> "If there are challenges thrown across, then some interesting, innovative solutions are found. Without challenges, the tendency is to go on the same way.
> —Ratan Tata

EDITORIAL

DIGITAL LIFE CERTIFICATE FOR PENSIONERS

The Digital Life Certificate (DLC) for pensioners is a transformative initiative introduced by the government to streamline the pension process and make it more convenient for senior citizens. Traditionally, pensioners were required to submit a physical life certificate each year to prove they were alive and eligible to receive their pensions. This process was time-consuming, often requiring pensioners to visit designated centers or banks, especially for those residing in remote or far-flung areas. The introduction of the DLC aims to eliminate these hurdles by offering a digital solution.

Under this initiative, pensioners can now authenticate their life certificate online using their Aadhaar and biometric data, thus eliminating the need for physical visits. This system uses technologies such as Face Recognition and Aadhaar-based authentication, which allows pensioners to provide their life certification digitally from the comfort of their homes. All they need is a smartphone or a computer with internet access. The Aadhaar-based biometric authentication or Face Recognition Technology (FRT) ensures that the process is secure and tamper-proof.

The benefits of the Digital Life Certificate are manifold. First, it ensures that pensioners no longer need to go through the long queues or travel long distances to submit their certificates. This is especially helpful for elderly pensioners with mobility issues or those living in remote areas. Moreover, it saves time for both pensioners and government officials, speeding up the process of pension disbursal.

The introduction of DLC is also a significant step toward promoting paperless governance, contributing to environmental sustainability by reducing the need for physical documents. The ease of submission and the use of digital tools also reduce the scope for fraud and ensure that only the rightful beneficiaries receive their pensions.

To avail of the Digital Life Certificate, pensioners can visit the Jeevan Pramaan Portal, a government initiative that facilitates the issuance of DLCs. The system can be accessed through a computer, mobile app, or even at designated Common Service Centers (CSCs) for those who do not have access to personal devices. Additionally, pensioners who are unable to use digital platforms can visit the nearest bank or post office that offers the service.

In conclusion, the Digital Life Certificate is a groundbreaking step in simplifying pension administration, enhancing efficiency, and improving the quality of life for pensioners.

It represents a shift toward a more inclusive, accessible, and technology-driven governance model.

Thaw in Sino-India Relations

■ OMKAR DATTATRAY

At last after many years of deployment of the Chinese army at the unmarked borders between India and China, the ice has been broken and recently there has been a thaw between the relations of the two neighboring country . The meeting between the prime minister of India Narendra Modi and president of China XI Jinping and the meeting of India's foreign minister and his Chinese counterpart has led to the thaw in relations between India and China .The verbal agreements between the two countries are being materialized and implemented on the ground and it seems that good sense and sanity has prevailed on China and the two countries have started the disengagement of the troops from the borders .China cannot be trusted and that country should not be taken at face value and India should be very cautious and tread cautiously while dealing with China .China has a well -known record of springing surprises and India needs to remain alert all the time .The Modi -Xi Jinping meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in the Russian city of Kazan symbolizes a thaw in the relationships between the two most powerful Asian countries that has turned bitter four years ago in the wake of Chinese Army's unexpected attacks on the Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley .India's commercial and political ties with China was moving in an upwardly positive trajectory when Galwan incident took place and Sino-Indian ties nosedived .It can be said that a restricted and restrained Cold war type rivalry emerged with China more fiercely expanding its influence in countries around India and at the same time feeling jittery about deepening India-US security relations .India's proactive engagements in the India -Pacific ,strengthening of the Quad ,and Delhi's ability to navigate the turbulent geopolitics emerging from the Ukraine war with continuation of stronger ties with Moscow and Washington appeared to be Beijing's envy .However ,China also saw India's robust economic growth amidst downturn in global political economy ,including in China .That country vividly sees the benefits of normalizing relations with India ,which has the tenacity to face Chinese muscle flexing along the LAC and the wisdom to maintain trade ties with China at the same time .Besides ,continuously taking unfriendly steps against India in the backdrop of US alliance politics in the Indo-pacific ,such as the Camp David Defense Pact with Japan and South Korea ,AUKUS Pact with Australia and Britain are now seen in Beijing as counterproductive .China is undoubtedly suspicious of Quad as well ,but respects India as a country that maintains its strategic autonomy .The way India has been able to keep Pakistan at bay also sends a clear signal to China that Islamabad may be proud of its all weather friendship with China ,but an unstable Pakistan cannot be a durable strategic asset and may actually become a liability .Chinese think in the long term and take steps with a strategic vision .The high level dialogue between the two sides at multiple levels to restore peace and stability along the border and its positive outcome is the byproduct of current Chinese strategic thinking .India is also a responsible international actor with deep strategic calculations .Modi government has successfully deterred further Chinese advances along the LAC ,reinforced the military presence in the border regions ,built critical infrastructure in the difficult Himalayan terrain ,and at the same time refused to normalize ties with China unless peace along the border is maintained and status quo of April 2020 is reinstated .The recent agreement by both the parties is a welcome development and the very first step to restore normalcy is mirrored in Modi-Xi meeting in Karzan .Both China and India support a multipolar world order ,both oppose unilateralism in principle ,both seek to champion the cause of the Global South ,and both are members of multiple multilateral mechanisms ,including BRICS ,East Asia Summit ,ASEAN Regional Forum ,and many others.PM Modi has aptly said that Sino-Indian cooperation can bring dividends for regional and global security.EAM S.Jaishankar has often stated that the 21st century cannot become an Asian century without deeper and expansive Sino-Indian cooperation .However ,the Modi-Xi meeting in Russia is only a first neecssary step .It perhaps gives satisfaction to the strategic community and peace lovers in the Indo-Pacific region .After all ,many Indo-Pacific countries face their dilemmas in navigating the Sino-Indian differences and disputes .Thaw in Sino-Indian ties is certainly good for both the countries .But it is not a positive sign for countries that played China against India or saw strategic gains in emerging Sino-Indian competition in certain areas .Thus ,complications will crop up on the way to normalizing India's relations with China .Some hardliners on both sides may also hold on to their conventional views that normalization of relations is not possible until the entire boundary disputes are resolved .Besides ,India needs to be cautious ,careful and diligent to progress through myriad dialogue mechanisms that have remained stalled since 2020.China has a well-known record of springing surprises and India needs to remain alert all the time .Trust is an imperative to conduct international relations ,but history teaches us that it is important to keep verifying the moves of other countries ,so that words ,written and spoken ,matches actions on the ground .On October 31,the day of Dewali ,the Hindu festival of lights ,Indian and Chinese troops exchanged sweets along the disputed border ,just a day after the two countries had successfully completed military disengagements at two points in Ladakh ,the theater of a bitter standoff over the Last four years .Ten days before Diwali ,Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri had announced that India and China had reached "an agreement on patrolling arrangements along the LOC leading to disengagement and resolution of issues that had arisen in these areas in 2020."Two days after the foreign statement ,Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had his first meeting in five years with Chinese president Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan ,Russia .During their 50 minute conversation ,the two leaders emphasized the importance of improving bilateral relations from a strategic and long term perspective ,upgrading strategic communications and pursuing cooperation for mutual development .They also agreed that their officials would meet to address the border issue ,in order to restore peace and tranquilly .The latest agreement provides for Chinese and Indian troops pulling back from occupied areas at Depsang Plains ,and Demchok and reverting to their pre -May 2020 positions .On the ground disengagements are being implemented and followed and both sides have moved their troops from the positions of discord. Disengagement is being followed and Jaishankar underscored the need for de-escalation ,which is meant to address the buildup of forces along the LAC since 2020.After disengagement ,India and China await de-escalation says S. Jaishankar EAM said disengagement process has been done and there is need to address de-escalation of forces .To cut the long story short the thaw in relations between India and China has been reached and it is a welcome development and it will build strong foundations for de-escalation and finally the better ties between India and China will follow which will be in the interest of both the countries.

(The author is a columnist, social and KP activist).

Rising Tide of Drug Abuse: A Growing Crisis

■ PANKAJ SHARMA

Jammu, often recognized for its rich cultural heritage and scenic landscapes, is grappling with an escalating crisis that is quietly corroding its social fabric: drug abuse. Once considered a problem confined to larger metropolitan cities, drug addiction has now firmly taken root in this region, affecting not just individuals, but entire families and communities. The alarming increase in substance abuse cases is a wake-up call, urging society, law enforcement, and policymakers to confront this issue head-on. This article delves into the causes, consequences, and urgent need for interventions to combat the rising drug menace in Jammu.

The Rising Trend of Drug Abuse in Jammu

Over the past decade, Jammu has witnessed a disturbing surge in drug abuse, particularly among its youth. Reports from various health and law enforcement agencies indicate that drug addiction is no longer an isolated issue but a widespread epidemic affecting people from all walks of life, regardless of socio-economic background. The substances of choice range from cannabis and heroin to synthetic drugs and pharmaceutical opioids, many of which are easily accessible.

The proximity of Jammu to the international borders of Punjab and Pakistan has exacerbated the problem. The region has become a transit route for drug smuggling, making narcotics more accessible to the local population. Experts warn that if this trend is not addressed promptly, Jammu could soon face the same challenges that plague other drug-ridden regions in the country.

Why Are Drugs Becoming Rampant in Jammu?

Jammu has seen a rise in youth unemployment in recent years. With limited job opportunities, many young individuals find themselves frustrated and directionless, turning to drugs as an escape from reality. The absence of recreational facilities and constructive outlets for their energy only worsens the situation. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure. In an attempt to fit in or seek approval from their social circles, they may experiment with drugs, which often leads to addiction. The normalization of drug use in certain social settings has made it more challenging to deter youth from falling into this trap.Mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, are often overlooked in the region. With limited awareness and access to mental health services, many individuals turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism. The stigma around seeking psychological help only pushes more people toward drugs.The porous borders of Jammu make it easy for drug traffickers to smuggle narcotics into the region. Despite the efforts of law enforcement agencies, the availability of drugs on the streets remains alarmingly high. The thriving black market, combined with the lack of stringent regulations, allows drugs to reach even the most remote parts of the region.

Consequences of Drug Abuse in Jammu

The impact of drug abuse is far-reaching, affecting not just individuals but families and society at large:

The physical and mental health consequences of drug abuse are devastating. Addiction leads to severe health issues, including liver damage, cardiovascular problems, and mental disorders like schizophrenia and psychosis. Hospitals in Jammu are increasingly reporting cases of drug overdoses and related complications, putting a strain on the healthcare system. Drug addiction often leads to a breakdown in family relationships. Many addicts resort to stealing or engaging in criminal activities to sustain their habits, creating a climate of mistrust and conflict within families. The social stigma associated with addiction further isolates affected individuals, pushing them deeper into substance abuse.

The surge in drug abuse has been linked to an increase in crime rates, especially among the youth. Desperation to procure drugs leads to theft, burglary, and even violent crimes. Law enforcement agencies in Jammu have reported a rise in drug-related arrests, highlighting the strong correlation between substance abuse and criminal behavior.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect is the effect of drug abuse on the region's younger generation. Addiction among adolescents not only hampers their education but also jeopardizes their future prospects, leading to a vicious cycle of poverty, crime, and substance dependence.

Efforts to Combat Drug Abuse in Jammu

Addressing the drug abuse crisis requires a multi-faceted approach that involves the government, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations.

Authorities must intensify their efforts to curb the trafficking of drugs into the region. This includes increasing border surveillance, conducting regular raids on drug dens, and cracking down on the black market. Collaboration between state and central agencies is crucial to dismantle drug networks.

Public awareness campaigns are essential in educating people, especially the youth, about the dangers of drug abuse. Schools and colleges can play a significant role in promoting a drug-free culture by incorporating awareness programs into their curriculum. Utilizing social media platforms can also help reach a broader audience. Addressing the root causes of addiction, such as mental health issues, is vital. Establishing more counseling centers and providing affordable mental health services can help individuals find healthier ways to cope with stress and anxiety.

Expanding access to rehabilitation centers is critical in providing addicts with the help they need to recover. Family counseling, vocational training, and aftercare programs can help former addicts reintegrate into society and reduce relapse rates.

Community support can be a powerful tool in the fight against drug abuse. Local organizations, religious institutions, and volunteers can work together to create support networks, offer mentorship programs, and encourage positive lifestyle choices.

The increasing drug abuse in Jammu is a crisis that demands immediate and concerted efforts from all sectors of society. The problem is complex and deeply rooted, driven by socio-economic factors, mental health issues, and the easy availability of narcotics. Without swift action, the region risks losing an entire generation to addiction.

The way forward lies in a holistic approach that combines strict law enforcement, widespread awareness, access to mental health resources, and strong community engagement. By working together, Jammu can reclaim its youth from the grip of addiction and ensure a healthier, brighter future for its citizens. The time to act is now, before this silent epidemic spirals further out of control.

(The writer is M.A Political Science Jammu University student).

Securing the digital future of the nation

A cyber-resilient India has to be built to protect citizens from the vulnerabilities that accompany technological advancements

■ JYOTIRADITYA M. SCINDIA

In India, telecom transcends the mere functionality of connecting people; it is also a critical tool that serves to uplift those who live on the fringes of development. In the last decade, the country has witnessed a huge surge in digital connectivity. With data rates among the lowest in the world, India now has over 954.40 million internet subscribers, of which 398.35 million are rural internet subscribers. In the last decade, broadband connections have increased from 64 million to 924 million. This widespread connectivity has fuelled a digital economy that contributes 10% of our total economic landscape today, and is projected to reach a fifth, or 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2026. Banking services, KYC verification, digital payments, and mobile-based authentication have been the backbone of India's digital revolution, enabling the Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile (JAM) trinity services to flourish. In October 2024 alone, India recorded 126 million digital transactions on the Aadhaar Enabled Payment System.

However, this digital revolution also presents formidable challenges, particularly, the protection of our citizens from the vulnerabilities that accompany technological advancements. The tool of convenience, our handheld devices, have also been exposed to a vector of cyber crimes such as spam calls, scam messages, unwarranted telemarketing calls, phishing scams, fake investments, and loan opportunities. One particular challenge stands out: "Digital arrest" scams are proliferating at an alarming rate today. The modus operandi - criminals masquerading as government officials to intimidate and extort innocent individuals. Far beyond mere financial loss, these malicious practices disrupt livelihoods, erode trust, and undermine the very confidence that citizens need to engage fully in the digital economy.

However, in a swift response to evolving threats, our authorities have been proactive, disconnecting mobile connections acquired through fraudulent means and have safeguarded over ₹2,400 crore through 7.6 lakh complaints, reflecting not just numbers but lives protected, and dreams secured.

As we are strengthening our defences in safeguarding the digital space, it will be an exercise in futility without the support of our citizens. Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's recent call to the citizens to "Ruko, SochoAur Action Lo" resonates with urgency and foresight, underscoring the escalating threats in the shadows of the internet. This call is not merely a response to the rising cyber crimes but an appeal for a vigilant and proactive society. During his recent Mann Ki Baat address, PM Modi reiterated the imperative to report dubious activities through the dedicated helpline 1930 and the cybercrime.gov.in portal. The emphasis on citizen participation is pivotal in the fight against cybercriminals.

Yet, as cybercriminals adapt, they have developed new tactics, employing international calls disguised as local numbers (+91-xxxxxxxxxx). This clever manipulation of calling line identity (CLI) allows these calls to masquerade as legitimate local number calls, further complicating the landscape of deception.

The department of telecommunications (DoT) has actively intervened, launching an indigenously developed International Incoming Spoofed Calls Prevention System. The tool is proving to be a formidable barrier, blocking 86% of spoofed calls - approximately 1.35 crore daily.

Central to our vision of a cyber-secure India is the digital empowerment of citizens. The Sanchar Saathi platform embodies this mission, with tools like Chakshu enabling users to report suspicious messages, calls, and WhatsApp activities. Leveraging the power of Artificial Intelligence, DoT has detected and disconnected over 2.5 crore fraudulent mobile connections, blocked more than 2.29 lakh mobile handsets, blacklisted 71,000 sellers, and registered FIRs against 1,900 offenders through Telecom Service Providers (TSPs).

With the advantage of a young, tech-savvy population, we have also involved students in a grassroots initiative. College students across Bharat have stepped up as Sanchar Mitra volunteers, reaching out to communities and spreading awareness about digital safety through Sanchar Saathi Portal. These young advocates help citizens harness the tools available for preventing telecom fraud. Since its inception in May 2023, the Sanchar Saathi Portal has garnered tremendous traction, with 7.7 crore visits and an average of two lakh daily users. The portal has also played a crucial role in tracing 12.59 lakh stolen and lost mobile phones. It has become an essential resource for citizens committed to safeguarding their digital experiences, reinforcing the notion that cyber defence and security is a collective responsibility.

In a decisive push to combat the menace of spam calls, unsolicited SMS and telemarketing, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has also implemented a robust series of countermeasures to safeguard citizens. Violations of rules will be met with stringent penalties, signalling the zero-tolerance policy in breach of digital trust. So far, TRAI has blacklisted over 800 entities and individuals engaging in unverified promotional calls, while more than 1.8 million numbers have been disconnected. This crackdown extends to SMS fraud as well, where 350,000 unused and unverified messaging headers and 1.2 million content templates have been blocked.

At the heart of our cyber defence strategy lies the Digital Intelligence Platform (DIP), uniting over 520 stakeholders, including 460 banks and law enforcement agencies. This collaboration enables real-time information sharing and coordinated actions against cyber threats.

In this rapidly evolving digital era, prioritising cybersecurity is not merely a precaution; it is essential for safeguarding our nation's digital future. With a strong digital public infrastructure, tech-savvy young population and robust institutional frameworks, India has positioned itself as the leader in the digital ecosystem. As we navigate this complex landscape, our commitment to continuous improvement and adaptability remains steadfast. By acting upon the PM's call, we will build a cyber-resilient India - one where every citizen is protected, empowered, and prepared to flourish in this digital era.

(The writer is Union Minister of Communications and Development of Northeastern region).

Girls' education in rural areas of India

■ VIJAY GARG

Girls' education in rural areas of India faces numerous challenges despite various initiatives to improve access and quality of schooling. The issue is complex and influenced by cultural, economic, social, and infrastructural factors. Here are some key aspects:

Cultural and Societal Barriers

Patriarchal Norms: In many rural communities, there is a strong preference for educating boys over girls. This preference is rooted in traditional views that prioritize boys as future breadwinners.

Early Marriage: Girls are often pressured into early marriages, which cuts short their education. The average age of marriage in rural areas is lower than in urban areas, and this directly impacts girls' chances of completing secondary or higher education.

Safety Concerns: Parents worry about their daughters' safety, especially if schools are far away, leading some families to keep their girls at home rather than risk travel-related safety issues.

Economic Constraints

Poverty: Many rural families live below the poverty line and prioritize work over education for their children. In such cases, girls are often tasked with household chores or contributing to family income, making education less accessible.

Cost of Education: While primary education is often free, secondary education can involve costs for uniforms, books, and transportation, which discourages poorer families from sending girls to school.

Infrastructure Challenges

School Availability: Many rural areas have limited or no access to secondary schools, forcing students to travel long distances, which is a deterrent for girls.

Lack of Toilets and Sanitary Facilities: Inadequate sanitation, especially the lack of girls' toilets, is a significant barrier for adolescent girls who may skip school during menstruation or drop out entirely due to discomfort and embarrassment.

Teacher Shortages and Quality: Rural schools often lack qualified teachers and resources. Teachers, especially female ones, are scarce, which affects the quality of education and limits girls' role models in the education sector.

Government and NGO Efforts

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: This initiative aims to improve the status of girls by focusing on both protection and education. It is a holistic approach targeting both societal attitudes and education access.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme: By providing free meals, this program encourages school attendance. For many families, the meal is a significant incentive to send their children, including girls, to school.

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas: These residential schools are specifically for girls from marginalized communities in rural areas and aim to improve enrollment rates in secondary education.

NGO Programs: Numerous NGOs work to improve girls' education through scholarships, awareness campaigns, and grassroots movements, often involving community members to change mindsets.

Positive Impacts and Future Outlook

Education of girls leads to better economic opportunities, improved health, and reduced child marriage rates, creating a cycle of benefits for the entire community.

Addressing the unique barriers faced by girls in rural India, through improved infrastructure, greater incentives, and community involvement, can yield long-term social transformation.

Overall, while India has made strides in girls' education, significant work remains, particularly in rural areas. Systematic changes and sustained community engagement are crucial to creating an environment where girls can access and benefit from education fully.

(The writer is Retired Principal and Educational Columnist).