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NEW ERA OF TRAVEL

n October 3, 2023, a significant milestone in the Indian railway network was achieved with the launch of the Jammu-Srinagar Vande Bharat Express. This semi-highspeed train, part of the Indian Railways' ambitious plan to modernize its rail services, marks a new era of travel between the two major cities of Jammu and Srinagar, connecting the winter and summer capitals of Jammu & Kashmir in style, speed, and com-

The Vande Bharat Express, also known as the Train 18, is a flagship initiative by Indian Railways to introduce semi-highspeed trains with world-class amenities. The train aims to reduce travel time between major cities while offering a luxurious, comfortable, and efficient mode of transportation.

The Jammu-Srinagar route, which is often characterized by winding roads and lengthy travel times, now boasts this fast and modern solution that will significantly improve connectivity in the region. The Jammu-Srinagar Vande Bharat Express is equipped with cutting-edge features aimed at enhancing passenger comfort and convenience. The train operates at speeds of up to 160 km/h, cutting down travel time significantly. The journey between Jammu and Srinagar, which would typically take around 6-7 hours by road, is now reduced to approximately 5 hours, offering a much quicker alternative for commuters. The Vande Bharat Express offers air-conditioned coaches, ergonomic seating, and reclining chairs. The interiors are designed for maximum comfort, with ample legroom and Wi-Fi connectivity on board. The coaches are also equipped with automatic doors, LED lighting, and advanced air-conditioning systems to ensure a pleasant travel experience. The Vande Bharat Express is built with energy-efficient technologies, making it more environmentally friendly compared to traditional trains. The coaches are constructed with lightweight materials, and the train is designed to optimize fuel consumption, contributing to reduced carbon emissions. The train is equipped with advanced safety mechanisms such as automatic train protection systems, which ensure the safety of passengers by preventing accidents. It also has CCTV cameras, emergency communication systems, and onboard medical facilities for additional security and assistance. The Vande Bharat Express prioritizes accessibility with elevated platforms and specially designed coaches for differently-abled passengers. The train provides a comfortable, barrier-free environment for all, ensuring inclusivity. The introduction of the Vande Bharat Express on the Jammu-Srinagar route has the potential to boost the region's economy and tourism. The reduced travel time will make it easier for tourists to explore the scenic beauty of Jammu & Kashmir, which is already one of India's top tourist destinations. The improved connectivity also means better access to markets, government services, and educational institutions, especially for the local population. Additionally, the train's arrival underscores the region's importance in India's overall transportation infrastructure and highlights the government's efforts to enhance connectivity in the northernmost region of India. The introduction of high-speed rail services is a testimony to the government's commitment to bridging gaps and promoting development in J&K. The Vande Bharat Express is a monumental step toward modernizing the transportation infrastructure in J&K.

Reservation issue Hogging limelight in J&K politics

OMKAR DATTATRAY

he issue of reservations in government services and admonition to professional courses has become a political issue and it has hogged the limelight in Jammu and Kashmir politics. In fact one can surmise that reservations have become a political, vote bank and appearement issue and it has marred efficiency and had given rise to inefficiency in administration and governance .At the time of the framing and implementing of our constitution, it was thought proper to give reservations to SC's ,ST's and OB'c for a period of ten years .But the irony of our politics and governance is that the reservations are continuing even after 75 years of freedom and self rule Reservation has become a reality of our politics and political system that no party musters the courage to touch and scrap it again for vote bank politics These days , reservation has become a subject of debate and talk of the town in JK UT .The chief minister Omar Abdullah has sought six months time to sort out the intricate issue of reservations .Jammu and Kashmir's new reservation policy has sparked protests and legal challenges .Critics say it reduces opportunities for some groups while benefiting others .The changes ,introduced after the revocation of Article 370 impact quotas for government jobs and educational institutions .Under the revised policy, open merit -general category reservations have been cut from 57% to 33%. The changes implemented have reduced the Reservations for Residents of Backward Areas -RBA from 20 percent to 10 percent .In contrast ,the share for Scheduled Tribes (ST) has doubled from 10 percent to 20 percent and reservations for Socially Backward Castes (SBC) have increased from 2 percent to 8 percent reservations for people living near the Line of Actual Control and Physically Challenged -PHC have been slightly raised from 3 percent to 4 percent .The new reservation policy also introduces new reservation categories, which include children of defense personnel -3% ,children of police personnel -1% and achievers in sports -2% .A significant addition is a 10% reservation for the newly recognized Pahari ethnic groups ,along with other communities like Paddari tribe ,Koils ,and Gadda Brahmins by the parliament at the behest of the BJP .Gujjar and Bakerwal communities who were granted ST status in 1991 veheothers on the contention that they do not meet the criteria to be granted an ST quota. They argued that the move has reduced their chances of seeking admissions and government jobs .The policy is also under legal challenge. The court has asked the J&K government to respond within three weeks . Regional parties say the reservation should be based on fairness and at expanse of those who do not enjoy reservation .The J&K government has set up a three-member panel to review the policy but has not given a timeline for its conclusions .With ongoing protests and legal challenges, the future of the policy remains uncertain .The reservation policy for jobs and admissions was introduced by the lieutenant governor -led administration before the assembly elections this year .Several political leaders and hundreds of students have gathered outside the residence of Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah to seek a review of the reservation policy, which was introduced by the LG -led administration earlier this year .Present with the protesting students was Abdullah's own party {National Conference] member and MP Ruhullah Mehdi In a post on X on Sunday, he had called for a protest at Gupkar Road outside the CM's residential office to demand rationality in reservation policy .Opposition leaders from PDP Waheed Para and Iltija Mufti along with Awami Itihad Party leader Sheikh Khurshi { brother of Er Rashid] have also joined the protest .On the top of all this, Abdullah's son also stepped outside to join Mehdi and the students .Meanwhile ,Mufti spoke to students and later told reporters,"We are not here to do politics."She said the politics in the valley revolves round Article 370 and restoration of statehood ,with no one talking about the "vouth .""They have very basic demands-like the reservation must be equitable and not discriminatory --- We hope the government that came to power with a huge mandate and with a promise that they will rationalize the reservation -we hope the NC government fulfils their promises in a time bound manner."Mufti told ANI. Hours after the protest began ,chief minister Omar Abdullah called in the students and spoke with them in his office .In March the Administrative council met under the LG Sinha and approved the proposal of the social welfare department to amend the Jammu and

Kashmir Reservation (Amendment]Act, 2023 dated 15-12- 2023 Constitution [Jammu and Kashmir] Scheduled Castes Order Act 2024 Constitution [Amendment] [Jammu and Kashmir] Scheduled Tribes Order {Amendment] Act 2024 and recommendations of Jammu and Kashmir Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission .The reservation policy introduced by the LG Manoj Sinha-led administration before the assembly elections early this year reduced the reservation percentage for general category and increased those for the reserved categories in jobs and admissions .The then administration had approved 10% reservations for Paharis and three other tribes ,taking the total reservation under the Scheduled Tribe -ST category up to 20%.It also granted 8% reservation to other backward classes -OBC's ,besides adding 15 new castes to the list of OBC's as recommended by the Socially and Economically Backward Classes -SEBC Commission .The parliament in February ,had approved reservations for Pahari ethnic tribe and other tribes during the budget session . This reservation policy did not go down well among politicians and students alike .Calls for review and reversal of the policy were being sounded across the valley .While NC MP Ruhulla had promised the students to join their outcry in November, he clarified that the reason for the new government not taking any action over the reservation policy was because of a confusion between the devolution of power between the newly elected Omar Abdullah -led government and the LG Sinha "I told that there is some confusion about the distribution of the rules of business on many issues between the elected government and other undemocratically imposed office and this subject is one among them I am assured that the government will take a decision to rationalize the policy soon," he added. On December 10th J&K government formed a three -member panel to review the reservation policy in jobs and admissions. The panel comprises health minister Sakina Itoo ,forest minister Javad Ahmad Rana, and Science and Technology minister Satish Sharma .So far no deadline has been set for the committee to submit its report. Two days later, the J&K high court , while hearing a fresh petition challenging the reservation policy, sought response on the same from the government

within a time period of three weeks. The court also clubbed the previous petition with the recent one. Chief minister Omar Abdullah on Sunday said that while government has formed a committee to review the reservation policy, it will abide by the court directions on the matter .Explaining that he understands the emotions surfacing over the reservation issue ,Abdullah affirmed that his party JKNC is fully committed to reviewing all the aspects of its manifesto."It is a continuation of this commitment that a cabinet sub-committee was constituted to move towards fulfilling this promise .That sub-committee was only recently notified and is in the process of starting its work by engaging with all stakeholders,"Abdullah said in a post on X. He noted that the policy has been challenged in the High Court, saying that his government will surely be" bound by any judgment when the final legal options have been exhausted .The CM however further said ,"It has come to my attention that a protest is being planned in Srinagar to highlight the sense of injustice surrounding the reservation policy .Peaceful protest is a democratic right and I would be the last person to deny anyone that right but please protest knowing that the issue has not been ignored or swept under the carpet .He assured people that everyone would be heard and a fair decision would be taken after due procedure. Tensions are raising over the recent reservation policy changes in J&K ,as the High Court has issued notices to the local government following a petition challenging these guidelines .Filed by local resident Dawar Ali and backed by the J&K civil society ,the petition raises serious concerns about the fairness and logic behind the current reservation framework .Advocates argue the policy violates principles of rationality and requests the court to annul it entirely Legal analysts and observers note how the changing reservation guidelines signal not just local effects-these alterations could serve as new precedents for other regions facing similar socio-economic challenges .Now that the High Court is seized of the matter of change in reservations, the best course is to wait the final outcome of the judiciary. Till then the issue should be kept in cold storage and not politicized.

(The author is a columnist, social, KP activist & freelance writer)

Water Sustainability: Challenges and Prospects

■ DR. BANARSI LAL

ater is a critical natural resource for the mankind and the future of our planet. Although water is the largest natural resource, it is a finite and irreplaceable resource that is fundamental to human well-being. Its sustainability is vital to the future well-being of humans and socio-economic development. It is indispensable for the existence of animal and plant eco-systems and is an essential element in the development of economic activities of any nation. It is the most vital resource for the existence of life on earth. No other natural resource is having such an overwhelming influence. Earth three-fourths surface is covered by the oceans. Freshwater constitutes a very small proportion of this enormous quantity. About 2.7 per cent of the total water available on the earth is fresh water of which 75.2 per cent lies frozen in Polar Regions and another 22.6 per cent is present as ground water. Rest of water is available in rivers, lakes, atmosphere water and soil and vegetation. India is having 2.4 per cent of the world's geographical area. 4 per cent of the world's water resources and 17.7 per cent of the world's population. It has been observed that less than one per cent of the world's fresh water on earth is readily available for human consumption. As the human population grows, the demand on freshwater resources will also grow. Presently the world is facing a freshwater crisis. If percapita consumption of water resource continues to rise at its current rate, humankind could be using over 90 per cent of all available freshwater within 25 years leaving just 10 per cent for the rest of the world's species.

Water sustainability refers to the maintenance and availability of clean water for future generations for consumption, agricultural processes and biodiversity. Agricultural sector is currently the largest consumer of freshwater due to its need for irrigation as well as livestock. Climate change is irreversibly affecting water accessibility as extreme water events increase, leading to more droughts and foods. Water is key to improve global health and productivity. The availability of water is falling overtime and water crisis is the fifth highest risk to the society according to the 2020 edition of the World Economic Forum's Global Risk report. Valuing the mul-



tiple uses of water from agriculture to power generation, domestic use, industry, fisheries, ecosystem and livelihoods can help to transform this looming crisis into an opportunity for advancing crisis. Each year, there are about 250 million cases of water borne diseases with around 5-10 million deaths. It is not only people who are threatened by water shortages and pollution, freshwater ecosystems which harbour the world's greatest concentration of species are among the most vulnerable on earth. Around half of the world's wetlands have been destroyed in the last 100 years. Two-fifths of the fish are freshwater species and of these around 20 per cent are threatened, endangered or have become extinct in recent

decades. Presently the freshwater demand is increasing not only because of demographic pressures but also because of improved living standards, urban and industrial growth. The world's thirst for water is likely to become one of the most important issues of the 21st century. Global water consumption raised six fold between 1990 and 1995-more than double the rate of population growth and continues to grow rapidly as agricultural, industrial and domestic demand increase. In some areas, water withdrawals are so high relative to supply that surface water supplies are literally shrinking and ground water reserves are being depleted faster than they can be replenished by precipitation. Due to overexploitation of ground water, water tables are dropping and some rivers often become dry before they reach the sea.

Freshwater is available as rainfall, surface water, ground water and atmospheric moisture. All these sources vary over place and time both seasonality and from year to year to year. Over exploitation of water resources, degradation of water recharge structures, naucity of funds depleting water resources due to fail ure of monsoon and competing demand on the available water resources are the factors that cause concern on the supply front. On the demand side, factors such as growing urbanization, increase in population, change in life styles etc. also increase the complexity of the problem. Presently many Indian cities do not have enough sources of water and in future, it would have to be transported over large distances as the water is found more away from the cities. The country's present and future situation can be gauged by the trend in water availability. It has been observed that irrigation alone accounted around 83 per cent of the total water use in 1997-98 on the demand side and it is likely to slow down to 69.5 per cent by the year 2050 due to the impact of technological advancement in irrigation. Demand of water for domestic, industrial and thermal power generation is expected to increase sharply. The limited ground water sources have not been able to keep pace with recharge and discharge to renew the balance. The amount of water available per person in India has decreased steadily over a period of time. It is predicted that the world in the year

2050 will be largely different from what it is today.

Water sector will undergo dramatic changes in the years to come. We have no option but to depend on the available sources of water and have the responsibility to save and conserve them without fail.

It is predicted that rivers and their water distribution will become one of the most politicised ecological issues in the near future. Water is scarce even for drinking purpose. India already is facing an alarming situation. Its fragile water resources are stressed and depleting while various sectorial demands are growing rapidly even as about 200 million people in the country do not have proper access to safe drinking water and nearly 1.5 million children under five die each year due to water-borne diseases. The droughts conditions in several parts of the country are on the rise and disputes over sharing of the water resources are becoming grimmer. If the available freshwater resources in India are not managed properly India can face a severe water crisis. At present, six of India's 20 major river basins already fall into water scarce category. It is expected that by the year 2025, five more basing will be water scarce. According to estimates by the year 2025, India will face a severe water shortage leading to serious struggles and it is also expected that within a few decades availability of water in the country will be about 1700 to 2000 cubic metres as per person as against the world average of 5000 to 9000 cubic metres per person. India is heading towards a freshwater crisis due to improper management of water resources and environmental degradation which has led to lack of access to safe water supply to millions of people. The freshwater crisis is already evident in many parts of the country varying in scale and intensity depending mainly on the time of the year. Ground water crisis has been caused by human actions. The most tragic part is that water is a finite natural resource and so far no technology has contributed successfully to produce water for mass scale. There is need to frame an appropriate water policy and equally important indomitable conscience of water users to utilize water judiciously are necessary for sustainable utilization of

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Opportunities for Savvy Indian Investor Modern Modes of Investment: Unlocking

NIKHIL KHAJURIA ndia's investing landscape is swiftly transforming, expanding beyond conventional assets such as fixed deposits, gold, and real estate to encompass a broader spectrum of possibilities tailored for contemporary investors. Digital technologies have rendered investment more accessible and adaptable, enabling individuals to diversify their portfolios in unprecedented ways, thereby optimizing wealth development and adeptly navigating the complexities of contemporary financial markets

The digital revolution has transformed the investment landscape, obviating the necessity for documentation and financial intermediaries. Currently, investors can access mutual funds, equities, exchangetraded funds (ETFs), bonds, and digital gold via mobile applications such as Zerodha, Groww, and Paytm Money. The enormous internet penetration in India, exceeding 750 million users, has facilitated this trans-

formation, allowing new investors to access the market and investigate opportunities with remarkable ease.

Direct stock is one of the most favored investing strategies among younger investors, enabling them to acquire ownership in companies with significant growth potential. India's stock markets have experienced a significant increase in direct equity ownership, boasting over 110 million unique participants since the epidemic. Digital trading systems provide real-time analytics and fractional investing, enabling individuals with constrained cash to possess shares in high-value global corporations such as Amazon or Tesla. This tendency enables young Indians to accumulate wealth through modest investments in assets that were before inaccessible

Indian households continue to trust mutual funds, especially via Systematic Investment Plans (SIPs), since they want consistent, longterm growth. AMFI reports that SIP investments have reached a record monthly total of ?14,000 crore, with more than 6 lakh SIP accounts in existence. SIPs commence at a minimum of ?500 per month, providing a systematic investment approach that capitalizes on compounding advantages. By incorporating theme and sector-specific funds, mutual fund firms are facilitating investors in aligning their portfolios with individual interests or market trends.

Alternative investments, like Peerto-Peer (P2P) lending and real estate crowdfunding, are increasingly popular among individuals seeking distinctive returns. P2P platforms such as Faircent and LenDenClub facilitate direct connections between investors and borrowers, providing the possibility of elevated returns, occasionally between 10% and 20%annually. This technique entails modest risk, as returns are contingent upon the dependability of borrowers. Real estate crowdfunding presents an appealing option, enabling investors to aggregate smaller amounts to invest in real estate. Platforms such PropertyShare enable property investments starting at ?1 lakh, rendering real estate a viable alternative for a broader range of investors.

For the technologically adept, cryptocurrencies present a high-growth but high-risk opportunity. India ranks in the top 10 nations in cryptocurrency usage, boasting over 100 million active users. Digital assets such as Bitcoin and Ethereum are favored for their decentralized characteristics and potential for substantial gains; yet, their volatility renders them appropriate only for investors with a high risk tolerance and comprehensive knowledge of the cryptocurrency domain. Platforms such as WazirX enable Indian investors to engage in both cryptocurrency and Non-Fungible Token (NFT) marketplaces, facilitating ownership of digital art and collectibles.

Conservative investors persist in seeking bonds and fixed-income instruments for dependable returns.

Government and corporate bonds provide reliable income, while the RBI's floating-rate savings bonds and Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs) deliver inflation-adjusted yields, rendering them suitable for individuals prioritizing capital preservation. The government's supplementary allocation of ?60,000 crore in SGBs signifies the increasing interest in these secure, inflation-hedged assets.

Exchange-Traded Funds (ETFs) and index funds, which replicate market indices such as Nifty 50 or BSE Sensex, have gained significant popularity, especially among passive investors. With assets under management in Indian ETFs surpassing ?5 trillion, ETFs provide diversified, low-cost alternatives to achieve market performance without requiring active management. This passive investment strategy appeals to individuals seeking a hands-off, longterm growth alternative.

Sustainable investment is an emerging trend, particularly among younger, socially aware investors.

Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) funds concentrate on enterprises dedicated to ethical conduct, social accountability, and robust governance. A poll conducted by Kantar and HSBC reveals that 77% of Indian millennials emphasize sustainability in their investment decisions. Mutual fund companies are launching ESGfocused products, enabling investors to accumulate money in accordance

with their principles. Although these contemporary alternatives present significant potential, investors must meticulously evaluate their financial objectives, risk appetite, and market circumstances. Through diversification across asset classes and the utilization of technology-driven investing platforms, Indians now possess the means to construct their financial future with

assurance and adaptability. (The writer is Academician and Research Scholar Udhampur Campus, University of Jammu)