Plenum, a five-yearly plenary event of the Central Committee where the key economic policies are formulated was due in October but has not been held so far. No wonder the 2024 "two Sessions" turned out to be a lacklustre event, deficient of substance.

Adam's ale: Why Bengaluru water crisis reflects hydrological destiny of peninsular India

Water scarcities that enervate the cities of peninsular India each year are by now passé. Yet, this summer, as Bengaluru and all of Karnataka face a shortage of the gravest kind, think of how a tiny molecule of an atom of oxygen to two of hydrogen, has seeped into and soaked through our destiny on this remarkable planet.

This gedanken experiment strikes a personal chord, as much of my scientific life was spent researching a curious type of interaction called the hydrogen bond. The hydrogen bond and water are intimately connected. The water molecule in itself has little to boast of. Its identity is only in how it interacts with others of its ilk—it's quite the sociological freak. These interactions form the hydrogen bonds and they result in assemblages of water molecules, which when spiked with other ingredients like nucleic acids, proteins and

lipids within the temperature range of earth, give rise to conditions for life. So unique is this serendipity that transforms the inanimate to the animate, and chemistry to biology, that it is almost as if a higher power intended for life to exist on our planet, and through this magical aqua pura we call water. Due to life originating from this watery, primordial soup of amino acids, all chemical and biochemical reactions and processes in the cells of living plants and animals are mediated in aqua. So living things need to ingest water to keep living. After air, water is the most vital commodity to sustain existence. At a secondary level, humans consume plant and animal-derived food products. Since these are generated from entities that are living in themselves, humans depend acutely on a steady and plentiful source of water to lead meaningful lives.



Planet Earth can be considered as a huge distillation experiment involving water. Water evaporates gigantically and continuously from warm oceans and an equally humongous amount of evaporated water condenses in the form of rain as temperatures fall. A small amount of this rain falls on 25 per cent of the planet's surface which is land mass. Even this is not uniform but depends greatly on prevailing winds, local temperatures and the

presence of elevated areas in the land mass. A very favoured condition concerning these variables is called the monsoon and has led to India becoming the most populous country in the world today. Nature jealously guards its supplies of freshwater, sensing that humans instinctively seek this precious commodity, hiding it in regions that are either too cold or too difficult to access: the polar ice caps, the Siberian permafrost wastes, and the tropical jungles of Africa and South America for example. The Great Lakes are another enormous reservoir of freshwater but let us not forget that they are found in an area that was largely uninhabited till 300 years ago. So, was North America ever intended for habitation by so many people in an ecological sense? The small volume of freshwater left over has sustained civilised life over the past several millennia beginning with the river valley civilisations in tropical and subtropical Eurasia. Milder climates and favourable conditions for the cultivation of cereals have driven a disproportionate mass of humanity into a rather small land area, a cornucopian quadrilateral defined by say Baghdad, Jakarta, Tokyo and Samarkand. Geography defines history and barring an accidental interregnum over the last 600 years, when the scene of action moved to Europe and North America, major world events have occurred only within this aqueous quadrilateral. Present indications are that the future too belongs to these old areas, India, China and their hinterlands. Not many realise that the Tibetan highlands are the source of say a dozen or so legendary rivers that feed 80 per cent of humanity today. He who controls Tibet controls the world, as water becomes less of a "taken for granted" and more of a valuable commodity.

India has been defined as the land of the seven sacred rivers, even as we wonder why the sombre Krishna and the mighty Brahmaputra are not included in these seven. Water is life. One of the sacred seven has since dried out and a once prosperous Sindhu-Saraswati civilisation, possibly the oldest in the world, has now been reduced to a desert.

As I write this, India has captured the choke point of Pakistan, when it finally cut off the flow of the Ravi river to that country utilising its full share as per the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960. That water-starved neighbour of ours is at present in very poor shape—as of now, salt water has intruded upstream from the Sindhu delta mangroves, due to reduced flows and its river beds not being desilted. After the water supply from the three eastern tributaries has been cut off, it is estimated that the Sindhu will gradually become saline for at least 50 km inland, causing widespread famine. Water has become a geopolitical weapon. Will Lahore, situated on the banks of the Ravi, become a ghost city even as its main source of fresh water has been compromised?

Para Archer and Arjuna Awardee, Ms. Sheetal Devi, will be ECI National PwD Icon

In a first of its kind initiative, the Election Commission of India (ECI) in association with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) organised an Exhibition Cricket Match between the Indian Deaf Cricket Association (IDCA) Team and the Delhi & District Cricket Association (DDCA) team to foster voter education and inclusivity. The match was held on March 16, 2024 at Karnail Singh Stadium in New Delhi. On the occasion, Ms. Sheetal Devi, a distinguished Para-archer, and Arjuna Awardee, was announced as the National Icon in the PwD category. The event was graced by Chief Election Commissioner Shri Rajiv Kumar and Election Commissioner's Shri Gyanesh Kumar and Shri Sukhbir Singh Sandhu who felicitated the winning team. Renowned former Indian Cricketer, Nikhil Chopra, was also invited as the special guest alongside officials from DDCA and IDCA. This cricket match exemplified the commitment made by CEC Shri Rajiv Kumar to the Indian deaf Cricket team when he felicitated them for bringing laurels to the nation by winning the T20 Champions

Trophy held in UAE, on the eve of International Day of PwDs in 2022. He had mentioned that "ECI will explore the possibility of sponsoring a match of the Indian Deaf Cricket Association team with mainstream cricket teams." Both teams put up a spirited performance to entertain and thrill the crowd of 2500 spectators including Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) of various categories and young voters, gathered under a bright blue sky to enjoy the match. The DDCA team won by 69 runs (Scorecard: DDCA 190/5; IDCA - 121/8) in a match where the message of inclusivity and togetherness was the ultimate victor. The message of "Nothing like voting, I vote for sure" rang loud and true throughout the event. It underscores ECI's commitment towards inclusivity and empowerment and will inspire fellow voters with disabilities to enrol and participate in the electoral process. The match concluded with a captivating performance by the 'Shining Star Music Band' - a band featuring the visually impaired. Over the course of the event, the Commission launched a dedicated Voter's

Guide for PwDs and Senior Citizen Electors. The comprehensive booklet outlines essential provisions available to PwDs and senior citizens, including infrastructural, informative, and procedural details at polling stations, as well as the applicability and procedure for Postal Ballots, facilitating a smooth and pleasurable voting experience. The measures follow key initiatives undertaken by the Commission towards PwDs.

WESTERN RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION WORK

Deputy Chief Engineer (construction) II, Western Railway, Indore invites e-tender E-Tender Notice No. IND/DINL/DY. CE/II/126 Name of Work: Design and Construction of Broad Gauge Ballastless track including checking, supply, installation, testing and commissioning in between Thilpithampur station in Tunnel No.1 (Approx. length of tunnel 2.967 Km, Approx. length of BLT 3.10 Km) with all other ancillary works in connection with construction of Dahod to Indore New BG Line Project of Western Railway. Approximate Cost of Work: ₹19,74,66,250.62/- Bid Security: ₹11,37,300/- Date and Time of Submission of Bid: 23.04.2024 upto 15:00 Hrs. Date and Time of Opening of Technical Bid: 23.04.2024 at 15:30 Hrs. Website particulars where complete details of tender can be seen: www.iireps.gov.in 1310 Like us on : facebook.com/WesternRly

ICICI Home Finance Corporate Office: ICICI Home Finance Company Limited ICICI HFC Tower, Andheri- Kurla Road, Andheri (East), Mumbai- 400059, India Branch Office: 4th floor, 410, Milestone Vibrant, Opp. Apple Hospital, Udhna Darwaja, Surat- 395002 [See proviso to rule 8(6)]

Notice for sale of immovable assets
E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8 (6) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.

Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor(s) that the below described immovable property mortgaged/charged to the Secured Creditor, the **Physical Possession** of which has been taken by the Authorized Officer of ICICI Home Finance Company Ltd., will be sold on "As is where is", "As is what is", and "Whatever there is", as per the brief particulars given hereunder:

Sr. No.	Name of Borrower(s)/ Co Borrowers/ Guarantors/ Legal Heirs, Loan Account No.	Details of the Secured Asset (s) with known encumbrances, if any	Amount Outstanding	Reserve Price / Earnest Money Deposit	Date and Time of Property Inspection	Date & Time of Auction
(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
1.	Singh Dharmendra (Borrower) Singh Sangita (Co Borrower) Loan A/c No. LHSUR00001361164 & LHSUR00001360753	Plot No.168, Block No.156 known as "Laxmi Pooja Residency", lying being land bearing R.S.No. 74/1, in Mauje Mota, at Registration District & Sub-District Bardoli District Surat within the state of Gujarat.	Rs. 9,09,880/- March 20, 2024	Rs. 8,24,400/- Rs. 82,440/-	April 22, 2024 11:00 AM 03:00 PM	May 03, 2024 02:00 PM 03:00 PM

The online auction will be conducted on website (URL Link- <https://BestAuctionDeal.com>) of our auction agency **Globe Tech**. The Mortgagors/ notice are given a last chance to pay the total dues with further interest till **May 02, 2024 before 05:00 PM** else these secured assets will be sold as per above schedule. The Prospective Bidder(s) must submit the Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) RTGS/ Demand Draft (DD) (Refer Column E) at ICICI Home Finance Company Limited, 4th floor, 410, Milestone Vibrant, Opp. Apple Hospital, Udhna Darwaja, Surat- 395002 on or before **May 02, 2024 before 04:00 PM**. The Prospective Bidder(s) must also submit signed copy of Registration Form & Bid Terms and Conditions form at ICICI Home Finance Company Limited, 4th floor, 410, Milestone Vibrant, Opp. Apple Hospital, Udhna Darwaja, Surat- 395002 on or before **May 02, 2024 before 05:00 PM**. Earnest Money Deposit Demand Draft (DD) should be from a Nationalized/Scheduled Bank in favor of "ICICI Home Finance Company Ltd.- Auction" payable at Surat. For any further clarifications with regards to inspection, terms and conditions of the auction or submission of tenders, kindly contact ICICI Home Finance Company Limited on 9928087300 or our Sales & Marketing Partner **NexXen Solutions Private Limited**. The Authorized Officer reserves the right to reject any or all the bids without furnishing any further reasons. For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please visit <https://www.icicifh.com/> Date : March 29, 2024 Place : Surat Authorized Officer ICICI Home Finance Company Limited