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Current Affairs, 29th December to 4th January, 2019

International

Qasem Soleimani Assassinated

➔ The assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Qods Force for over two decades, in Baghdad, is a reckless and unilateral act of provocation by the U.S. that could trigger another full-scale war in West Asia. The strike against Mr. Soleimani and several Iraqi Shia militia members when they were leaving the airport, was apparently in retaliation for the storming of the American Embassy in Baghdad by protesters earlier this week. Mr. Soleimani, who had celebrity status among Iran's military leaders, was highly popular among the hardliners. He was reportedly very close to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who once called him a "living martyr of the revolution". Mr. Soleimani was also the main architect of Iran's recent foreign operations, mainly in Syria and Iraq, which were crucial in saving the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and defeating the Islamic State (IS) in both countries. It was under his leadership that Iran founded and trained Shia militias and despatched them to the battlefields there. The militias fought alongside Kurdish paramilitaries and the Iraqi Army, with U.S. air support, against the IS in northern Iraq, from Amirli to Mosul. Ironically, the soldier who helped the U.S. and the Iraqi government defeat the IS has been assassinated inside Iraq by the Americans. This was a crisis foretold by many, and U.S. President Donald Trump is squarely responsible for where U.S.-Iran ties stand today. He single-handedly destroyed the détente between the two nations established by the 2015 Iran nuclear deal by unilaterally pulling the U.S. out of the agreement in 2018 and reimposing sanctions on Iran. Now, with the assassination, Mr. Trump has escalated the crisis to the levels not seen in the past; not even during the siege in 1979 of the American Embassy in Tehran by the revolutionaries. It might help an impeached President in an election year to divert attention from his domestic woes and mobilise political support, but for a region already struggling to cope with multiple conflicts and external interventions, it could be dangerously consequential. The attack has already killed off even the possibility of renegotiating the nuclear deal. Iran might see this as an act of war like any sovereign country would do. A full-scale war would be totally different from the wars the U.S. has fought in West Asia. It could trigger multiple attacks across the region, destabilising it further, cause heavy casualties and help the jihadist al-Qaeda and the IS regroup and re-emerge. It is unfortunate that the U.S., which is struggling to get out of Afghanistan after 18 years of war, which destroyed the Iraqi state 17 years ago, turning parts of the country into fertile ground for jihadists, is triggering another conflict in the Muslim world.

Potential Fallout, On India

India has already had considerable difficulties in meandering through the obstacle course created by the U.S.-Iran cold war. While we need to be on the right side of the U.S., our ties with Iran, apart from being "civilizational", have their own geostrategic logic. Now that the conflict has turned hot, its adverse impact on India could magnify. Apart from a rise in our oil import bill and difficulties in supplies, the safety of an estimated eight million expatriates

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in the Gulf may be affected. Iran has the capacity to influence the U.S.-Taliban peace process in Afghanistan, a neighbouring country. Last but not the least, after Iran, India has perhaps the largest number of the world's Shia population and the possibility of some of them being radicalised by this event cannot be ruled out. It can be argued that had the U.S. not invaded Iraq in 2003 creating the mother of all chaos, Qassem Soleimani and his Qods Force would have largely remained a sideshow in Lebanon. So, his targeted assassination completes the circle.

In Baghdad US Embassy Storming, Echoes of A Siege in Tehran

➔ As several dozen protesters stormed the United States embassy compound in Baghdad, smashing windows and lighting fires, and a crowd of thousands thronged the streets outside chanting "Death to America", John R Bolton, who was the US National Security Adviser until September 2019, posted on Twitter: "The attack on the US embassy in Baghdad is straight from Iran's playbook in 1979..." The US believes the attack on the embassy compound was directed from Tehran, and led by the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia, which is different from Hezbollah in Lebanon but, like the latter, is closely aligned with the *Quds Force, the overseas operations wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).* The Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Revolutionary Guards have been designated international terrorist organisations by the US. What happened in 1979, and why does the US blame Iran for Tuesday's attack on its embassy compound in Iraq?

Tehran Embassy Siege

On November 4, 1979, youth followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calling themselves Muslim Students Following the Imam's Line smashed through the gates of the US embassy in Tehran and seized the compound and the 63 American citizens present on the premises. (Another three American diplomats were seized at the Foreign Ministry.) The crisis lasted a full 444 days — until January 20, 1981, when the last batch of the 52 Americans who were taken hostage were released. The incident — the most consequential of its kind in recent decades (along with the 2012 assault on the US embassy in Benghazi, Libya, in which the American ambassador and a foreign service officer was killed) — put the relationship between the US and Iran in a fundamentally hostile cast, the echoes of which continue to reverberate more than 40 years on. The embassy siege, a seminal event of the Islamic Revolution, cemented the perception of the ayatollahs' regime as being intractably fundamentalist and anti-West, and has ever since been at the heart of the US narrative of Iran as a rogue outlier that has no respect for internationally accepted principles law, morality, or human rights.

The Context in Iran

The last Shah of Iran, *Mohammad Reza Pahlavi*, who had been installed and kept in power by Western powers led by the US and the UK, had been a close American ally for decades. Under him, Iran was the West's bulwark against the Soviet Union, and the autocratic Shah energetically pursued Western style modernisation in the country, including the suppression of religious groups. As public anger against the Shah peaked, the sprawling US embassy compound became, from the last months of 1978 onward, the scene of large protests by Iranians who perceived the US as his primary benefactor. On January 16, 1979, the Shah fled Iran for Egypt, and on February 1, Khomeini made a triumphant return to his country after

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15 years in exile. On October 22, the deposed Shah arrived in the US for medical treatment, triggering an eruption of anger on the Iranian street, which ultimately resulted in the storming of the embassy on November 4.

The Unfolding Crisis

Initial negotiations by representatives of President Jimmy Carter and diplomats of other countries in Iran made no headway. The country's mood was virulently anti-American, and the fate of the hostages was also caught in a tussle between rival revolutionary factions. Mehdi Bazargan, who had been appointed Prime Minister by Khomeini, resigned on November 6. The US refused to accept the hostage takers' key demand for the return of the Shah — and instead stopped buying Iranian oil, froze Iranian assets in America, lobbied with other countries and in the United Nations, and took Iran to the International Court of Justice (where it ultimately won). Meanwhile, on November 17, 13 women and African American hostages were released. On July 11, 1980, another hostage who had fallen very ill, was let go. Separately, on January 28, 1980, six American diplomats who had escaped being taken hostage and had been sheltered by the senior Canadian diplomat John Sheardown, made a dramatic escape along with two CIA operatives on board a Swissair flight to Zurich. (Their story was fictionalised in Escape from Iran: The Canadian Caper (1981) and the Oscar-winning Argo (2012). On April 24, 1980, a dangerous military attempt to fly the hostages out of Tehran failed tragically after three of the eight helicopters on the mission malfunctioned, and a fourth was involved in an accident as the US forces sought to withdraw hastily. Eight American soldiers were killed, and Iran showed their bodies on TV, to the Carter administration's humiliation. Thereafter all diplomatic efforts ceased, and Iran tightened security around the hostages.

In the Ruins of Unilateralism

➔ If one looks for an overarching theme that defined global politics in 2019, one might settle for protests. Angry crowds, especially the youth, revolted against the establishment in several parts of the world — from Santiago to Hong Kong, Beirut and New Delhi. But the year also saw some defining trends in geopolitics as well such as China's growing assertiveness both in trade and foreign policy, Iran's dangerously aggressive, yet calculated, behaviour, and the rise of Turkey as a new power pole in West Asia. The most important of them all, however, was the relative decline in America's power, which was manifested through a number of crises during the year. The U.S. is the world's mightiest military power and arguably the centre of the post-Soviet world order. In the 1990s, the U.S.'s dominance was at its peak with international and multilateral organisations getting overshadowed by its pre-eminence. In 2001, after the September 11 terrorist attacks, it got international support for its war in Afghanistan. In 2003, the U.S. went ahead with the plan to bomb Iraq despite the UN opposition, reminding the world of imperial invasions. But the global situation is different, and more complex today.

The Afghan Experience

Changes under way over the past decade picked up pace in 2019, showing cracks in the post-Soviet order. At least three developments in 2019 suggested that the U.S.'s ability to shape global politics is clearly receding. The U.S. went to Afghanistan in October 2001, with a vow to destroy al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban regime. Seventeen years later, the U.S., desperate

to get out of a stalemated conflict, started direct negotiations with the Taliban. The talks almost led to a settlement last year, with both sides agreeing to a draft agreement under which the U.S. would pull out most of its troops from Afghanistan in return for assurances from the Taliban that it would not allow Afghan soil to be used by transnational terrorists. The agreement, however, was not signed as President Donald Trump cancelled the peace process in September after an American soldier was killed in a Taliban attack. A few weeks later, Mr. Trump resumed the talks. The whole Afghan experience shows how the U.S. botched up the war. The U.S. has a superior hand in conventional warfare. But winning a war abroad is not just about toppling a hostile regime, but also about stabilising the country after the regime is toppled. The U.S., history shows, is good at the former but fares poorly in the latter. It is now left with no other option but to reach an agreement with the Taliban for a face-saving exit. That would leave Kabul's fragile, faction-ridden government exposed to the Taliban insurgency, just like the Mohammed Najibullah government was left to the Afghan Mujahideen in 1989 after the Soviet withdrawal. The Soviet Union disintegrated in two years, and Najibullah's government collapsed after a few months.

The Iran Stand-Off

The latest spell in the U.S.-Iran tensions was triggered by President Trump's unilateral decision to pull the U.S. out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. Mr. Trump's plan was to put "maximum pressure" on Iran through sanctions and force Tehran to renegotiate the nuclear deal. But Iran countered it through "maximum resistance", instead of giving in. The year 2019 saw Iran repeatedly provoking the U.S. and its allies. It shot down an American drone over the Gulf in June, captured a British tanker in July and is believed to have either carried out or orchestrated multiple attacks on oil tankers that pass through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway that connects the oil-rich Gulf with the Arabian Sea through the Gulf of Oman. In September, two Saudi oil facilities came under attack, which temporarily cut the kingdom's oil output by half. Iran was blamed for the attacks. The attacks on Saudi facilities challenged the post-war partnership between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia that guaranteed American protection to the kingdom. Still, the only counter-measure the U.S. took in response to Iran's growing provocations was imposing more sanctions. One can argue that the U.S.'s subdued response doesn't have anything to do with a decline in its power but is rather due to the reluctance of the sitting President to launch new wars. Even if one buys this argument, the question remains: why is Mr. Trump reluctant to launch new wars? The answer, perhaps, is the wars the U.S. launched in the new century, be it Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya, were not won. Sections in Washington don't want the U.S. to get stuck in another long-drawn conflict in West Asia. Here, the U.S.'s inability to shape outcomes of the wars it launches is acting as a deterrent against its own war machines.

Cracks in the NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Cold War alliance that was formed as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, continued to act as a vehicle of Western military dominance under the leadership of the U.S. in the post-Soviet order. The alliance has come under pressure in recent years with the rise of nationalist-populist leaders, including Mr. Trump, who have a favourable view of Russian President Vladimir Putin and are critical of NATO. These contradictions sharpened in 2019, suggesting that there are growing cracks in the alliance. In October, Turkey invaded north-eastern Syria's Kurdish held-territories, which

had housed U.S. troops during the war against the Islamic State. Ankara practically forced the Trump administration to pull back troops from the areas before it started air strikes. The U.S. was relegated to the role of a spectator when a determined Turkey first captured some towns on the border and then struck a deal with Russia to create a buffer between Turkey and the Kurdish-held territories of Syria, which will be manned by Russian and Turkish troops. But the biggest crisis emerged when Turkey, the second largest military in NATO, purchased S-400 missile defence system from Russia, NATO's primary enemy and the main geopolitical rival of the U.S., despite protests from the West. The U.S. expelled Turkey from the F-35 stealth fighter programme and has threatened to impose sanctions for the deal. It says Russia could use the system radars to spy on the F-35 jets. Turkey didn't give in. It now says it could buy Su-57 jets from Russia if the U.S. does not lift the ban on F-35 sales. Moreover, in response to sanctions threats, Turkey has vowed to shut two U.S. bases in the country, which would mean a split within NATO. These incidents do not mean that the U.S.'s dominance over global politics is over. But they do show that America's long wars and its inability to shape post-war outcomes are impacting its stature in an international system that centres around it. If one translates Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory into geopolitics, the U.S., the core of the strategic world system, is facing revolts in the periphery. The relative decline in America's power coupled with the rise of new and old powers point to a structural churning in the post-Cold War order. In the world system, the core has never been static. Hegemony of a single power is temporary.

What Next in Afghanistan

➔ Since December 22, Afghanistan has been debating the preliminary results of its election. Amid this uncertainty, the Taliban were reported to have agreed to a temporary ceasefire in Afghanistan, before they denied these reports. A look at the controversial election, and what a Taliban ceasefire and US withdrawal — if that happens — could mean for Afghanistan:

Why Is There Uncertainty About the Results of The Election?

The results announced on December 22 gave President Ashraf Ghani 50.64 per cent of the 18,24,401 votes counted (which means a second-round runoff would not be required); he managed to cross the halfway mark by fewer than 12,000 votes. His main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, polled 7,20,990 votes or 39.52 per cent, and was in second place. But these are "preliminary" results. The elections were held on September 28. The preliminary results were scheduled to be declared on October 18, and the final results on November 7. The schedule could not be kept as the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan undertook an "audit and recount" process in 8,255 polling stations, later increased to 8,494 polling stations, for the following reasons: a discrepancy between votes cast on the basis of Biometric Voter Verification, and the paper trail at these polling stations; missing paper trail or "result sheets"; and other irregularities. The recount and audit went slowly. Abdullah wanted 3 lakh votes invalidated (including over 1 lakh cast after polling hours and nearly 1.5 lakh set aside initially because of various suspected irregularities) and 2,423 polling stations excluded from the count. His supporters led street protests in many provinces and succeeded in getting the process suspended for a few days in November. The IEC has been accused of siding with Ghani. Abdullah has declared that he does not accept the "fraudulent result" declared without excluding the 3 lakh "unclean" votes. He has equated the damage caused by the result to that caused by a suicide bombing. Other candidates, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, have also opposed the result. Hekmatyar, the head of Hizb-e-Islami, who got

70,247 votes (3.85 per cent), has denounced the results as "false" and accused the IEC of "stealing" votes cast for him.

So, What Happens Now?

The final results may be declared only towards the end of January. The Election Complaints Commission has received 16,500 complaints, of which 8,000 are from the Abdullah camp. Ghani's side has filed 3,000 complaints. If Abdullah's complaints are rejected, Ghani will be declared the winner. If the Commission takes on board Abdullah's concerns, especially about the invalidity of a large chunk of votes, it would bring down Ghani's vote count and pave the way for a second-round runoff between the top two contenders — a runoff takes place when no candidate secures a simple majority. Neither scenario promises the formation of a stable government.

Why Will the Government Not Be Stable?

Abdullah has already pledged that he will not allow "rootless fraudsters to rule over Afghanistan". This is Deja vu — in 2014 a contested result after the second round had to be resolved by then US Secretary of State John Kerry, who flew in to hold talks with both Ghani and Abdullah. The two men then came together in a National Unity Government. Ghani became President and Abdullah was given the newly created role of Chief Executive. Both Ghani and Abdullah have rejected another national unity government. Ghani has said the country "needs one President, not two", and the idea was no more acceptable to him. Abdullah believes he was cheated out of becoming President twice earlier — before 2014, he had been narrowly defeated by Hamid Karzai in 2009. And the US, keen to hightail it out of Afghanistan, is focused on reviving the talks with the Taliban that President Donald Trump called off abruptly in September. A second round may only bring more uncertainty as it did in 2014. The losing side is sure to see the electoral process itself as compromised. Besides the low turnout — out of 9.6 million registered voters, the IEC pegged it at 2.8 million, but later revised it to 1.8 million — the election has thrown up a sharp regional divide. A vote map of the country's 34 provinces put out by the IEC shows that Ghani, a Pashtun, has won all the southern provinces, while Abdullah, of mixed Tajik-Pashtun ethnicity from the north-eastern province of Panjshir, has won all the non-Pashtun northern provinces. If Abdullah and Ghani were partners in government, they would be seen as a bridge over the divide; as rivals, they would make it look dire.

Where Do the Taliban And Their Talks with The US Figure in All This?

That is a big part of the uncertainty. In September, President Donald Trump had called off a talks process after nine formal rounds that began in January 2019. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Envoy on Afghanistan, said just before the cancellation that the two sides had finalised an agreement that only required the President's signature. As abruptly, during an unannounced Thanksgiving Day trip to Afghanistan on November 28 to meet US troops, Trump declared talks with the Taliban were on again. Ten days before this announcement, the Taliban released an American and an Australian who were teaching at the American University in Kabul, and had been taken captive in 2016. In an apparent exchange, the Afghan government released Anas Haqqani, brother of the Haqqani group leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, and two Taliban militants. From December 7 to 12, Khalilzad met with Taliban representatives in Qatar again, just as he had until September. Just a day before this round

of talks ended, the Taliban carried out a 12-hour attack at the Bagram airbase, north of Kabul. The attack began with a car bomb, after which gunmen entered a medical facility. Two Afghan civilians were killed and 73 were injured. Just before the talks began, the Taliban carried out another deadly attack, this time on a security post in Kunduz, killing 11 Afghan soldiers. There were several other bombings and other violent attacks during the rest of December that killed civilians, Afghan soldiers and militants. There have been no formal talks since. The Taliban denied reports that they were ready to call a ceasefire in preparation for an agreement with the US on withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the name by which the Taliban call themselves) has no ceasefire plans", the Taliban said in a statement. The Taliban's refusal to commit themselves to a ceasefire has been the main reason why President Ghani, other politicians and Afghan civil society have been filled with disquiet and dread about the US-Taliban talks.

Is There A Chance That the New Government Will Be Included in the US-Taliban Process?

It is unlikely. The Taliban have said they do not recognise the elections and have denounced all governments in Kabul as "puppets" of the US. The US kept the previous government out of the talks that ended in September, in deference to the Taliban's wishes. There isn't a new government in Kabul yet. Going by Khalilzad's statements during the pre-September talks, dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan "representatives" (not government), would follow a US-Taliban agreement, and it would be for this "intra-Afghan" dialogue to discuss the road-map ahead, including perhaps a ceasefire. Back in September, the imminent US-Taliban agreement had cast uncertainty on the election itself. There was a view that the election would serve no purpose, and that instead, the "intra-Afghan dialogue" should negotiate the setting up of an interim government that would include Taliban representatives. The cancellation of the US-Taliban process meant there was no more talk about not holding the election. Ghani, who had been determined from the start that the democratic exercise should not be disrupted, hoped he would return with a strong mandate, which in turn would help him face the Taliban with a better hand. But his slender majority from a low turnout, and the contested result may not help. If the election goes into a second round, a new government would potentially take months to form, raising the possibility that the US-Taliban talks may even conclude in an agreement before that, presenting the new dispensation with a changed ground situation in which its own role may be reshaped by circumstances outside its control.

At Least 90 People Killed in Mogadishu Blast

➔ The massive truck bomb attack in Mogadishu that killed at least 79 people and injured 149 points to a resurgent terrorist threat in Somalia. Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group that was ousted from Mogadishu in 2011 by international forces, has claimed the attack. Shabaab, which still controls parts of the country, has carried out a number of suicide attacks in the recent past. In the deadliest attack in the country, truck bombs killed at least 600 people in Mogadishu in 2017. Shabaab is blamed for this attack too, though it never took responsibility. Early this year, Shabaab militants attacked a hotel complex in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 21 people. The latest assault comes barely two weeks after militants stormed a hotel in Mogadishu, killing five people. The growing number of such attacks, despite the U.S. steadily enhancing its air campaign against Shabaab and other militants in the country in recent years, have not only exposed the inability, if not incompetence, of the federal

government in ensuring security but also sent a message to the government's regional and international backers that their attempts to get a stable government in the Horn of Africa country are reaching nowhere. Somalia has hardly been stable since the fall of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991. With different clans and militia groups vying for influence and power, the country plunged into a cyclical civil strife. The U.S. sent troops in 1992 as part of an international humanitarian and peacekeeping mission, but it pulled out of the country in 1994 after 18 American soldiers were killed in the 'Black Hawk Down' incident. Shabaab rose from the anarchy that prevailed over the country. It spread its influence fast across Somalia, capturing even Mogadishu, until U.S. and African Union troops ousted it. Since then, the group has been attacking the internationally-backed federal government and the people residing in government-controlled areas through guerrilla and terror strikes. The original regional plan was to establish a government that will stabilise the country and take over the fight against terrorists. But the Somali government is accused of corruption, incompetence and infighting. While Shabaab exploits the chaos and lawlessness, other militant groups, including an Islamic State faction, are on the rise. Security is largely taken care of by the African Union Mission in Somalia, which has stated that it is preparing for "condition-based handover of national security responsibility" to the Somali government. So fragile is the security situation that it is doubtful whether the Somali government could hold itself together if the international troops pull out. To arrest the slide in security, the government has to first get its act together. The African Union should continue to back the government, as Shabaab poses a threat not just to the Somali government but to the whole region.

Foreign Affairs

Reading Bangladesh Provisions for Citizenship and Freedom of Religion

➔ Among the three countries from where certain categories of migrants have become eligible for Indian citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act, Bangladesh is significant. A look at the laws under which Bangladesh grants citizenship, and what its Constitution says on freedom of religion:

How Does the Bangladesh Constitution Define the Country?

The Bangladesh Constitution, adopted by the Constituent Assembly on December 4, 1972, refers to its war of liberation as "historic war" and establishes the independent sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh. The original preamble mentioned 'Nationalism, Democracy, Socialism and Secularism' as fundamental principles. Unlike India's Constitution, the Bangladesh Constitution's commitment to socialism is explicitly mentioned. The preamble says the fundamental aim of the state is to realise through democratic process socialist society free from exploitation —a society in which rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, equality and justice, political, economic and social will be secured to all citizens. The expression "rule of law" is not used in the Indian Constitution.

But Isn't Islam The State Religion?

In 1977, the military dictator Ziaur Rahman removed the term "secular" from the Constitution. In 1988, President Hussain Muhammad Ershad got Article 2A inserted, which

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says the state religion of the republic is Islam but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony. The amendment was struck down by the Bangladesh High Court in 2005 and the Supreme Court in 2010. The SC said that in spite of Islam being the state religion, the Constitution remains secular. It observed that the "preamble and the relevant provision of the Constitution in respect of secularism, nationalism and socialism as existed on August 15, 1975 (Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on this day) will revive". On June 30, 2011, the Constitution was amended and the term "secular" reinserted. The amendment also removed the expression "absolute faith and trust in Allah" from the preamble but retained, above the preamble, the expression "in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful" that had been added in 1997. To accommodate other religions, it also mentions "in the name of our Creator, the merciful".

How Does the Idea of a State Religion Coexist with That of Secularism?

While Islam is the state religion, other religions have been given "equal status" and "equal rights" by the Constitution and their followers have been given an equal right to freely practise their religions. This seems to be a contradiction as it is not in line with classical secular formulation. Article 8(1) of the Bangladesh Constitution mentions secularism along with nationalism, democracy and socialism as the fundamental principles of state policy. Article 12 was revived by the 15th Amendment and in a way this, unlike the Indian Constitution, explains the essential ingredients of secularism and how it will be achieved. It says the principles of secularism shall be realised by elimination of communalism in all forms, granting of political status in favour of any religion, abuse of religion for political purposes and any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practising a particular religion. With such a progressive provision, the charge of religious persecution has no legs to stand on as far as the text of the Constitution is concerned, just because Islam is the state religion. Unlike Pakistan's Constitution, there is no Muslim qualification required for the office of President or other constitutional offices.

How Is Freedom of Religion Defined?

Article 41 of the Bangladesh Constitution says every citizen "subject to public order and morality" has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion. In India, Article 25 guarantees religious freedom in a narrower sense — in addition to "public order and morality", it is also subject to "health" and "other fundamental rights", and the state can also restrict freedom of religion in respect of any economic, financial, political or other secular activity associated with religious practices, and can also do so in the name of social reforms. But in another sense, India's religious freedom is broader as it is not confined to just citizens. Like India's Article 26, Bangladesh's Article 41(b) gives every religious community or denomination the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions. Like India's Article 28, Article 41(c) in Bangladesh lays down that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction or take part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that relates to a religion other than his own. The difference is that while India does not permit any religious instruction in any institution that is maintained out of state funds or is recognised by the government, Bangladesh permits religious instruction but only of one's own religion. Article 28(1) is a replica of India's Article 15 and prohibits the state from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. This includes admission to any educational institution. India's Article 15 does not mention educational institutions and gives right of access only in

respect of places maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public. The Bangladesh Constitution prohibits all discrimination based on religion, which weakens the argument of religious persecution there.

What Are the Laws on Citizenship?

Article 6 of the Constitution says citizenship in Bangladesh shall be regulated by law and people shall be known as "Bengalees as a nation". On December 15, 1972, a Presidential Order, Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions), conferred citizenship from March 26, 1971 on anyone who, or whose father or grandfather, was born in the territories then comprising Bangladesh and who was a permanent resident on March 25, 1971 and continued to be a resident of Bangladesh. Any person who, for studies or employment, was in territories within a country at war or engaged in military operation (Pakistan), and was being prevented from returning to Bangladesh, would also be citizen. The Bangladesh government, like Pakistan, may grant citizenship to a person who is citizen of Europe, North America or Australia or any other state. But knowledge of Bangla would be necessary. Foreign women married to Bangla men can also get citizenship after two years' residence. Irrespective of place of birth, if one's parents are Bangladeshi, citizenship would be given. In 2017, it was provided that anyone who invests $150,000 can get citizenship.

Does Bangladesh Grant Citizens to Non-Bangla-Speaking Residents?

Many Urdu-speaking people who had supported Pakistan in the war became stateless with the creation of Bangladesh as the law did not give citizenship to those who sided with the enemy country. There were some 10 lakh such people in 1972. Under an agreement among India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, 1,780,969 were repatriated to Pakistan, followed by about 1 lakh more subsequently, but 2.5 lakh remained. In 2008, the Supreme Court in M Sadakat Khan reaffirmed the citizenship of all Urdu-speaking citizens. The 1951 Citizenship Act of Pakistan also remained in force. In 2016, a draft citizenship law was prepared that gave dual citizenship but was criticised for other provisions like termination of citizenship.

Nation

Don't Punish A Child for Marrying A Female Adult

➔ The anti-child marriage law does not intend to punish a male aged between 18 and 21 years for marrying a "female adult," the Supreme Court has held in a recent judgment. A Bench led by Justice Mohan M. Shantanagoudar was interpreting Section 9 of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, which says: "whoever, being a male adult above 18 years of age, contracts a child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two years or with fine which may extend to one lakh rupees or with both." The court said neither does the provision punish a child for marrying a woman nor a woman for marrying a male child. The latter because "in a society like ours, decisions regarding marriage are usually taken by the family members of the bride and groom, and women generally have little say in the matter." The sole objective of the provision is to punish a man for marrying a minor girl. "The intention behind punishing only male adults contracting child marriages is to protect minor girls," the court reasoned. It said the 2006 Act also gives an option for prospective grooms who are between 18 and 21 years old to opt out of marriages. The case

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at hand concerned a boy who married a 21-year-old woman when he was 17 years old. The Punjab and Haryana High Court had set aside its own order providing protection to the couple, and initiated prosecution against the boy for contracting a child marriage, in which he himself was the child. The Supreme Court set aside the HC order, saying the intent behind Section 9 was not to punish a child for contracting a child marriage.

Periyar, The Hero of Vaikom (This Essay Draws from The Author's Full-Length Tamil Book Vaikom Porattam (Kalachuvadu Pathippagam). Translated by A.R. Venkatachalapathy)

➔ To people in Kerala, Vaikom is associated with the name of the great Malayalam writer, Muhammad Basheer. The historically minded would associate it with an important satyagraha during the freedom struggle. In Tamil Nadu, it conjures up the bearded figure of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (September 17, 1879-December 24, 1973). Vaikom is a metaphor for social justice — when scores of satyagrahis from the Tamil country joined hands with their brethren in a heroic struggle. Vaikom was then in the princely state of Travancore. The four streets surrounding the temple of the presiding deity, Lord Mahadeva, were out of bounds for Ezhavas and other castes counted as ritually lower. In 1924, a satyagraha was launched against this injustice by T.K. Madhavan. It lasted for 18 months. In the initial stages, K.P. Kesava Menon and George Joseph led the struggle. Other prominent figures included Kurur Neelakanthan Namboodiri and Mannathu Padmanabhan. Towards the end, M.K. Gandhi reached Vaikom and gave it the finishing flourish.

Leadership at A Critical Juncture

The satyagraha began on March 30 with the active support of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. But within a week all its leaders were behind bars. While George Joseph sought directions from Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari, he wrote to Periyar pleading with him to lead the satyagraha. Periyar was in the midst of political work when Joseph's missive reached him. As he was then the president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, Periyar handed over temporary charge to Rajaji before reaching Vaikom on April 13, 1924. From that date to the day of the victory celebrations, November 29, 1925, he was in the thick of the struggle giving it leadership at a critical juncture. Periyar presided over the satyagraha in the face of untold violence and indignity inflicted by the orthodox and the repression of the police. To mobilise support, he visited villages in and around Vaikom and delivered public speeches in several towns. His campaign tour stretched to Thiruvananthapuram and even further to Nagercoil. When the Kerala leaders asked for Gandhi's permission to make the satyagraha an all-India affair, Gandhi refused saying that volunteers from Tamil Nadu would keep it alive. The Mahatma was not wrong. As the British Resident said in his report to the government of Madras: "In fact, the movement would have collapsed long ago but for the support it has received from outside Travancore…" Historian T.K. Ravindran observes that Periyar's arrival gave "a new life to the movement". What was Periyar's role in the satyagraha? He made a cogent and compelling case for it. He used his wit and folk logic to punch holes in the argument of the orthodox. The speeches reported by the secret police and the press make for interesting reading nearly a century later. As his campaign met with an enthusiastic response, the government imposed prohibitory orders on him. He was externed from Kottayam district and then Kollam. Unmindful, he continued his campaign. An angry administration arrested him on May 21. Periyar refused to cooperate with the court saying

that the trial was no more than an eyewash and braved the magistrate to inflict any punishment. On May 22, he was awarded a month's simple imprisonment which he spent at Arookutty jail. On his release, Periyar went to Vaikom rather than to his home town of Erode much to the chagrin of the district magistrate who chided the police superintendent for this. As Periyar showed no sign of slackening, he was arrested 27 days later, on July 18. This time he was sentenced to four months of rigorous imprisonment and lodged in Thiruvananthapuram central jail. While fellow satyagrahis were treated as political prisoners, Periyar was denied this status. Rajaji wrote in a letter to The Hindu that Periyar was condemned to "rigorous imprisonment and irons and jail clothing and to deprive him of all society to which other satyagraha prisoners were rightly deemed entitled is totally unjustifiable". Infuriated by this discriminatory treatment, fellow prisoner Kesava Menon wrote to the government expressing objection but to no avail. The indignities continued until all the satyagrahis were released when the minor king Chithira Tirunal ascended the throne. Periyar continued his campaign in Vaikom apart from Nedunganda and Nagercoil. On September 10, he returned to Erode where he was again arrested — but this time by the British Indian police for a seditious speech delivered earlier. It was but a ploy to keep him away from Vaikom.

At the Forefront

Periyar was in the forefront of every aspect of the struggle. As president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee he arranged for a contribution of ₹1,000. He was part of every consultative meeting, peace committee, campaign party, etc., including the eight-member deputation constituted to meet the Diwan. Every major personality who came to Vaikom met with Periyar. This included Swami Shraddhananda of the Arya Samaj. Rajaji met Periyar in prison before proceeding to Vaikom. Gandhi too consulted him during his visit. Periyar had received Gandhi at Erode (March 8, 1925) on his way to Vaikom, joining him later at Varkala on March 12. The police superintendent records that Periyar was present in the small closed-door meeting of Gandhi with Sree Narayana Guru. Periyar recalled on many occasions that Gandhi had consulted him before his all-important meeting with Maharani Regent. It should be added that his wife Nagammal and his sister S.R. Kannammal were with him for much of the agitation, apart from offering satyagraha themselves. When, following an agreement between Gandhi and the police, the prohibition order against Periyar which had been in place for over a year was withdrawn, Gandhi wrote in Young India (April 23, 1925): "The reader will be glad to learn that the Travancore Government have... withdrawn the prohibition order against Sjt. Ramaswamy Naicker..." The satyagraha ended in partial victory in November 1925: three out of four streets were thrown open. Nevertheless, it was an important step. Final victory came 11 years later with the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936. By that time not only had Periyar become a bitter critic of Gandhi, but even his views on satyagraha changed. Periyar had arrived at Vaikom, on invitation, and had given a new life to a sagging movement. He was jailed twice, and was the only person to be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. From available evidence we know that he visited Vaikom seven times. Of the 114 days that he devoted to the struggle he languished in prison for 74 days. Apart from being the only leader from outside the State to be invited to the victory celebrations, he was even asked to preside over it. No wonder, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, the great journalist and labour leader, called him the Vaikom Veerar, the hero of Vaikom, even at the time of the struggle.

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Making Capital Out Of Political Rivalry (K. Venkateshwarlu - Senior Journalist Based In Hyderabad)

➔ After maintaining secrecy over the future of Amaravati for months and allowing confusion to prevail, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has finally revealed what is in his mind. By hinting at the establishment of three capitals, citing the South Africa example, Mr. Reddy has made it clear that he is not in favour of grandiose plans lined up for Amaravati by his predecessor, N. Chandrababu Naidu. If Mr. Reddy means what he has announced in Andhra Pradesh Assembly about having Amaravati, Visakhapatnam and Kurnool as the legislative, executive and judicial capitals respectively, it is going to be a rather radical move that raises many questions. Can a capital city be divided into three or more pieces and spread across the State based on regional and other considerations? Can the ruling party of the day play with the idea of a State capital, an enduring symbol of identity for people, and keep shuffling it on political grounds? Should a huge mandate mean a licence to tinker with anything, with scant regard to continuity in governance? And what if a rival political party comes to power later and reverses the three capitals proposal midway?

Wait for A Capital

Such a move by Mr. Reddy would mean that people of Andhra Pradesh have to wait for more time to realise their dream of having a place that could be called a capital. When the Telugu-speaking Andhra State was carved out of the composite Madras State in 1953, Kurnool was made the capital and many people had to move out of the then-Madras city. Three years later, in 1956, the erstwhile Hyderabad State was merged with the Andhra State, including Rayalaseema, to form Andhra Pradesh with Hyderabad as capital. And, just when people began settling down in Hyderabad, investing their time and resources, showing their enterprise and entrepreneurial skills, the agitation for separate Telangana State began, triggering a wave of insecurity. Following the creation of Telangana in 2014, just when people in Andhra Pradesh thought their search for a capital was over with Amaravati, Mr. Reddy tossed up the three-capital idea. No one opposes decentralisation of administration and development. But in gravitating towards a three-capital idea, Mr. Reddy appears to be using it to settle political scores with his predecessor. There could be no other reason as Mr. Reddy has floated his idea a full five-and-half years after the tumultuous bifurcation left a truncated Andhra Pradesh without a capital. As Leader of the Opposition in the previous State Assembly, Mr. Reddy did not oppose the location or structure of the capital, leave alone demanding three capitals. He avoided visiting Amaravati even when a section of farmers in the region protested. There was no mention of the three-capital idea in YSR Congress Party (YSRCP)'s manifesto either. So, to find fault with the choice and contours of the capital now looks belated and motivated. Further, thousands of farmers who gave away their land are now in a fix. Yes, it is true that the Siva Ramakrishnan Committee, constituted by the Central government to suggest choices for the capital, did not favour one 'super-capital' and pitched for decentralised development. But the panel also never said that there should be a string of capitals across the State as is being interpreted now. Perhaps, it was for this reason that the government went in for a fresh committee headed by former IAS officer G.N. Rao to get a report in sync with its thinking. It came as no surprise that the committee's report had all the points made by Mr. Reddy in the Assembly, two days earlier! This committee suggested that Andhra Pradesh should have a High Court in Kurnool, with a bench each in Visakhapatnam and Amaravati; and an Assembly in Amaravati, which also conducts a few sessions in

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Visakhapatnam. The proposal promises to be a logistical nightmare with officials frequently having to hop from one city to another.

Naidu's Vision and Fallacies

At the same time, no one disputes the fact that Mr. Naidu had dumped the Sivaramakrishnan Committee report and its objections to locating the capital in the Vijayawada-Guntur-Tenali-Mangalagiri stretch of land — a fertile stretch. He bulldozed the panel's warnings and went ahead to build a 'dream capital' at the very place. Mr. Naidu's vision was that of a capital as grand as Singapore or any other contemporary capital city with characteristics like iconic public buildings and multiple cities within a city. Mr. Naidu wanted the capital to be a robust growth engine that would attract investments, promote tourism and create innumerable jobs, like Hyderabad closer home, Bengaluru and Mumbai. Through Amaravati, Mr. Naidu thought his name would remain etched in public memory forever. In hindsight, Mr. Naidu seems to have gone for an overkill, pooling in a whopping 33,000 acres for the capital and taking his own sweet time to draw a master plan, for which he paid a heavy price and lost badly in the election. There is also a charge made by YSRCP leaders that lot of 'insider trading' happened and Mr. Naidu's supporters benefited. The point here is, leaving aside Amaravati's scale and size, a centrally located capital has already come into existence with the completion of Secretariat, Assembly and High Court buildings. Should not a government that appears to be sensitive to extravagant public expenditure capitalise on this infrastructure, instead of creating something new in various cities at an enormous cost? At a time when political rivals of conflicting ideologies have come together to form a government in a neighbouring State based on a Common Minimum Programme, is it too much to expect something like CMP on a capital city?

Strengthening Grassroots Democracy (Vignesh Karthik Is A Doctoral Researcher at The King's India Institute, King's College London)

➔ It's been more than two decades since the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments were passed by Parliament, which accorded constitutional status to local administration bodies across India. Yet, the Tamil Nadu government delayed holding rural local body elections, due in 2016, by three years. This unconstitutional delay started when the Madras High Court cancelled the notification put forward by the State government citing irregularities in it. The reasons cited for subsequent postponements revolved around delimitation and carving out new districts. After resorting to the infamous ordinance route to extend the tenure of the Special Officers of local bodies and some back and forth on the means of electing mayors and municipal chairmen, the State will now see elections being held for rural local bodies alone in two phases on December 27 and 30. The elections to urban local bodies are expected to be notified soon, which in itself raises questions on the constitutional and moral validity of the time gap between rural and urban local body elections.

Social Justice Ramifications

On the question of inclusiveness, in February 2016, a few months before the notification for local body elections was put forward, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously passed the much-needed bill that accorded 50% reservation to women in the local bodies, raising the quota from 33%. Moreover, reservations are in place for the depressed castes. A delay, therefore, has social justice ramifications too, a principle central to the socio-political

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur

history of Tamil Nadu. Local body elections serve as a means to both strengthen political parties' organisational structures and in enabling them to stay closely connected with the voters. The numerous opportunities in terms of official posts that open up through local body elections serve as an opportunity for political parties to give a chance to party workers from multiple backgrounds to partake in government functioning. Narendra Subramanian, a Professor of Political Science at McGill University, argues that such broad-based accommodation results in 'organisational pluralism', wherein, with intra-party pluralism, a given party's engagement with society changes its orientation towards an atmosphere of tolerance. Put otherwise, in a diverse society like Tamil Nadu, one can argue that the presence of local bodies serves as a means to usher in societal syncretism through broad-based representation. On another note, local bodies provide opportunities for the emergence of leaders at the local level outside of political parties as well. Taking stock of the multifarious benefits stemming out of the existence and functioning of local bodies to all the stakeholders involved, the need for sterner fixing of accountability and instituting checks in the system to avoid any delays in the time ahead is only more urgent.

Jharkhand Signals

➔ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s defeat in Jharkhand at the hands of the Congress-Jharkhand Mukti Morcha-Rashtriya Janata Dal alliance, seven months after it won 51.6% votes in the Lok Sabha election, follows a now-familiar pattern. The BJP does much better in Lok Sabha elections than in Assembly elections if one goes by the outcomes in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Haryana over the last year. Jharkhand, like Maharashtra, is also an example of the increasing distrust between the BJP and allies. The BJP's ally, All Jharkhand Students Union, parted ways with it following the Lok Sabha election, contributing to its defeat. Its unyielding approach towards allies has a certain appeal, but many communities and interest groups find it as hubris, for good reasons. Conflicting demands of social groups are easier to overcome for the BJP when it manages to place itself as the sole torch-bearer of national interest and pride in Parliament elections. Nationalist bluster has limited appeal in State elections, and questions of livelihood and ethnic autonomy significantly influence voter choices, it appears. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity and rhetorical flourish may still win elections for himself, but State elections have different dynamics. In Jharkhand, outgoing Chief Minister Raghubar Das's unpopularity made the BJP's downfall quite predictable. Mr. Modi tried to make up for the governance deficiency by making communal appeals during the campaign. He insinuated that only Muslims were behind the violence in protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. The BJP bit the dust nevertheless. Mr. Das, the first non-tribal CM of the State that was formed with the objective of accelerating welfare for indigenous communities, ran a government that only strengthened the perception that the BJP had little sympathy for them. Simultaneously, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar also sought to deepen religious fault lines in the State, between Christian and non-Christian tribals on the one hand, and against Muslims in the name of cow protection on the other. The State witnessed some abhorrent incidents of mob lynching under the BJP. To top it all, the BJP failed to keep its own house in order. Long-time party loyalist Saryu Rai resigned from the party and defeated Mr. Das. The win is a breather for the Opposition, which is struggling to formulate a nationwide and coherent strategy against the BJP on the CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens. But it may not be accurate to interpret the outcome as the sign of any countrywide mood against the BJP. There is no proof yet that the Opposition has gained enough momentum to challenge the BJP's defining ability

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to build up mega campaigns on sentimental issues and eclipse material questions and diversity in aspirations.

South Has Higher Prevalence of Mental Disorders

- ➔ A study by the India State-level Disease Burden Initiative, published in The Lancet Psychiatry last week, found that 197.3 million Indians (one in every seven) were suffering from mental disorders in 2017. The study describes the prevalence of mental disorders in Indian states between 1990 and 2017. The 197.3 million in 2017 included 45.7 million cases with depressive disorders and 44.9 million with anxiety disorders. Among the disorders with the highest prevalence, idiopathic developmental intellectual disability affects most Indians, at 4.5 per cent, followed by depressive disorders (3.3), anxiety disorders (3.3) and conduct disorders (0.8). Among depressive disorders, the prevalence is the highest in Tamil Nadu (4,796 per 100,000), followed by Andhra Pradesh (4,563), Telangana (4,356), Odisha (4,159) and Kerala (3,897). In case of anxiety disorders, the prevalence is highest in Kerala (4,035), followed by Manipur (3,760), West Bengal (3,480), Himachal Pradesh (3,471) and Andhra Pradesh (3,462). For conduct disorders, Jharkhand and Bihar have the highest prevalence, at 983 and 974 per 100,000 people. At 6,339 and 5,503 per lakh respectively, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have the highest prevalence of idiopathic developmental intellectual disability.

- ➔ The study finds that roughly one in seven Indians, or 197 million persons, suffered from mental disorders of varying severity in 2017. These include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, idiopathic developmental intellectual disability, conduct disorders, and autism. Importantly, the contribution of mental disorders to the disability adjusted life year (DALY) — the sum of total years of life lost and years lived with disability — has doubled between 1990 and 2017 increasing from 2.5% to 4.7%. Mental disorders were the second leading cause of disease burden in terms of years lived with disability (YLDs) and the sixth leading cause of disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) in the world in 2017. In total, 45.7 million people had depressive disorders, as one in three years lost due to a mental disorder was due to depression. This was followed by anxiety — a total of 44.9 million people suffered from it and it accounted for the loss of 1 in 5 years. In its State-wise analysis, the study divides different States into three categories on the basis of their socio-demographic index (SDI), i.e. low, medium and high SDI States. The SDI is a composite measure of per-capita income, mean education, and fertility rate in women younger than 25 years and is calculated on a scale of one. Prevalence of depressive disorders was highest in Tamil Nadu (loss of 836 years per 1 lakh population), Kerala (loss of 641 years), Goa (loss of 626 years) and Telangana (loss of 756 years) in the high SDI State group and Andhra Pradesh (loss of 793 years) in the middle SDI State group. Similarly, anxiety disorders were found to be more common in Kerala (loss of 383 years per 1 lakh population), Himachal Pradesh (loss of 329 years), Tamil Nadu (loss of 325 years), Karnataka (loss of 324 years), Telangana (loss of 324 years), and Maharashtra (loss of 324 years) in the high SDI State group and Andhra Pradesh (loss of 328 years), Manipur (loss of 360 years), and West Bengal (loss of 331 years) in the middle SDI State group.

The Return of The Secular (Rajeev Bhargava - Political Theorist with The Centre for The Study of Developing Societies)

- ➔ Gandhi's contribution to an everyday understanding of secularism is massive, one different from at least three other understandings. First, the political secularism of Western Europe

and North America in which some form of separation between church and state is required to defend equality and individual liberty but has no room for the idea of fraternity or community, crucial in deeply diverse societies. Second, the more legal and philosophical, constitutional secularism of India, one that is immensely complex, nuanced and comprehensive, cognisant of deep diversity as well as oppression within communities. Here, the state is required to maintain a principled distance from all religious communities. This is concerned with preventing inter-religious domination as much as fighting religiously grounded hierarchies and fanaticism within religions. Finally, the secularism practised in recent times by most political parties in India, what I have called 'party-political secularism'. This secularism does not really deserve to be called so because it is unprincipled and opportunistic, plays footsie with the most orthodox, bigoted and regressive elements of all religions, is concerned solely with seeking and maintaining power, and is willing to engineer riots or capitalise on inter-communal estrangement. In contrast, Gandhi made secularism simple. All religious communities inhabiting a particular territory must live with continuing ease and comfort with one another. This is a people-dependent notion, one that Gandhi believed was already part of popular Indian consciousness but jeopardised in modern times by communal politics. To counter it, he felt, support was needed from the state that is not partial to any one particular religion. Moreover, whenever any estrangement or hostility ensued, then the state must help restore communal harmony. To perform its primary duty of maintaining fraternity, to prevent political alienation, the state must distance itself equally from all religions.

Against Discriminatory Laws

It was heartening to find so many young women and men all fired up about this Gandhian vision of secular India, and be out on the streets to defend their idea of constitutional secularism. Four things about what they conveyed are noteworthy. First, the fundamental injustice of policies with unambiguous discriminatory intent. This is unconstitutional. And offends the dignity not only of those discriminated against but also of every citizen in the polity. In major nationwide protests in which countless people participated, it was made clear that any law or policy that discriminates on the basis of religion is not acceptable. Besides, the whole idea of proving one's citizenship by producing documents before government officials is abhorrent — anyone born in India must be presumed to be an Indian citizen and should not be compelled to demonstrate this. Many protesting students are convinced that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) is discriminatory. Article 14 provides for equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Suppose that a foreign national from Europe commits a grave crime in India. Should he be treated differently from other Indians? Would the law be differentially applied simply because he is, say, a European Christian? No. Analogously, suppose that illegal immigrants fleeing persecution in their own country enter Indian territory, need to be identified and investigated for possible deportation. A uniform criminal law should apply here too. Either all should be given refuge or all deported by due process of law. No one within the territory of India, Indian citizen or foreign national, must be treated differently. Second, a rejection of the politics of hate and revenge. Such policies, the peaceful protesters seemed to suggest, disrupt peace and stability by generating a vicious cycle of resentment and mutual hostility. To be sure, conflicts and skirmishes have not been uncommon between communities in the past, but a deep division between them occurred only when a pernicious ethno-nationalist ideology was imported into India in the 19th century, with tragic results in 1947. Young people appeared to have realised that leaders

of the current government have not learned any lessons from those dark events and continue with policies aimed at consolidating a pan-Hindu identity defined by hostility to the 'other'. Third, the public acknowledgement by young Hindus of the contribution of Muslims to Indian culture and civilisation, to constructions of Indian notions of civility. Young women and men asserted that their religious identity is not defined against other religions. One can be Hindu without being anti-Muslim and vice versa. Indian citizens cohabit a shared social and public space not through mutual toleration but by actively accepting one another, and are committed to participating in each other's suffering and destiny. They conveyed that they shall not tolerate attempts to breach civic friendship.

Composite Culture

Likewise, norms of public etiquette, civility and refinements in culture have been shaped in India by multiple religious traditions in which Muslims have played a prominent role. For example, the qawwali and the ghazal are as much a part of our culture as the bhajan. Are not some of the greatest bhajans in Hindi films written by Sahir Ludhianvi and Javed Akhtar, sung by Mohammad Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar and others to compositions by Naushad and A.R. Rehman? It is not for nothing that even a known Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sympathiser, the actor Paresh Rawal, was compelled to remark that he was stunned by the 'idiocy' of the demand that Firoz Khan not be allowed to teach Sanskrit at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). There is a whole tradition of such scholarship alive today that harks back to Dara Shikoh and Amir Khusro, and continues in Modern India with renowned Sanskrit scholars such as Mohammed Hanif Khan Shastri and Pandit Ghulam Dastagir. Finally, the protesters made it clear that an obsession with religious identity takes focus away from pressing issues of everyday life. The reappearance of secularism in Indian public discourse, initiated by young Indian students, is surely a matter of relief and joy to those who aspire to protect India's diverse cultural heritage, defend India's Constitution and wish every Indian to have a better standard of living.

Return to The Homeland

➔ The exclusion of Sri Lankan Tamils figured prominently in the debate on the Citizenship Amendment Bill, and the crucial support extended by the AIADMK to the government in Parliament has handed the opposition in Tamil Nadu a stick to beat the ruling party in the state. About 1 lakh Tamils from Sri Lanka live in India, including some 60,000 in camps across Tamil Nadu. These refugees are mostly Hindu, and are of both Sri Lankan and Indian origin. The AIADMK claims Home Minister Amit Shah has promised Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami that the question of the Tamil refugees would be considered soon.

When Did the Refugees from Sri Lanka Arrive in India?

Tamils who came from Sri Lanka can be separated into those who came before 1983 and those who came after, when the separatist movement in the island nation took a violent turn followed by a series of anti-Tamil riots. Most of the 1 lakh documented Sri Lankan illegal immigrants who live in Tamil Nadu today, fled this ethnic conflict. Those who reached India before 1983 were mostly Indian-origin Tamils whose forefathers migrated to Sri Lanka a century previously, mainly to work in the tea plantations. In 1964, Prime Ministers Lal Bahadur Shastri and Sirimavo Bandaranaike signed an agreement to allow some 9,75,000 people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka, who had citizenship of neither country, to become

citizens of the country of their choice. Many of those who arrived in India until 1982 got legal accommodation; however, the process was not comprehensive, and was ultimately not completed. Some 4.6 lakh repatriations from Sri Lanka have been officially recorded so far, besides thousands of Tamils of Sri Lankan origin who sought asylum in India. Some of those who arrived from Sri Lanka managed to travel onward to countries of Europe; some others married Indians and resolved their identity issues. The arrivals from Sri Lanka dwarf the arrivals from Burma (about 1.4 lakh from 1963 to 1989, when it was stopped) and Vietnam (a total 2,055 repatriates between 1975 and 1980), government records show. Arrivals from Sri Lanka turned into a flood after 1983.

What Are the Conditions in The Tamil Nadu Camps Like?

About 19,000 Sri Lankan families, comprising 60,000 individuals, live in 107 camps in Tamil Nadu. Some 10,000 of these inmates are children below the age of eight, according to latest available data from August 2019. "Technically, those who arrived by boat and other informal, illegal channels during the war in Sri Lanka are considered illegal immigrants, not refugees," said S C Chandrahasan, head of the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OFERR), the only nongovernment agency that is allowed to work in the camps and have free access to the inmates. Most of these "illegal immigrants" reached Tamil Nadu in the 1980s and 1990s. Thereafter, a few hundreds came over the years — until arrivals spurted during the last leg of war, which ended with the final defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. At least 20 per cent of these refugees claim an Indian origin on the basis of Sri Lankan birth certificates that identify them as "Indian Tamil", and documents issued by Indian authorities that trace their links to Indian grandparents or other ancestors. Dwellings in the so-called refugee camps are in most cases a single room that was allotted to a family when it reached India in 1983 or later, and where they have continued to live ever since. Most of these camps are in a shamble. No rent is charged from the residents, and they get rice for 57 paise a kilo. Each member of a family aged eight and older is eligible for 12 kg of rice every month. The head of the family gets an allowance of ₹1,000 every month, the spouse gets ₹750, and children below the age of 12, ₹400 each. Besides the 60,000 in the camps, about 30,000 Sri Lankan Tamils live on their own, and are required to periodically report to the nearest police station. They do, however, have greater freedom of movement than those who live in the camps, which have a system of attendance — inmates of camps cannot go outside Tamil Nadu, and require permission to even travel out of the district. A VIP visit in the vicinity of the camps almost always brings interrogation and inquiries from the Q-Branch of the police and central intelligence agencies. The relatively free atmosphere in the refugee camps changed permanently after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

What Do the Refugees from Sri Lanka Expect from The Government?

They expect citizenship of India — because they fear persecution and violence at the hands of the Colombo government and the Sinhala Buddhist majority if they return to Sri Lanka, and because they are unable to go anywhere else (such as to a European country). Also, most of the Indian-origin Tamils have ancestral roots, relatives, and property in India. Many could have got Indian citizenship under the Shastri-Bandaranaike Pact if they had chosen to come to India before the ethnic riots broke out in Sri Lanka. OFERR's Chandrahasan, who is himself of Sri Lankan origin, and the son of S J V Chelvanayakam, a prominent Sri Lankan Tamil leader and a torchbearer of the Tamil rights movement in that country, however, believes that those who live in the camps should return to Sri Lanka. It is better for them to "become one among

the few millions in Sri Lanka, instead of being one among over a billion population in India", Chandrahasan said. "There is no process in India to give them citizenship, and these camps were built as a temporary arrangement for people in distress, to make them feel safe until such time as they could return to Sri Lanka after normalcy was restored. The European model of giving asylum and citizenship to refugees works on individual cases. That is impossible in India, as there are thousands of Tamil refugees," he said. A dozen-odd refugees whom The Indian Express met last week disagreed with Chandrahasan. Most of those in the camps have nothing left in Sri Lanka, no property or community to go back to, they said. The situation of the Tamil refugees has been a fairly emotive issue in Tamil Nadu. DMK chief M K Stalin has in recent statements and speeches repeatedly attacked the AIADMK for voting in favour of the citizenship Bill that did not include a provision for Sri Lankan Tamils, and recalled the efforts of DMK regimes to make them eligible for government schemes. The AIADMK, which finds itself on the defensive, has tried to counter-question the DMK for its failure in get citizenship for the Sri Lankan Tamils despite having been part of the UPA government at the Centre for a decade.

Principle of Discrimination Based on Faith Will Be Difficult to Limit

What Were the Indian Ideas and Rules of Citizenship in The Constitution Before the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019?

The Articles (5-11) on citizenship in the Constitution of India were formulated specifically for the immediate aftermath of the Partition, leaving it to Parliament to enact the law on citizenship, which it did in 1955. The Constituent Assembly held the principle of jus soli (citizenship based on birth on the soil of a country) to be the more "enlightened modern civilised" principle, as compared to the "racial" principle of jus sanguinis (citizenship based on descent); although citizenship by descent, as well as registration and naturalisation, also found recognition in The Citizenship Act of 1955. The law on Indian citizenship is located within a constitutional framework that confers equal rights on all citizens, and does not discriminate between them on grounds of caste, creed, tribe or gender.

But If the New Citizenship Law Does Not Impact Indian Muslims, Should the Exclusion of Muslims From Pakistan, Bangladesh, And Afghanistan Bother Indians?

It is true that the CAA per se does not impact Indian Muslims. When twinned with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), however, it could adversely impact not only Indian Muslims, but also poor Indians of all faiths. Even if (given the conflicting signals from the government) the NRC is not implemented, and the differentiation is only in relation to illegal migrants in the CAA, the very introduction of the principle of religious discrimination is cause for concern. Once the principle is admitted, that discrimination on religious grounds is permissible in law, it may not be possible to limit or contain its application to other realms as well.

How Has the Switch to Jus Sanguinis Been Significant in The Great Citizenship Debates of The World?

The direction of change varies. When Donald Trump became President of the United States, he did indeed signal a questioning of the idea of birth right citizenship. On the other hand, Germany has moved in a more inclusive direction, combining elements of both jus soli as well as jus sanguinis. So there are historical fluctuations and hybridisations. The Indian law

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of citizenship recognizes both — but through an amendment enacted when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister, jus soli was undermined in favour of jus sanguinis, through the exclusion of people born in India, but with one parent who was an illegal migrant at the time of their birth. The new amendment consolidates this shift, introducing an explicitly religious criterion into a hitherto religion-neutral law.

Did the Collapse of Countries Such As The USSR And Yugoslavia Feed The Idea Of Ethnicity/Race And Nudge India Towards An Exclusive Idea Of Citizenship?

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the break-up of Yugoslavia were a long time ago. The hyper-nationalism and xenophobia in countries experiencing populist regimes have been attributed to the perceived excesses of globalisation. But the fact is that we have been in what is called a post-multicultural world since at least the mid-1990s. The impetus for the decline of multiculturalism in Europe had different sources. From left to right, it ranged from the broadly left dissatisfaction with identity politics as a distraction from the project of equality to the concern that it had failed to improve the condition of minorities to the populist worry that being over-solicitous of minority cultures was threatening the majority's way of life. The Indian case is, however, distinct from all of these. The great civilizational diversity of this country makes imperative an inclusive architecture of governance. This found powerful expression in the freedom movement, in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly, and in our Constitution. Even if the word 'secular' was a later addition, India's Constitution is a document that builds the imperatives of diversity and pluralism into the architectural design of how we are governed, from reservations for historically disadvantaged groups to cultural rights for religious minorities and even the federal arrangement initially based on language. The questioning of this architecture has less to do with the outside world and more to do with our own polity.

What Other Examples Are There In The World Of Countries Asking All Citizens To Prove Citizenship At Government Windows, In The Way That Some Fear The NRC Might Do? Does That Not Mean Assuming Everyone Is Illegal Unless Proven Otherwise?

I am not aware of any example in the world in which an entire population has been asked to prove its citizenship. Even national ID cards have been controversial. In 2006, the United Kingdom legislated National ID cards, to be linked to a National Identity Register, carrying 50 categories of information on every citizen. Among the significant objections were concerns about discrimination expressed by black and South Asian citizens. Significantly, the Commission for Racial Equality said that this could result in a two-tiered racial structure, in which British ethnic minorities may be obliged (by the state or by employers) to register while white British people may not. The Act was repealed in 2011, and the data on the National Identity Register was destroyed within a month.

Based on The Experience in Assam, How Much Might A Nationwide NRC Exercise Cost?

The cost of the Assam NRC was ₹1,600 crore, and 50,000 officials were deployed to enrol 3.3 crore applicants. We now know that it ended up excluding 1.9 million people, mostly genuine citizens of all religious affiliations. If we take this as the basis of a back-of-the-envelope

calculation, counting only the Indian electorate of 879 million voters, an all-India NRC would entail an expenditure of ₹4.26 lakh crore, and would require 1.33 crore officials to conduct it.

Can the NRC Be "Done Again", As Is Being Said in Assam's Case? How Does A Repeat of The Exercise Impact the Credibility of The State?

The huge margin of error — especially exclusion errors — obviously dents seriously the credibility of such an exercise. But there can also be errors of inclusion. As Kamal Sadiq's book Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries showed, there is a greater likelihood of poor illegal migrants holding proper documents than of poor nationals. Migrants, because that's the condition for their survival, have to organise papers on arrival, through what Sadiq calls "networks of kinship" and "networks of profit". This is what he describes as "documentary citizenship". Essentially, it means that documented non-nationals (illegal migrants) may be able to prove their citizenship even as undocumented nationals are unable to do so. The dangers of stripping legitimate citizens of their citizenship should surely outweigh any advantage of 'detecting' illegal foreigners. Credibility is also called into question when the authenticity of documents issued by the state is impugned. The courts have been known to cast doubts on the legitimacy of the citizenship of Indian passport holders, on the grounds that a passport could have been acquired by misrepresentation and fraud.

A Decision Without Forethought (Jaiveer Shergill - Supreme Court Lawyer and National Spokesperson, INC)

➔ Every cause has an effect and that is why every government decision must be preceded by careful thought about its potential repercussions. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 has had huge consequences on both the domestic and foreign policy front. In India, widespread protests that began in the Northeast are now raging across the country. On the international front, soon after the protests broke out, two Bangladesh ministers cancelled their visit to India, the Japanese Prime Minister postponed his visit to the country and the annual India-Japan summit was cancelled. From the perspective of India's ambitious development plans and strategic diplomacy, the question that arises is whether the Central government factored in the ramifications of the CAA on India's Act East Policy and its potential side effects on the country's relationship with foreign stakeholders heavily invested in the Northeast.

Repercussions on Various Fronts

Apart from being the unique region that links India with ASEAN nations, the Northeast is also the springboard for India's engagement with Southeast Asia. This is precisely why New Delhi roped in Tokyo to fulfil its ambitious plan of expanding its global footprints via development in the Northeast. As part of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, Japan has been investing in the Northeast in a big way. Recently Tokyo decided to invest ₹13,000 crore in different projects in the Northeast. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is actively engaged in building Northeast road network connectivity, water supply projects and economic modernisation of the region. It will be financing the construction of India's longest bridge between Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya. Japan has contributed official development assistance loans for the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement

Project. Private Japanese organisations are also financing a host of developmental projects in the region. It is but natural that the CAA protests and Internet shutdowns in the region would have come as a huge shock to Japan and its investment plans in the region which hinge on stability and a business-friendly environment conducive. Given these considerations, the government could have done well to analyse how such a decision would affect the economic development of the Northeast. Second, in case Japan has a rethink on these development projects, will it do so keep in mind only the Northeast or the rest of India too? JICA is involved in various big-ticket infrastructure projects in Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Odisha, etc. Third, the volatility of the Northeast can possibly be a setback to the collaborative efforts between India and Japan in providing an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Fourth, besides being a development partner, Japan is also a member of the Quad, which came into existence to counter Chinese economic prowess and unlock India's potential in the Indo-Pacific. Last and most importantly, when Kashmir is already volatile, can India afford to open another frontier of vulnerability in the Northeast? Clearly, the government did not take various stakeholders into confidence while taking this decision. The proof of messy diplomatic pudding is in the eating as the UN has described the CAA as "fundamentally discriminatory". The U.S., the U.K., Canada and others have issued travel advisories to those visiting the Northeast. Why did the government not utilise diplomatic channels to put forth its views before the stakeholders in the international community? Had it done this, it could have avoided the embarrassment it is facing today. It is high time that decision-makers of the BJP learnt the basic difference between raw muscularity and successful diplomacy before taking such measures.

Viewed with Suspicion

The blunders of the BJP government are straining and staining India's foreign policy. India has been described as the "Internet shutdown capital of the world". Senior political leaders are under detention, Parliament is passing laws to grant religion-based citizenship to migrants of selected countries, and the youth of the country is out on the streets protesting. Will all this not shake investors' confidence and dent the ease of doing business in India? The Indian economy is already going through a rough phase and the loss of investor confidence will only add to our woes. At the global level, India has always been respected for its diversity and inclusive character. It is because of parochial decisions like the CAA that India will now join the rank of nations which are viewed with suspicion because of their political and economic climate. Instead of being on an expansion mode, thanks to the government India will now be on an explanatory mode.

Mixed Signals on NRC

➔ Addressing a rally at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that there have been no discussions on an all-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) since the BJP-led government assumed power in 2014. He said that the NRC was implemented in Assam alone following the Supreme Court's orders. Is this statement accurate?

Claims and Counterclaims

On November 20, 2019, in a reply to a question by Rajya Sabha MP Swapan Dasgupta, Home Minister Amit Shah said that the NRC exercise would be carried out across India. He said that the gazette notification of September 7, 2015, which was made in the case of Assam, would

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be applicable to the rest of India as well. The Prime Minister's remarks on the "nationwide NRC" therefore contradict what the Home Minister has been saying on the issue. "Nationwide NRC" also finds a mention in the BJP's 2019 election manifesto. Under the section 'Combating Infiltration', the manifesto clearly mentions that NRC will be implemented across the country. The manifesto says, "There has been a huge change in the cultural and linguistic identity of some areas due to illegal immigration, resulting in an adverse impact on local people's livelihood and employment. We will expeditiously complete the National Register of Citizens process in these areas on priority. In future we will implement the NRC in a phased manner in other parts of the country". The Prime Minister also denied the existence of detention centres in India. In response to a question by Md. Nadimul Haque in the Rajya Sabha on December 11, 2019, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, said that the Central government had circulated a document titled Model Detention/Holding Centre Manual to all State and Union Territories on January 9, 2019. He also revealed in another answer in the House that, as on November 22, 2019, Assam already had six functioning detention centres with 988 foreigners lodged in them. In response to Mr. Haque, Mr. Rai also said that "detention centres are set up by State Governments/ Union Territory Administration (UTs) as per requirement to detain illegal migrants or convicted foreigners pending deportation to their native country. Instructions have been issued to all State Governments/UTs from time to time for setting up the detention centres... and [States/UTs] will not require any specific approval from the [MHA] for setting up of such detention centres". He also said that the government has approved a detention centre at Goalpara in Assam at a budget of ₹46.5 crore. While referring to opposition among a section of the political class to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, Mr. Modi said, "The very people opposing citizenship rights to refugees had supported in 2004 a move to deprive Jammu and Kashmir's women of rights if they married someone outside the State." His reference was perhaps to the Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Residents (Disqualification) Bill, 2004. This contentious issue was adjudicated upon by the J&K High Court in 2002 in State and others v. Dr Susheela Sawhney. In that judgment the court said that "a daughter of a permanent resident marrying a non-permanent resident will not lose the status of permanent resident of the state of Jammu and Kashmir". The Peoples Democratic Party, which was in a coalition government with the Congress in 2004, brought the said Bill to overturn the decision. The Bill passed 47-34 in the Lower House in the then State of J&K. However, partly due to opposition by the Congress, it lapsed in the Upper House. Peerzada Muhammad Sayeed, the Congress chief for J&K, was reported to have said: "There are thousands of students studying in various States and some have married there. If we enact this law it would create problems for them. Legally and morally, the Congress will not be part of any Bill which is anti-women".

A Hindu Critique of Hindutva (Avijit Pathak - Professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

Transcending Limiting Identities

Yes, there is a Left-Ambedkarite version of secularism, and many of us — university-educated/metropolitan intellectuals and civil society activists — are reasonably free from the burden of the conditioned mind that religious orthodoxy causes. Yet, a careful look at India's culture and society would indicate that religion is all-pervasive: it can be seen in beliefs,

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rituals as well as in the dangerous stereotypes we nurture about others. Hence, the mere act of debunking religion will not help. We need to rescue religion from zealots and rediscover the spirit of religiosity as, to use Rabindranath Tagore's language, our 'surplus'. It is in this context that as someone born in a Hindu family, I would like to critique Hindutva or, for that matter, any deterministic/one dimensional doctrine of religion. This critique emanates not from scientism or soulless secularism, but from deep religiosity, the urge to transcend limiting identities. The kind of Hindutva we see today is against some of the finest aspects of my religiosity that I learned as a Hindu. While the discourse of Hindutva with its hypermasculine nationalism is essentially monolithic and centralising, I have learned about the beauty of the elasticity of human consciousness and merger of multiple faiths and paths from the likes of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. While the doctrine of militant Hindutva is recklessly engaged in an act of 'othering' and stigmatising Muslims, I have learned about love, empathy and listening from M.K. Gandhi's remarkably nuanced engagement with Hinduism. Likewise, while Hindutva intensifies aggression, Mira's bhajans teach me that love and religiosity are not separate. The character of 'Anandamayee' that Tagore created in his classic novel Gora makes me see the enchanting power of maternity, the current that absorbs everything. And hence, I begin to see the hollowness in the assertion of brute masculinity seen in instances of mob lynching by zealots, which ruthlessly denies the possibility of an evolutionary journey towards what Sri Aurobindo regarded as the 'divine consciousness'. Yajnavalkya's conversation with Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad helps me conceive the depths of spirituality, the quest for the Eternal, and also helps me see the ugliness in a doctrine that reduces religion into mere identity politics, or a weapon for intensifying the narcissistic ego of the 'Hindu nation'. Engagement with the Bhagavad Gita acquires a different meaning. I see the ethos of niskam karma (or the spirit of work as an offering without selfish interests) in Gandhi's politico-spiritual pilgrimage to Noakhali in 1946, not in the calculative Machiavellian urge to build a temple at Ayodhya at the demolished site of the Babri Masjid. Moreover, there is a culture of conversation and argumentation in the broad tradition of Hinduism. While Nachiketa dared to converse with Yama, the proponents of Lokayata did argue with the followers of Vedanta. In a way, it is possible to be a Hindu with the spirit of pluralism and dialogue in our consciousness. Paradoxically, it is possible to be a Hindu, yet be a non-Hindu. This is why the ideology of Hindutva is not in conformity with religiosity as people's inner quest for moving towards a world of love and togetherness. We are passing through difficult times. First, as the CAA and the National Register of Citizens together indicate, the minority community has further been stigmatised. And in a society with a long history of the tension-ridden relationship between the two communities, the ghettoisation of space and mind has further erected a huge wall of separation. Hence, the danger is that the anger against the CAA might take a communal turn, and it is not impossible for the 'nationalist' media to project it as a conflict between 'patriotic' Hindus and 'problematic' Muslims. From Seelampur in Delhi to Aligarh Muslim University in Uttar Pradesh, these 'Muslim sites' might be immediately projected as 'war zones. And in a vicious cycle of humiliation and provocation, the minorities could feel more and more lonely.

A Culture of Communion

Majoritarian Hindutva is not merely against Muslims; it is no less hostile to those Hindus who think and live differently — while some would be castigated as 'leftists', 'pseudo secularists' and 'urban Naxals', the rest would be regarded as 'effeminate idealists' or 'Gandhian fools'. Therefore, in such a situation, it is important to try to evolve a culture of communion between

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the two communities, and fight together for a better world. However, the discourse of communalism or a politics based on exclusivist religious identity (and even though majority communalism is immensely destructive, minority communalism is no answer to it) is essentially against this spirit of communion. Likewise, a soulless secularism which fails to deal with the religious/spiritual quest doesn't succeed much in touching people's hearts for inspiring them to create a new moral politics for collective redemption. In troubled and directionless times, Gandhi could tap the therapeutic power of religiosity and move towards this communion. He could be a Hindu; yet, dialogic, experimental and elastic. In a way, as Nathuram Godse might have thought, he was also a non-Hindu. Likewise, I would imagine that a Muslim with true religiosity is equally eager to resist the attempt by the orthodox clergy or the fundamentalist elements to hijack the religious sphere. He/she ought to be inherently against the Talibanization of consciousness. Because true religiosity is the art of using the 'form' in order to be formless. Imagine a world where Kabir and Rumi, Gandhi and Maulana Azad, and Tagore and Nizamuddin Auliya work with us, become our educators, and inspire us to heal the world through the power of love and understanding. Even though in the age of dystopia it may appear to be impossible, it is a challenging task we ought to strive for. This is precisely the most important sadhana, or the meaning of being a 'Hindu' — a seeker who seeks to break the iron cage of Hindutva or, for that matter, any other fundamentalist doctrine.

Undoing Harms

➜ As the Centre tries to fend off criticism that its Citizenship (Amendment) Act excludes Muslims from its beneficial provisions and quell strident protests, it must look for ways to undo the incalculable harm caused by fears set off by the law. Indications that it is open to suggestions on the rules to implement the CAA are welcome. However, these should not be confined to the proposed rules. The government must heed the call for meaningful changes that would dispel fears gripping the country, especially minorities. The stated objective is the fast-tracking of applications from minorities from three Muslim-majority neighbourhood countries for citizenship by naturalisation. Can't this be achieved without violating the Constitution or its secular ideals? A first step would be to further amend the Act, even by an ordinance, to drop its religion-specific wording, and make it explicit that the benefit would be open to all undocumented migrants who can prove persecution in their home countries. For allowing a Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist or Parsi to apply for citizenship after staying in the country for six years, there is no need to bar Muslims from making a similar claim. It is only an enabling law and does not oblige the government to grant citizenship to anyone. And Muslims and atheists have been persecuted in these and other countries by authorities and dominant sections. Regarding others such as Sri Lankan refugees, the legal bar on their applying for citizenship stands out. A 2004 amendment to the citizenship law introduced a clause that 'illegal migrants' will not be eligible to apply for citizenship. The definition of 'illegal migrants' as those who arrived without valid travel documents includes refugees. A provision of the present CAA is to remove this 'illegal' tag from non-Muslim minorities from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dropping the reference to 'illegal migrants' will automatically enable any refugee to apply for citizenship, subject to the residential requirement. Therefore, a general enabling provision to allow a relaxation of the minimum residency requirement will serve the purpose of considering citizenship to any persecuted people. This would be non-discriminatory, without obligation to grant citizenship. Finally, India should enact a refugee law wherein the right to live a life without fear or

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confinement can be protected. If the fear is that people may seek permanent asylum, the UNHCR can work with them officially for their voluntary repatriation, and without rendering long-term refugee's ineligible for applying for citizenship. Finally, the government must end the process once the National Population Register is updated. It must give up the notion of a citizenship register. No good will come out of setting off a clamour for inclusion and panic over possible exclusion. That is a pain Indians of all persuasions can do without.

NPR: House-To-House Verification Planned

➔ The Narendra Modi government proposes to update the existing National Population Register, which already has an electronic database of more than 119 crore residents, by verifying the details of all respondents through house-to-house enumeration, according to an official manual on conducting the fresh NPR exercise. The NPR exercise has become controversial because the Citizenship Rules 2003 link the Population Register to the creation of a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) or National Register of Citizens. Coupled with the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which excludes Muslims, fears about an NPR-NRC have brought lakhs of people onto the streets in protest. Data for the NPR was first collected in 2010, and updated in 2015. The Modi Government has proposed that the next phase of NPR will be conducted along with Census exercise between April to September 2020. The enumerators, all government officials, will "modify and correct the demographic data items". They are also tasked with collecting mobile, voter card, Indian passport and driving licence numbers from residents. The manual requires the "inclusion of all new residents, new households found in the local area during the field work". The 2010 NPR form collected details on 15 parameters whereas a "pretest" form that was used to collect data on a trial basis from 30 lakh people in September this year, sought additional details on columns such as "place of birth of father and mother, last place of residence" etc. It also added details such as Aadhaar number, voter ID card number, mobile phone number and driving license number. The manual states that in cases where date of birth or age was not known, the enumerator could help the respondent by "stimulating her/his memory" with reference to historical events well known in the area such as a "war, flood, earthquake, change in political regime, etc."

Examples: First World War (1914-1918), Dandi March (1930), Quit India Movement (1942), Independence (1947), war with China (1962), war with Pakistan (1965), liberation of Bangladesh (1971), Asian Games (1982), India's first win in the cricket world cup (1983) etc.

1. The year of birth/age can also be ascertained with reference to the birth/age of another person in the same household or in the neighbouring household or that of well-known person in the village.
2. If a woman is not aware of her age, you will have to further probe to estimate it. One way is to find the date of birth of her eldest living child and her age at the time she gave birth. Subtract her age at the time of birth of her child to get a fair estimate of her year of birth.
3. If a woman is not able to tell her age at the time when the first child was born, try to ascertain her age at the time of marriage and the interval between her marriage and the birth of her eldest child.
4. If a woman does not know her age at marriage, try to find out the difference between her age from that of her husband whose year of birth may be known. Use this to record the woman's year of birth.

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5. If the respondent does not know the age of any member of the household and asking questions also does not help, you will have to estimate her/his age by using your best judgement.

Is Govt. Right in Denying NPR-NRC Link?

Claim: NPR Is Not the Basis Of NRC

Facts: NPR is indeed the basis for NRC or NRIC, as Section 14A of the Citizenship Act empowers the government to compulsorily register every citizen of India and issue an identity card and to maintain a 'National Register of Indian Citizens'. The citizenship register is generated out of the NPR database.
The Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Card) Rules, 2003, introduced the term 'Population Register' and said particulars collected in the population register shall be verified and scrutinised for the purpose of preparation and inclusion in the citizenship register. In other words, without NPR there can be no NRIC.

NPR Will Not Be Followed By NRC

It is possible for the government not to establish a citizenship register. The earlier NPR exercise done during UPA regime did not result in the creation of a citizenship database.
The Act says the government MAY maintain a national register of Indian citizens. It is possible to argue that preparing a citizenship register out of NPR data is not mandatory.
However, the 2003 Rules mandate the Registrar General of India, who is also the Registrar General of Citizenship Registration, SHALL establish and maintain the national citizenship register. The Centre is also mandated by the rules to carry out a house-to-house enumeration and collection of particulars related to every individual and family, including citizenship status.

No Proof of Details or Biometrics Will Be Collected During NPR

In the initial phase, details may be accepted based on self-declaration.
However, if a citizenship register is to be generated, scrutiny of documentary proof may become necessary. Biometrics were collected during the last NPR for some, and biometrics collected for Aadhaar were used for others.
As Aadhaar coverage saturation is close to 98%, it is possible to dispense with collection of biometrics during NPR for most residents

NPR Is Being Updated for Efficient Delivery of Welfare and Social Benefits Under Government Schemes

This was the original objective of NPR, but with Aadhaar being introduced and backed by an Act, which mandates linking of subsidies and welfare schemes to possessing an Aadhaar number, it may not be correct to argue that NPR is needed for efficient delivery of benefits anymore.

What Connects The NPR, NRIC And Census?

➔ As protests spread all across the country against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019 and the proposed National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC), West Bengal and Kerala

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suspended work related to the preparation and update of the National Population Register in their respective States. The NPR, a register of residents of the country with demographic and biometric details, was supposed to be prepared between April 2020 and September 2020 ahead of the Census slated for 2021. Preliminary work on the NPR has begun in several States. In Bengal, civil rights activists had been protesting against the compilation of the NPR alleging that it had nothing to with the Census, but the "first step to initiate the National Register of Citizens" in the State. According to Section 14A of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (which was inserted in 2004), the Central Government may compulsorily register every citizen of India and issue a national identity card to him; and it may maintain a National Register of Indian Citizens.

What Is the National Population Register (NPR)?

The NPR is a database containing a list of all usual residents of the country. Its objective is to have a comprehensive identity database of people residing in the country. It is generated through house-to-house enumeration during the "house-listing" phase of the census, which is held once in 10 years. The last census was in 2011, and the next will be done in 2021 (and will be conducted through a mobile phone application, according to the Home Minister, Amit Shah). A usual resident for the purposes of NPR is a person who has resided in a place for six months or more, and intends to reside there for another six months or more. The census involves a detailed questionnaire — there were 29 items to be filled up in the 2011 census — aimed at eliciting the particulars of every person, including age, sex, marital status, children, occupation, birthplace, mother tongue, religion, disability and whether they belonged to any Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. On the other hand, the NPR collects basic demographic data and biometric particulars. Once the basic details of the head of the family are taken by the enumerator, an acknowledgement slip will be issued. This slip may be required for enrolment in NPR, whenever that process begins. And, once the details are recorded in every local (village or ward), sub-district (tehsil or taluk), district and State level, there will be a population register at each of these levels. Together, they constitute the National Population Register.

What Is the Legal Basis for the NPR?

While the census is legally backed by the Census Act, 1948, the NPR is a mechanism outlined in a set of rules framed under the Citizenship Act, 1955. Section 14A was inserted in the Citizenship Act, 1955, in 2004, providing for the compulsory registration of every citizen of India and the issue of a "national identity card" to him or her. It also said the Central government may maintain a "National Register of Indian Citizens". The Registrar General India shall act as the "National Registration Authority" (and will function as the Registrar General of Citizen Registration). Incidentally, the Registrar General is also the country's Census Commissioner. The NPR is the first step towards establishing the NRIC.

Is There Any Link Between the NPR And Aadhaar?

Better targeting and delivery of benefits and services under the government was one of the early objectives of the NPR. During the early days of the NPR enrolment, under the United Progressive Alliance regime, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) scheme for issuance of Aadhaar numbers was also concurrently on. There was a conflict between the Union Home Ministry, which administers the NPR, and UIDAI, leaving the impression that

there was duplication of work, as both involved gathering personal particulars, including biometric data. Ultimately, they agreed that both databases will exist with different objectives, and that each will use the other's biometric data. Those already enrolled for Aadhaar need not give their biometric details again during NPR. At the same time, data captured for NPR would be sent to UIDAI for "de-duplication". In case of discrepancy between Aadhaar and NPR data, the latter would prevail. The present regime decided to update the NPR originally created after the 2011 Census.

What Will Happen After the NPR Is Compiled?

Out of the NPR, a set of all usual residents of India, the government proposes to create a database of "citizens of India". Thus, the "National Register of Indian Citizens" (NRIC) is a sub-set of the NPR. The NRIC will be prepared at the local, sub-district, district and State levels after verifying the citizenship status of the residents. The Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003 spells out the rules for operationalising the idea of registering all citizens and issuing national identity cards to them. However, so far, there has been no decision on introducing a national identity card. The rules say the particulars of every family and individual found in the Population Register "shall be verified and scrutinized by the Local Registrar ...". In the process, details of those "whose citizenship is doubtful" will be entered with a comment suggesting further inquiry. The family or individual will be informed about it and given an opportunity of being heard by the Sub-district or Taluk Registrar of Citizen Registration before a final decision is made on excluding them from the NRIC. The decision should be made within 90 days.

Is the NRIC Complete After This Step?

No. A draft of the Local Register of Indian Citizens shall be published to invite objections or claims for inclusion or corrections. Any objection or request for inclusion must be made within 30 days of the publication of the draft. The sub-district or taluk registrar shall summarily dispose of the objections within 90 days. Thereafter, the entries in the Local Register will be transferred to the National Registrar. Any person aggrieved by an exclusion order can appeal to the District Registrar within 30 days, and the appeal should be disposed of within 90 days. In case, the appeal succeeds, the names of those concerned would be added to the NRIC.

What Are the Documents That Would Help Establish Citizenship?

The government is yet to notify a date for generation of the NRIC. It has not yet prescribed rules for the sort of documentary proof that would be required to prove citizenship. The government says any document that shows date of birth or place of birth, or both, will be sufficient. And that common documents will be accepted, and those unable to produce documents may produce witnesses or other proof supported by members of the community.

Many State Governments Have Said the NPR Would Not Be Implemented. Is This Possible?

As of now, this is a political decision. Kerala and West Bengal have put on hold activities related to NPR work. Most State governments would have, by now, re-issued a Central government notification on the initiation of work to update the NPR. As the house-to-house enumeration is a part of the Census operation, it is unlikely that the NPR process can go

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ahead without State governments agreeing to deploy their staff for the purpose. The legal position is that while the Centre is in charge of the census, the State governments are expected to provide staff whenever required. Section 4A of the Census Act, inserted through a 1994 amendment, says: "Every local authority in a State shall, when so directed by a written order by the Central Government or by an authority appointed by that Government in this behalf, make available to any Director of Census Operations such staff as may be necessary for the performance of any duties in connection with the taking of census." Further, Rule 5 of the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003, lays down that "Every official of the Central Government, State Government, local bodies or their undertakings shall assist the Registrar General of Citizen Registration or any person authorized by him in this behalf, in preparation of the database relating to each family and every person, and in implementing the provisions of these rules." In any case, it is compulsory on the part of every citizen to assist in the preparation of the National Register of Citizens, the rules say. In practical terms, it may not be possible for the process to be undertaken without the State government's cooperation at the local level.

What Is the Relationship Between the NPR And the Citizenship (Amendment) Act?

There is no direct link. But remarks by the Home Minister that the CAA would be followed by the NRC has given rise to fears that when people are excluded from the final citizenship register, the CAA may help non-Muslims take the CAA route to apply for citizenship, and leave Muslims with no option. However, the government seeks to allay these fears.

Chief of Defence Staff Gets Govt. Nod

➔ The Union Cabinet approved the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), who will function as the Principal Military Adviser to the Defence Minister and also as the Permanent Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). The CDS, who will be above the three Service Chiefs, has been a long pending demand as part of higher-level military reforms. Outgoing Army Chief Gen Bipin Rawat, who is set to superannuate on December 31, is among the contenders for the new post. Vice-Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane has already been appointed as the next Army Chief. "The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved to create the post of CDS in the rank of a four-star General with salary and perquisites equivalent to a Service Chief," a government statement said. The CDS will also head the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) to be created within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and function as its Secretary, it stated. Official sources said the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which discussed the issue, had approved the recommendations of the Implementation Committee headed by the National Security Adviser (NSA) on the role and charter of the CDS. Mr. Modi, in his Independence Day address this year, announced the appointment of a CDS. Following this, the Implementation Committee was constituted to determine and finalise the "exact responsibilities, an enabling framework" for this new post. The government also recently informed Parliament that the CDS would come in the ambit of 'Right to Information Act', in accordance with the provisions of the RTI Act, 2005. The armed forces will be brought under the ambit of the DMA and will deal with works relating to the three Services and procurement exclusive to the Services, except capital acquisitions, as per prevalent rules and procedures. The broad mandate of the CDS includes bringing about jointness in "operations, logistics, transport, training, support services, communications, repairs and maintenance of the three Services, within three years of the first CDS assuming office."

Good Governance Index

➔ Tamil Nadu has topped the Good Governance Index released by the Centre, followed by Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. The government celebrates December 25 as Good Governance Day to mark the birthday of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Odisha, Bihar, Goa, and Uttar Pradesh did not fare well in the Big States category and Jharkhand was at the bottom of the list. The other two classifications are North-East and Hill States, and Union Territories. In the North-East and Hill States category, Himachal Pradesh ranked first, followed by Uttarakhand, Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim. Jammu and Kashmir is at the sixth place, followed by Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Union Territories, Puducherry emerged as the best-governed, ahead of Chandigarh and Delhi. Lakshwadeep was found to be the worst-performing. The rankings were launched by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances and the Centre for Good Governance. A government statement said the index is a uniform tool to assess the status of governance and the impact of various interventions by state governments and Union Territories. "The Index was designed scientifically based on various parameters of governance," said Jitendra Singh, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office, while releasing the index on Wednesday. As per the methodology of the index, states are assessed on their performance in 10 sectors — agriculture and allied sectors, commerce and industries, human resource development, public health, public infrastructure and utilities, economic governance, social welfare and development, judicial and public security, environment and citizen-centric governance. In the agriculture and allied sector, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Daman and Diu are the best performing states in their respective classifications, taking into account the growth rate of agriculture and allied sector, food grain production, horticulture produce, milk and meat production, and crop insurance. In the category of commerce and industries, Jharkhand was at the top among big states, Uttarakhand among hill states and Delhi among Union Territories. West Bengal emerged as the topper in the Environment category among the big states and Jammu and Kashmir has topped among the North-East and Hill States. Chhattisgarh has topped the Social Welfare and Development Sector ranking among big states and Meghalaya is on the top in its category. In Economic Governance, Karnataka has emerged at the top among big states and Uttarakhand has topped among North-East and Hill States. In terms of Public Infrastructure and Utilities, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh have topped their respective categories. Kerala is on top in terms of Public Health.

Why A Scheme for Groundwater?

➔ Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Atal Bhujal Yojana, or Atal Jal, a day after the Cabinet approved it. Atal Jal is a World Bank-funded, central scheme aimed at improving groundwater management. It was approved by the World Bank Board in June 2018. The idea first came up in 2015, in view of depleting groundwater resources. The government announced its intention to start a programme for management of groundwater resources in the Budget of 2016-17, with an estimated cost of about ₹6,000 crore.

How Scarce Is Water in India?

India accounts for 16 per cent of the world's population living in less than 2.5 per cent of the global area, and has just 4 per cent of the global water resources. According to the Central

Water Commission (CWC), the estimated water resources potential of the country, which occurs as natural runoff in the rivers, is 1,999 billion cubic metres. Of this, the estimated utilisable resources are 1,122 billion cubic metres per year — 690 BCM per year surface water and 432 BCM per year replenishable groundwater. With the population rising, demand for water will increase manifold in coming years. According to the CWC, per capita availability in the country will decrease from 1,434 cubic metres in 2025 to 1,219 cubic metres in 2050. By CWC benchmarks, a water-stressed condition happens when per capita availability is less than 1,700 cubic metres, and a water-scarcity condition when per capita availability falls below 1,000 cubic metres. Some river basins are facing a water-scarcity condition. Among these are the basins of the Indus (up to the border), Krishna, Cauvery, Subarnarekha, Pennar, Mahi, Sabarmati and east-flowing rivers, and west-flowing rivers of Kutch and Saurashtra including Luni. Water scarcity is most acute in the basins of the Cauvery, Pennar, Sabarmati and east-flowing rivers, and west-flowing rivers of Kutch and Saurashtra including Luni.

What Is the Groundwater Situation in Particular?

According to 'Water and Related Statistics 2019', a report published by the CWC, the annual replenishable groundwater resources in India (2017) are 432 BCM, out of which 393 BCM is the annual "extractable" groundwater availability. Fifteen states account for about 90 per cent of the groundwater potential in the country. Uttar Pradesh accounts for 16.2 per cent, followed by Madhya Pradesh (8.4%), Maharashtra (7.3%), Bihar (7.3%), West Bengal (6.8%), Assam (6.6%), Punjab (5.5%) and Gujarat (5.2%). The current annual groundwater extraction is 249 BCM, the largest user being the irrigation sector. This is why the government has called for alternatives to water-intensive crops such as paddy and sugarcane. Compared to the decadal average for 2009-18, there has been a decline in the groundwater level in 61% of wells monitored by the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), according to a reply by the Jal Shakti Ministry in Parliament recently. Among the states where at least 100 wells were monitored, the highest depletion has been in Karnataka (80%), Maharashtra (75%), Uttar Pradesh (73%), Andhra Pradesh (73%), Punjab (69%).

What Is the Role of the CGWB?

The Board monitors water levels and quality through a network of 23,196 "National Hydrograph Monitoring Stations" — 6,503 dug wells and 16,693 piezometers —in January, March-May, August and November every year. A piezometer is a device placed in a borehole to monitor the pressure or depth of groundwater. The CGWB has classified the country's assessment units (blocks, taluks, mandals etc) into safe, semi-critical and over-exploited in terms of groundwater resources. The number of over-exploited units has increased to 1,186 in 2017, from 839 in 2004. In the north, more than 60% of the assessment units in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan are either over-exploited or critical. During the Monsoon Session of Parliament, the Jal Shakti Ministry had said 14% of the country's assessment units are semi-critical, 5% are critical, and 17% are over-exploited, as of 2017.

How Much of This Does the New Scheme Seek to Address?

For now, the Atal Bhujal Yojana will be implemented in seven states – Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and UP over five years from 2020-21 to 2024-25. It is expected that it will benefit about 8,350-gram panchayats in 78 districts.

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According to Jal Shakti Ministry sources, if the scheme meets its objectives in water-stressed areas, it will be extended to other parts of the country.

How Will These Objectives Be Met?

The focus will be on arresting the rate of decline of groundwater levels as well as water consumption. The scheme will seek to strengthen the institutional framework and bring about behavioural changes at community level for sustainable groundwater resource management. It envisages community-led Water Security Plans. There has been a Groundwater Management and Regulation scheme to manage the country's groundwater resources since 2013. The new scheme is an updated and modified version. Concepts such as 'Water User Associations' and Water Budgeting will be introduced. Better performing districts and panchayats will get more funds.

Where Will This Money Come From?

Of the ₹6,000 crore, ₹3,000 crore will be contributed by the World Bank as loan while the other half will be provided by the central government in the form of central assistance. All of it — the World Bank component and central assistance — will be given to the states as grants.

Gender Gap

➔ Assessing women's access to equal opportunity and resources against the access that men have would be a scientific way of evaluating a nation's commitment to the advancement of its citizens. But going by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2020, released last week, questions can easily be raised about whether this government is doing the right thing by the country's women. India has dropped four points from 2018, to take the 112th rank on the Index. The Index measures the extent of gender-based gaps on four key parameters — economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Notably, it measures gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in countries, rather than the actual levels of the available resources and opportunities. Despite a small score improvement, India has lost four positions as some countries ranked lower than India have shown better improvement. The country has reportedly closed two thirds of its overall gender gap, with a score of 66.8%, but the report notes with concern that the condition of women in large fringes of Indian society is 'precarious'. Of significant concern is the economic gender gap, with a score of 35.4%, at the 149th place, among 153 countries, and down seven places since the previous edition, indicating only a third of the gap has been bridged. The participation of women in the labour force is also among the lowest in the world, and the female estimated earned income is only one-fifth of male income. An alarming statistic is India's position (150th rank) on the very bottom of the Health and Survival subindex, determined largely by the skewed sex ratio at birth, violence, forced marriage and discrimination in access to health. It is on the educational attainment (112th rank) and political empowerment (18th rank) fronts that the relatively good news is buried. There is no question that the Gender Gap Index presents India with an opportunity to make the necessary amends forthwith. Doing what the government is currently doing is clearly not going to be sufficient; it needs to engage intimately with all aspects indicated by the Index to improve the score, and set targets to reduce the gender gap in the foreseeable future. It will have to drastically scale up efforts it has introduced to encourage women's participation, and increase opportunities for them. To do so it also

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needs to make sure there is actual implementation at the ground level. While a good score on any global index is a target worth pursuing, what is being questioned here is basic — is the state reneging on its commitment to half its population? A commitment to ameliorate the conditions for women is a non-negotiable duty of any state.

Business & Economics

Economy Challenges: Boost Growth and GST Revenues, Keep Deficit in Check

➔ Several announcements made by the government after the Budget in July 2019, aimed at quelling anxiety around slowing economic growth, falling private sector investment, and decline of consumption, have so far failed to achieve the desired results. As India Inc., bankers, economists, and consumers wait for a next round of measures in the Budget next month, they will be watching how the government balances measures to boost growth with its stated objective of sticking to the fiscal deficit target, improves GST collections, and keeps rising inflation under check.

Where We Stand Now

GDP growth for the second quarter was at a six-year low of 4.5%. The Finance Minister has said earlier that the economy may have bottomed out; several analysts and experts, however, feel the worst may not be over yet. Passenger car sales, which witnessed a marginal uptick of 0.3% in the festival month of October after sliding continuously over the previous 10 months, went back into decline mode in November. In the eight months of this financial year, passenger car sales have declined 18%, sales of medium and heavy commercial vehicles by 37%, and two wheelers by 15.7%. This indicates a slowdown in economic activity in both urban and rural areas, and in industrial demand. Between April and October, gross bank credit growth expanded by just 0.7%; within that, the credit outstanding for the industrial and services sectors contracted 3.4% and 2.6% respectively. The personal loan segment expanded by only 7.6%. Power demand has been falling — as of November 11, of the total 262 coal, lignite, and nuclear units, 133 were shut due to lack of demand. As of November 7, peak demand met was 1,88,072 MW, a little less than half the total installed generation capacity of 3,63,370 MW. Both direct and indirect tax collections have slowed due to the overall economic slowdown, and it will be a challenge for the government to meet tax receipt targets set in the Budget. GST revenue collections have been slowing over the past few months. Barring November, when collections picked up due to festival sales, GST revenue has contracted for the previous two months, leading to delayed compensation payments to states. The central GST collection during April-November has fallen nearly 40% short of the Budget estimate — ₹3,28,365 crore against the Budget estimate of ₹5,26,000 crore — as per data presented to Parliament. Direct tax collections have fared no better, with only 41.7% or ₹5.56 lakh crore of the target of ₹13.35 lakh crore, collected during the first eight months of the financial year, government data show.

What the Government Can Do

There have been calls for the government to lead the revival through aggressive spending. The question is whether the government has the wherewithal to do so. After the cut in corporate tax rates, there are expectations now of a reduction in income-tax rates, or

adjustment of tax slabs in the Budget to stimulate demand. However, the government's fiscal health does not provide it with much leeway for an aggressive expenditure push. The fiscal space is tight, especially after the sharp cut in corporate tax rates, which is estimated to cost the exchequer ₹1.45 lakh crore. Privatisation of state-owned companies such as BPCL, Shipping Corporation of India and Container Corporation of India Ltd is being lined up to generate resources to cover the expected shortfall in tax revenues. A rollover of subsidies this year could add close to 0.3% of GDP to the fiscal space. Even so, analysts expect the fiscal deficit to be around 3.7-3.9 per cent of GDP, against the target of 3.3% by March-end 2020. With the Reserve Bank of India maintaining a pause in its rate reduction cycle during the latest review of monetary policy, the government might wait for the corporate tax cuts to drive investments in the economy. One way for the government to give a spending push will be to postpone the fiscal consolidation plan. Industry executives argue that if reduction is put on hold for a couple of years, the government would have extra resources to push spending. As the economy picks up pace later, it can revert to the targeted reduction in deficit.

Infrastructure Push

➔ For an economy that is tottering, a big bang announcement from the government can sometimes work to turn around sentiment. The unveiling by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman of a mega push to infrastructure investment adding up to ₹102 lakh crore over the next five years belongs in this category. Projects in energy, roads, railways and urban infrastructure under the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) have been identified by a task force. About 42% of such identified projects are already under implementation, 19% are under development and 31% are at the conceptual stage. The NIP task force appears to have gone project-by-project, assessing each for viability and relevance in consultation with the States. Considering that the NIP will be like a window to the future, a constant review becomes paramount if this is not to degenerate into a mere collation and listing of projects. A periodic review, as promised by the Finance Ministry, is necessary. The government's push on infrastructure development will not only enable ease of living — such as metro trains in cities and towns — but also create jobs and increase demand for primary commodities such as cement and steel. From this perspective, this push to invest in infrastructure is welcome. Identifying the projects to be put on the pipeline is the easy part. Implementing and commissioning them will be the more difficult one. There are a few hurdles that the NIP task force needs to watch out for. First, the financing plan assumes that the Centre and the States will fund 39% each while the private sector will chip in with 22% of the outlay. Going by the present fiscal situation, it will be no small challenge for the Centre to raise ₹39 lakh crore, even if it is over the next five years. The financial position of States is even more perilous. Second, the ₹22 lakh crore expected from private investment also looks steep considering the lack of appetite for fresh investment by the private sector in the last few years. In fact, this factor has been a major drag on economic growth. Given the scale of investment, debt will play an important role and it remains to be seen if banks have gotten over their apprehensions on infrastructure financing as a major part of their bad loans originated there. Finally, cooperation from States becomes very important in implementing infrastructure projects. The experience on this count has not been very happy till now. While these are genuine obstacles that the task force needs to manage, these should not detract from the need for a concerted effort to invest in infrastructure. The key will be following up and reviewing the pipeline at regular intervals.

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Is the Economy in Really Bad Shape?

➔ On November 30 this year, India's statistical machinery revealed that growth in the quarter from July to September had slipped to 4.5%. This was the lowest level recorded in six-and-a-half years, with the 6.1% nominal GDP growth (real growth plus inflation) coming in as the slowest in a decade.

Amidst this gradual slowdown over the past year-and-a-half, the saving grace for the economy and consumers was that inflation had been friendly and benign. That is no longer the case with retail inflation hitting a 40-month high of 5.54% in November, more than double the 2.3% recorded a year ago. Food inflation hit 10%, led by vegetables (think of onions) and pulses. This has led to worries about India entering a phase of stagflation, where growth and employment are low but inflation is high — a difficult morass for policy makers to swim out of. Any further spike in inflation, that takes it closer to or over the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) tolerance limit of 6%, will take the option of cutting interest rates for spurring growth out of the equation, for instance. The official third quarter growth numbers will be out on February 28, weeks after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents the second Union Budget. But an advance GDP estimate for the full year is expected early next month.

Why Is Former Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) Arvind Subramanian Calling It India's Great Slowdown?

The economy's "seemingly sudden" illness is unusually severe, Mr. Subramanian has noted in a new working paper co-authored with Josh Felman for the Harvard University's Center for International Development. "This is not an ordinary slowdown. It is India's Great Slowdown, where the economy seems headed for the intensive care unit," the paper stresses. Comparing indicators for the first seven months of this financial year with the past, the two have made the case that the current slowdown is closer in nature to what was faced as far back as 1991 — the year India liberalised. While dissecting the slowdown, many have argued on whether this has been driven by a structural malaise caused by significant deficiencies in the economy's framework, such as archaic rules governing factor markets. Several others, including some in the government, suggest that this is a cyclical phenomenon and will pass like the circle of life... what goes up, must come down, et al. The World Bank has said this cyclical slowdown is severe. This camp's rationale for the slowdown focuses on demand collapsing due to reasons ranging from poor rural income growth, the ghosts of demonetisation and a hastily implemented Goods and Services Tax (GST). Mr. Subramanian's paper with Mr. Felman reckons that India's current crisis is driven by both cyclical and structural factors — but problems in finance have exacerbated the slowdown. Demonetisation and GST may have hurt growth, but cannot be the reason for the precipitous fall in recent quarters. The preface to this crisis began in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, when slower growth threw out of whack bullish assumptions driving large infrastructure investments. That was the first stress point for banks, and investment and exports that had driven growth through the early 2000s stumbled. That India's growth recovered without fixing these problems adequately, the paper ascribes to a series of fortuitous developments such as lower oil prices and a boom in credit from non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) which may be partly driven by demonetisation sending more cash into the formal financial system. With the collapse of IL&FS in late 2018, that party has ended too. And now the twin balance sheet crisis (of stressed banks and corporates with infrastructure bets) that Mr. Subramanian flagged as a CEA, has become a Four Balance

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Sheet challenge (adding stressed NBFCs and real estate firms). The paper, titled "India's Great Slowdown: What Happened? What's the Way Out?" underlines: "All major engines of growth, this time also including consumption, have sputtered, causing growth to collapse... Something must be done to get India out of its current vicious cycle, in which low growth is further damaging balance sheets, and deteriorating balance sheets are bringing down growth."

What Are Rating Agencies and Multilateral Institutions Saying?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had already pared India's growth estimate for this year to 6.1% in October from its earlier forecast of 7%, but is now expected to slash it further with the country in the "midst of a significant economic slowdown". The World Bank had said in October that it expects 6% growth but even achieving this range (6% to 6.1%) would require a significant uptick in the second half of this fiscal. The most glaring downgrade for India came from global rating agency Moody's Investor Services which switched India's sovereign rating outlook from "Stable" to "Negative" in early November, citing enhanced growth risks. A week later, it also lowered growth expectations to 5.6% (from an earlier 6.2% hope) for 2019, saying the slowdown is lasting longer than it expected. In October, Fitch Ratings lowered its growth estimate for 2019-20 to 5.5% from 6.6%. Similar revisions have come from almost every other global institution, including the Asian Development Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and rating agency Standard & Poor's (S&P). These gloomy estimates still appear rosy compared to expectations from those closer to the ground. India-based, S&P-owned rating agency CRISIL has pegged down its growth hopes from 6.3% to just 5.1%, stressing that the slowdown has deepened.

What Can the Union Budget Do to Help?

The government has rolled back several measures perceived to be deterrents for investors in the Budget for 2019-20 presented in July; in September, it even slashed corporate taxes significantly in a bid to attract fresh investments. The Finance Ministry has unveiled some packages for particularly embattled industry sectors such as NBFCs and real estate to salvage the situation even as it has hinted that the slowdown is not structural, but cyclical and driven by global growth pressures. On its part, the central bank has slashed its key interest rates by 1.35% or 135 basis points over the past year, in a bid to spur growth too. In an interview to this paper, the RBI Governor has mooted some "countercyclical steps" (read tax cuts and higher public spending) and continuation of structural reforms to revive the growth project. But the room for tax cuts — after those announced in September set the exchequer back by ₹1.45 lakh crore — is very limited. GST collections this year have also been tepid and below target, leaving little room for the Centre to spend its way out of trouble. Stoking of inflationary pressures also need to be avoided. Given the constraints, the challenge for the Finance Minister is unenviable, but a focus on fixing the core crisis afflicting India's financial entities, creating a sense of certainty and predictability about India's policy direction, be it in taxation matters or reforms of labour, land and other restrictive laws, could provide some salve to the bleeding economy. We will know in 33 days from now.

CAD Narrows To 0.9% Of GDP

➔ India's current account deficit (CAD) narrowed to 0.9% of GDP, or $6.3 billion, in the September 2019 quarter, on account of lower trade deficit. It had stood at 2.9% of the gross

domestic product (GDP), or $19 billion, in the corresponding quarter of 2018-19. On a sequential basis, CAD had printed 2% of GDP, or $14.2 billion, in the June 2019 quarter. "The contraction in the CAD was primarily on account of a lower trade deficit at $38.1 billion as compared with $50 billion a year ago," the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said. During the first half of the current financial year, CAD narrowed to 1.5% of the GDP from 2.6% in the corresponding period in 2018-19, on the back of a reduction in the trade deficit, which shrank to $84.3 billion as compared with $95.8 billion a year ago. The balance of payments stood at $5.12 billion in the second quarter and $19.1 billion during the first half of this fiscal. Net foreign direct investment stood at $7.4 billion, almost the same level as in the second quarter of 2018-19. Helped by net purchases in the debt market, foreign portfolio investment recorded a net inflow of $2.5 billion in the September 2019 quarter, against an outflow of $1.6 billion a year ago. In the April-September 2019 period, while the net FDI inflows were at $21.2 billion, portfolio investment recorded a net inflow of $7.3 billion. Net services receipts increased 0.9% on in July-September on a year-on-year basis, on the back of a rise in net earnings from computer, travel and financial services, the central bank said. In the second quarter of 2019-20, private transfer receipts, mainly representing remittances by Indians employed overseas, rose to $21.9 billion, an increase of 5.2% compared to a year ago. The net inflow on account of external commercial borrowings to the country was $3.2 billion in the second quarter as compared with $2 billion a year earlier.

RBI Buys ₹10,000 Crore Worth Government Securities Via OMO

➔ In its second special open market operation (OMO), the Reserve Bank of India bought ₹10,000 crore of long-term government securities and sold ₹8,501 crore of three short-term bonds. The RBI had said it would buy and sell government securities under OMO for ₹10,000 crore each, simultaneously. Though the central bank offered to sell four securities in the auction, it accepted bids for only three. In the OMO purchase of 6.45% GS 2029, i.e. the 10-year benchmark security, the RBI received ₹25,698 crore worth of bids but accepted ₹10,000 crore worth. It also received 285 bids to purchase 6.45%-2029 security but accepted only 151 bids. The cut-off yield at which bids were accepted was 6.4874%. The RBI offered to sell four government securities — 6.65% GS 2020; 7.8% GS 2020; 8.27% GS 2020 and 8.12% GS 2020 through the OMO sale. It accepted only ₹8,501 crore worth of bids for the three securities as against ₹38,551 crore bids it received for four securities. Separately, the RBI also proposed a reduction in the loan amount an urban co-operative bank can lend to a single entity and a group of borrowers to 10% and 25%, respectively, with an aim to prevent occurrences as with PMC Bank, caused by large exposures to one group. Currently, urban co-operative banks are permitted to have exposures up to 15% and 40% of their capital funds to a single borrower and a group of borrowers, respectively. Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank collapsed because of its huge exposure totalling ₹6,226.01 crore to Housing Development and Infrastructure Ltd Group firms.

New Rules, Old Problems (Neethi P. Is with The Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru, And Works on Labour and Informality. Nandita Shivakumar - South India Coordinator For Asia Floor Wage Alliance)

➔ On November 20, the Karnataka government issued a notification allowing women to work night shifts (7 p.m. to 6 a.m.) in all factories registered under the Factories Act, 1948. States that already allow this are Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh,

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and Maharashtra. In line with the Night Work Convention, 1990 of the International Labour Organization, these States amended the Factories Act to remove both sex-based discrimination in night work and restrictions on the fundamental right to practise any profession, occupation, trade, or business of one's choice. This move has to be read alongside the State's attempt to improve ease of doing business, investor friendliness, and flexibility in a macroeconomic climate vis-a-vis increasing female work participation rate, which is only 25% in India. Welcoming the decision, industrial bodies and chambers of commerce have said it will benefit the trade and manufacturing sectors, especially the garment industry.

Many Concerns

In principle, this is a welcome move. However, several concerns have been voiced by women garment workers who are estimated to constitute over 90% of the five lakh garment workers in Karnataka (according to data by Asia Floor Wage Alliance, a global coalition of trade unions). The amendment suggests that night shifts for women will only be allowed if the employer ensures adequate safeguards concerning occupational safety and health, protection of dignity and honour, and transportation from the factory premises to points nearest to the worker's residence. The amendment stipulates 24 points related to occupational rules and regulations, most of which have been in existence for years. Yet, women workers fear that when there is no safety or dignity in the workplace even during daytime, how will employers ensure all this during night shifts? The Garment Labour Union, a women-led trade union working for garment workers in Karnataka, organised a protest in Bengaluru on November 27, arguing that if gender equality is a concern, the state ought to first ensure better working conditions and higher wages in garment factories. GLU says they were neither consulted on this matter nor given a circular for their perusal. Workers remain pessimistic as they are still not given the promised minimum wage. They are puzzled that the night shift amendment does not address the issue of pay structure for night work (overtime in the garment sector is only an extension of regular work time with questions on extra payment rarely entertained). Though the amendment places the onus on employers to prevent sexual harassment, workers say existing mechanisms aimed at addressing workplace violence, including abuse of workers' rights and verbal abuse, which are primarily driven by unrealistic production targets, are simply absent or dysfunctional. Against this background, they feel the new rules recommending monthly meetings with the representatives of the employer are farcical. Workers also express scepticism about strengthening the role of inspectors in factories, as past experience shows improperly conducted inspections or negligence towards grave violations. The reality is that workers face the threat of losing their jobs if they report such violations. Also, while the amendment has prioritised installation of CCTV cameras, workers point out that there is no guarantee of their operational status, or clarity on who handles the footage. The amendment has also failed to address child care, an important concern in a women-dominated sector, especially when paid care is beyond their means. Other promises such as 12 consecutive hours of rest between the last shift and the night shift, separate canteens, and more rest rooms also appear unconvincing in a context where even rest room breaks are infrequent due to high production targets.

Systemic Failure

In a sector where there is systemic failure and worker-management relations are turbulent, putting the onus of worker safety and security in the hands of the management alone can be risky. Moreover, it is well-known that in supply chains the brands call the shots. Involving them in discussions on worker dignity and equality is important. Omitting workers and trade unions from discussions about the amendment is also seen by the workers as a short-sighted measure. Women garment workers are concerned that while the amendment has stipulated many 'new' guidelines amidst the plethora of unaddressed concerns, allowing night shifts would only extend daytime exploitation.

Weighing in On the Public Sector Privatisation Debate (V. Ranganathan - Retired Professor From The Indian Institute Of Management, Bangalore, And Visiting Distinguished Professor At IIT Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. Bhamy Shenoy - Energy Professional)

➔ There seem to be broadly three positions with respect to the privatisation of public sector undertakings (PSUs). The left position is "PSU is family silver and should not be sold irrespective of its performance". The divergent stand is that "business is not the business of government", which found resonance in the United Kingdom, and, of late, in India. There is also the third position: Why privatise profit-making PSUs? Why do you sell the family silver? Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) which is making handsome profits, comes under this category.

Case of Loss-Making Units

Loss-making PSUs certainly merit privatisation — but no one would buy them with their huge debt and employee liabilities. The government may even have to pay the buyer, as it happened in the case of the Delhi Discom privatisation. Even then it may be worth it, since privatisation will stop fiscal flows to these PSUs. Alternatively, there is the exit route through the new Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. Some of the major loss-making PSUs, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited, Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited and Air India should go under the block as their losses are greater than their revenue. The Economist has a term for such entities — value subtracting enterprises. Restructuring them and even ensuring an additional infusion of funds and other resources have not produced results. Their chairmen cum managing directors are bureaucrats who may not have domain knowledge or technical service people bereft of business acumen. Justifying their existence — in the case of BSNL/MTNL which ran telecom at one time as a government monopoly, with a tele density of 0.01% — by citing national security is strange. At one time the argument was that BSNL alone maintains the military telecom network. It was for the same reason that the private sector was not allowed to operate in the defence sector; we have paid a heavy price for only entrusting it to the public sector in this area. The present government has by and large done well in opening up defence to the private sector. Privatisation is not a default option; rather, it is resorted to only out of extreme necessity. As World Bank consultants said on the Delhi Discom privatisation: "Privatization is resorted not just when the firm makes losses, but only when the physical performance is so bad that the PSU becomes a political embarrassment to the Government." This may explain the hesitation to privatise some of the largest loss-

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making PSUs — Air India, the BSNL and MTNL — as the embarrassment threshold may not have been reached as yet.

Meeting Fiscal Targets

But why privatise a profit-making PSU. What comes into play here is not the lofty "business is not the business of government" argument, but a more mundane fiscal imperative. The Finance Minister's disinvestment target of a little over a lakh of crores for the current fiscal has to be met. It is this fiscal requirement that now drives privatisation. Let us revisit the question: Should profit-making PSUs be privatised? It is good to remember what former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once said on the issue. He made the assurance that the government would not "privatise profit making PSUs working in competitive environments". That is, if the output price is a competitive price and you still make a profit, then you are efficient and the need to privatise does not arise. But if the output price is set in a monopoly background — the case now being the monopoly cartel of the oil majors, BPCL, Indian Oil Corporation Limited and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited — with the autonomy given being used for monopoly pricing, then your profit is no longer an index of your efficiency. In that case, privatisation will still bring in benefits of the efficient operation of private sector through reduced costs. Examples of PSUs that made monopoly profits and still inefficient were Coal India and Indian Airlines (IA). For IA, there was poor punctuality, high staff-to-plane ratio, high operating costs and overall customer indifference. The BPCL is not inefficient but its privatisation still offers scope for improvement. When a company such as this has never faced any serious competition, it is impossible to even discuss the issue of efficiency or inefficiency. There is no comparable firm in the private sector to benchmark it with. However, if one looks at just about any public sector company in India, it is impossible to argue that the BPCL can be an exception. Over the years, the financial performance of oil marketing companies has undergone a bureaucratic process called "administrative price mechanism". All one can say is that the oil PSUs have been allowed to make profit; if one can use The Economist's phrase again, they can be called "allotted millionaires". On the non-financial performance side, it would be difficult for the BPCL to show what innovations it has implemented over the years either in marketing or refinery operations.

Accompanied by Competition

There is no point in converting a public monopoly to a private monopoly; it will only result in inefficiency being replaced by private profits. Privatisation must be accompanied by competition in the post-privatised scenario. However, the government will face a dilemma. If you want a high price, you must allow a monopoly situation post-privatisation, and if you want competition and low price for consumers, you must be content with a modest sale price, as the post-privatisation valuation of the firm critically depends on the market structure post-privatisation. If that is to be competitive, other PSU national oil companies such as the IOC and HPCL should also be privatised. There is also no issue of national security for downstream oil firms. Oil marketing companies, even if they are not in the public sector, can be made to own strategic petroleum reserves as in most of Europe and by the government itself as in the U.S. Thus, privatising the BPCL does not compromise India's national security. Similarly, LPG and kerosene subsidies can be handled by direct benefit transfer, which is already in vogue in the case of LPG. Finally, there is an argument advanced in the case of the BPCL: that the government paid about ₹622 crore in today's money to acquire it, while it now has a market value of around ₹85,000-1,15,000 crore. How did ₹622 crore balloon into this

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amount even after the time value of money adjustment? Is it a bargain one cannot refuse? Not quite. After all, in the interim period of many years, the firm would have invested, out of retained profits, and also generated further monopoly profits for dividends which explains its increased value. This is not by its virtue of being a PSU. The BPCL is not a golden goose. It may be an ATM.

Divestments in Air India, BPCL Unlikely This Fiscal

➔ In what can potentially hurt the math for the ongoing fiscal, a senior government official said strategic divestments in Air India, BPCL and Container Corporation are 'unlikely' to be completed in FY20. Work on all these companies is on and the process is facing delays due to "surprises" encountered once the wheels began moving, the official from the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (Dipam) said. The Ministry had budgeted to garner ₹1.05 lakh crore from divestments during the fiscal. When asked if the strategic divestment in BPCL, which alone can fetch the government over ₹60,000 crore if it were to sell its entire 53% stake, will be completed this fiscal, the official said, 'unlikely'. On Container Corporation (Concor) and Air India as well, the official said the sale would not go through in the current fiscal ending March 31. The official said the government is preparing the financial statements and getting the data room ready for the sale. Till now, the industry has shown 'excitement' over the companies which are being floated, the official said, adding that there are additional details which may be sought by potential bidders. The strategic sale in Shipping Corporation of India is at a certain stage and going strong, the official said.

With No Buyer in Sight, AI Fast Losing Altitude

➔ Making a daily loss of ₹20 crore, Air India (AI), the country's struggling national carrier, is staring at closure unless it quickly finds a buyer. AI currently has a debt of more than ₹30,000 crore after the government moved an equal sum to Air India Assets Holding Ltd., an entity that owns the airline's assets. Currently, AI's main problem is to augment funds to pay a monthly interest of ₹225 crore towards the huge loan it has on its balance sheet. A default may spell disaster like that experienced by Jet Airways. Nine months ago, the Centre had stopped giving any financial support to the bleeding carrier and asked AI to fend for itself till the disinvestment process was completed. Though the government had made its intention to sell its 100% stake in AI that had been bleeding badly since 2007, hardly anyone has evinced interest.

Prospects Back Out

The Tatas, who had earlier shown interest, are believed to have backed out as they are focussed on stabilising Vistara and AirAsia India, both loss-making joint ventures. Besides, they have chalked out overseas expansion plans for Vistara for which they have to commit more funds. A businessman who was informally approached by the government is believed to have developed cold feet after considering the enormity of AI's problems. IndiGo had already said 'no' to buying into AI. So, though the government is expected to invite Expressions of Interest (EoI) for AI shortly, it is likely to witness a lukewarm response. The only hope is that some Gulf-based carriers, backed by huge sovereign capital, might evince interest in the proposal. On sale are loss-making AI, its wholly owned, profitable, low-cost subsidiary Air India Charters Ltd. which operates under the Air India Express brand and Air India's 100% stake in Air India SATS Airports Pvt. Ltd. The government had asked the AI

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management to run the airline on its own till the disinvestment was complete. A request to provide a sovereign guarantee for bank loans to meet debt servicing obligations was rejected forcing AI to fend for itself. Out of the sovereign guarantee agreed upon last year, the government had vouched for ₹2,600 crore and is now unwilling to stand guarantee for the balance ₹2,400 crore. Since April 2019, the government has advanced ₹500 crore to AI but this was from the previous year's funds.

Daily Income Helping

AI is running its operations through daily income from ticket sales and bank loans. Oil companies are supplying jet fuel against immediate cash payment at airports (cash and carry), and its vendors are patient enough to continue the supplies. AI is paying salaries to employees but with delays. The pilots have moved court claiming ₹50 crore in outstanding payment. In the past few months, with difficulty, the airline brought into service eight wide-body planes, grounded due to maintenance and spare parts issues. Though the airline managed to induct more capacity on international routes following the grounding of Jet Airways, its domestic market share has now dropped to 12%. At a time when all other private airlines from India are increasing their international operations, capacity-constrained AI, with an 18% market share in that segment, may be soon be marginalised like in the domestic market as it will not be able to expand, unlike others. If the financial crisis is not dealt with on a war-footing, then AI will crash-land soon," said Vaibhav Bhure, a lawyer from Bombay High Court who also practices in the NCLT.

Railways starts vistadome train on Kalka-Shimla route

➔ The Railways on December 25 started a seven-coach glass-enclosed vista dome train on the heritage Kalka-Shimla route. The red-coloured train, which was decorated with balloons, chugged off from the Kalka railway station in Haryana at around 7 a.m., a railway official at the Kalka station told PTI. The 'Him Darshan' train has a seating capacity of over 100 passengers and the bookings are full over the next few days in view of the peak tourist season and New Year being around the corner, the official said. Earlier this year, the Railways had put only one see-through vista dome coach on the narrow-gauge route, but in view of the huge response, now the entire train has such coaches, he said. Along the route, one of the few heritage Railways in the word, tourists headed to Shimla will be able to experience snow and rainfall in these glass-enclosed coaches. "It feels so nice to enjoy the nature with transparent roofs as it gives a panoramic view. We will also return in a few days. Hope we get a chance to witness snowfall while we are on this train," a family told the media in Kalka after boarding the train. The vista dome coaches were tastefully decorated with plush interiors and tourists will also get a chance to feel close to the nature on the 95.5 km route with big glass windows in the air-conditioned train.

Life & Science

What is Michelin Star

➔ For any restaurant, the highest honour in the business is three "Michelin stars", provided the restaurant is in a country covered by this rating system. Michelin stars are in the news now

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because of a lawsuit against the Michelin Guide, which awards them.

THE CONTEXT:

In 2018, the French restaurant La Maison des Bois won its third Michelin star. In 2019, the Michelin Guide stripped it of the third. Celebrity chef Marc Veyrat sued the company, asking for reasons for the downgrade and demanding $1 in symbolic damages. This week, a French court ruled against him, saying Michelin need not share the reasons and there was no proof that any damages were suffered.

WHAT'S A STAR?

In 1889, brothers Andre and Edouard Michelin founded the Michelin tyre company. To encourage motorists, they gave out a free guide with information such as maps, how to change a tyre, where to get fuel – and where to eat. As the restaurant section grew in popularity, the brothers recruited a team of "mystery diners", who visited and reviewed the restaurants anonymously. From 1926, the guide started awarding single stars.

HOW IT WORKS:

In 1936, the Michelin Guide started the started the three-star system — one star for "a very good restaurant in its category"; two for "excellent cooking, worth a detour"; three for "exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey". Every year, restaurants visited by "mystery diners" can be awarded or stripped of a star. Restaurants are judged on five criteria: quality of the ingredients used, mastery of flavour and cooking techniques, the personality of the chef in his cuisine and value for money and consistency between visits. The restaurant inspectors, who remain anonymous, do not look at the interior decor, table setting or service quality when awarding stars. While Veyrat sued the company, it is important to note that the stars are given to the restaurant, not the chef. The same chef can prepare cuisine for two restaurants, each earning a star, but cannot claim these to be his or her stars. On the other hand, two different chefs can fetch the same restaurant two Michelin stars over two different years, but these will belong to the restaurant.

WHERE IT WORKS:

The Guide began by covering French restaurants, but has now expanded across the world. The Michelin website says the Guide now rates over 30,000 establishments in over 30 territories across four continents, including Asia. To be reviewed, a restaurant needs to be in a territory where a Michelin Guide already exists. No Michelin Guide exists for any Indian city yet.

Gaganyaan, Chandrayaan-3 in Mission Mode

➔ Four pilots from the Indian Air Force (IAF) will leave for Russia this month to receive training as astronauts of Gaganyaan, the first Indian crewed flight to space. They were shortlisted after a series of fitness and endurance tests, ISRO Chairman K. Sivan announced at a press meet. The initial tests were conducted in the IAF's Institute of Aerospace Medicine, Bengaluru, and Russia. The four will be trained at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Centre in Moscow, as per an agreement signed between the space agencies of the two countries last year. Gaganyaan, announced by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2018, is the

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₹10,000-crore Indian human space flight scheduled for 2022. It is designed to have 3-7 crew members spend 3-7 days in space in a 400-km orbit. Dr. Sivan said Gaganyaan activities were on track. However, it was not known yet how many astronauts would finally travel to space. The first of the two pre-Gaganyaan flights with a humanoid will be launched this year-end along with some of the six shortlisted micro-gravity experiments, Dr. Sivan said. ISRO has also quietly begun work on another soft-landing mission to the moon with most of the same features of Chandrayaan-2 and almost on the back of the failure of the latter's lander on the lunar surface on September 7. The launch of the nearly ₹600-crore Chandrayaan-3 is targeted for the end of this year or early 2021. It will be almost a repetition of the July 2019 Chandrayaan-2 mission in the configuration of spacecraft, the landing spot on the moon and the experiments to be conducted on the lunar surface, Dr. Sivan said. The third mission, he said, was ISRO's bid to realise for itself the difficult technology of soft-landing on another planetary body. The agency is undertaking it as the landing module of the second mission crashed barely five minutes before it was to have landed on the lunar surface. The Tamil Nadu government has started acquiring 2,300 acres of land in Thoothukudi district for ISRO's second launch port. Currently satellites are launched from the Sriharikota launch centre in Andhra Pradesh. Dr. Sivan said Thoothukudi offers a locational advantage to launch towards India's South. When ready, the new port will handle mainly the small satellite launch vehicle (SSLV) that is under development. SSLVs are meant to put a payload of up to 500 kg in space. He said work on Chandrayaan-3 is going on smoothly and it may need 14-16 months to get ready. In the second mission that cost nearly ₹1,000 crore, an orbiter carried the lander and the rover to a lunar orbit. The orbiter continues to work well around the moon. Another lunar mission is being discussed with Japanese space agency JAXA (Japan Aeronautics Exploration Agency) but its elements have not been finalised, he said. Although scores of landers sent by Russia, the U.S. and the Chinese have explored the moon's surface, so far, no other agency has landed in the southern hemisphere. ISRO hopes to be still the first to do so.

What is SnowEx

➔ Around 1.2 billion people, or nearly one-sixth of the world, depend on seasonal snow and glaciers for their water supply. For a better understanding of how much water is contained in each winter's snowfall and how much will be available when it melts in the spring, NASA has launched a seasonal campaign — part of a five-year programme called SnowEx, initiated in 2016-17. While the geographical focus of SnowEx is North America, NASA's overall target is optimal strategies for mapping global snow water equivalent (SWE) with remote sensing and models leading to a Decadal Survey "Earth System Explorer" mission. NASA currently has no global satellite mission to track and study SWE. On its website, NASA acknowledges any future snow satellite mission will require observations from an international collection of satellites. Within its geographic range, SnowEx assesses where snow has fallen, how much there is and how its characteristics change as it melts. It uses airborne measurements, ground measurements and computer modelling. The airborne campaign will fly radar and lidar (light detection and ranging) to measure snow depth, microwave radar and radiometers to measure SWE, optical cameras to photograph the surface, infrared radiometers to measure surface temperature, and hyperspectral imagers for snow cover and composition. Ground teams will measure snow depth, density, accumulation layers, temperature, wetness and snow grain size — the size of a typical particle. This year, real-time computer modelling will be integrated into the campaign as well.

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Musth Does Not Necessarily Give Younger, Male Asian Elephants an Edge

➔ A seven-year study of Asian elephants from Nagarahole-Bandipur, a population centred around the Kabini region, yields interesting patterns of male elephant behaviour when in musth. Hormonal levels give musth males high energy and aggression levels and this state is often correlated with a propensity to mate. In two papers published in Journal of Mammology and Gajah, the team from Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR), Bengaluru, probes how this works in the Kabini population.

Elephants in Musth

When an elephant is in a musth state, its urine shows increased testosterone levels. Also, temporin, a thick secretion, flows from the temporal ducts situated midway between their eyes and ears. Sometimes, the elephant dribbles urine as well. They hardly feed during musth and are more focussed on finding fertile females. They move from female to female, checking if she is fertile or not. Males enter into musth (show signs of musth) when there are in good body condition, and lost body condition over the time they are in musth because they are hardly feeding. Moreover, males can also mate when they are not in musth (they do not have to enter musth in order to mate). Therefore, people have been interested in finding out how exactly musth helps as a reproductive strategy since it is a very expensive strategy. One way in which musth might give an advantage is that it might help to break a "queue" so to say of which male elephant is allowed to mate. It is also possible that musth allows for males to have greater energy and to rove (roam) over larger areas, which then gives males the opportunity to sample more females than nonmusth males. Data were collected by a seven-member team. The team members drove along pre-selected routes for nearly 12 hours starting early morning and took photos and videos whenever they sighted elephants on these paths. "We aged all the elephants based on relative height, and ratio of head size to body size, and identified all the individuals based on ear, back and tail characteristics since we have a database based on long-term monitoring," says P. Keerthipriya, a research associate at the Evolutionary and Integrative Biology Unit, JNCASR. Which individual male whether in musth or not was associated with which female was recorded.

No Apparent Advantage

The key findings of the group are that young (15-30 years old) males in musth did not have an advantage over older (over 30 years) non-musth males in terms of access to females. Old musth males had an advantage over old non-musth males, and also showed a roving strategy which allows for searching for multiple females. Therefore, musth seems to be a roving strategy that is primarily advantageous to old males and not to young males. They also found that Kabini has a lower proportion of musth sightings compared to earlier studies from Kaziranga and Mudumalai. Female elephants have a four-month oestrous cycle in which they are ovulating for three or four days only. Thus, for a male to find an ovulating female and mate with her is, even normally, a rare occurrence. Further, if the female should get pregnant, she is out of circulation for about five years, because the pregnancy lasts two years and then she is lactating for over two-and-half years. Therefore, females are a rare resource for males seeking to produce offspring. Therefore, male mating strategies become very important in such a species.

Competing Males

In this context, the obvious feature is the high degree of competition that exists among males to select and mate with the few available females. This study analyses how musth might affect this competition. "The young males probably have to wait it out and invest in growth rather than reproduction while the competition is mostly among the old males," says T.N.C. Vidya of the Evolutionary and Integrative Biology Unit, JNCASR, under whose leadership the work was done. "The low occurrence of musth in Kabini brings up interesting questions about how paternity will be distributed among males in Kabini, which is now being studied," says Dr Vidya.

Shape of Sun's Corona Accurately Predicted

➔ Solar physicists from Centre for Excellence in Space Sciences (CESSI), IISER Kolkata, have succeeded in predicting the shape of Sun's corona at the time of the annular eclipse on December 25. The corona is the outermost part of the Sun's atmosphere. This is the second successful prediction, counting the last solar eclipse that was viewed from South America on July 2 this year. While the earlier prediction differed slightly from the actual image, this time, it has been pretty close to the real thing. This was imaged by NASA and European Space Agency's space-based Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) using the LASCO instrument.

 "The dynamic events on the Sun can affect Earth's outer atmosphere and our technologies, leading to disruption in communication and navigation networks (GPS). These are more frequent during solar maxima and pose a threat to space reliant technology and astronauts,".

Biomarkers for Glioma Brain Tumour Found in Peripheral Blood

➔ Researchers have found potential gene biomarkers that can be used for prognosis and early diagnosis of the most aggressive form of primary brain tumour called glioblastoma. The biomarkers can help in knowing if the tumour is at an initial stage (low-grade) or advanced stage (high-grade). The multi-institutional research work carried out by a team led by Javed N. Agrewala from Institute of Microbial Technology (CSIR-IMTECH), Chandigarh, now at IIT Ropar, looked at immune cells called macrophages in the tumour microenvironment to understand their role in suppressing or boosting the immune system to keep the tumour under check. The role of certain macrophages in suppressing the immune system leading to progression of cancers such as breast, prostate, bladder and cervical cancers is already known. Based on patient tissue samples the researchers identified two macrophages — M1 and M2 — that were associated with the tumour. These were identified using hallmark gene markers (CCL3 gene for M1 macrophage and CD163 for M2 macrophage). The M1 macrophage is protective for glioma while the M2 macrophage is not. The M2 macrophage control the immune response and intimately interacts with the tumour and supports tumour progression. "We observed that as the glioma progresses from low-grade to high-grade, the amount of M1 macrophages reduced and the amount of M2 macrophages increased," says Prof. Agrewala. "Thus, the ratio of M2 macrophage marker CD163 versus M1 macrophage marker CCL3 can ascertain the glioma progression." In the low-grade glioma, the ratio of M2/M1 macrophages (or CD163/CCL3) is less while it is high in the case of high-grade glioma tumour. "Besides indicating whether the tumour is low- or high-grade, the macrophages can also indicate the chances of survival of patients with glioma," says Aurobind Vidyarthi from

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CSIR-IMTECH, the first author of a paper published in Cancer Immunology, Immunotherapy. He is currently a post-doc at Yale University, New Haven, U.S. "In low-grade glioma patients we see both M1 and M2 macrophages. But if there are more M2 macrophages (as indicated by the gene marker expression) than M1 macrophages, the survival is less. Likewise, if there are more M1 macrophages then the patient has better chances of survival." Most studies have looked at only the local immune response in the tumour region. But these researchers went a step ahead and looked for macrophage phenotypes and different T cells in peripheral blood samples collected from glioma patients. "Interestingly, compared with healthy individuals, there was elevated level of M2 macrophages in peripheral blood too. This indicates that the influence of glioma is so prominent that M2 macrophages can be found in the blood," says Dr. Vidyarthi. Besides M2 macrophages, the researchers also found in the blood PD-1 expressing CD4 T cells. During chronic infection and tumour, the T cells become exhausted. "So instead of promoting, the exhausted CD4 T cells end up suppressing the immune system at the systemic level. Consequently, both CD4 T cells and M2 macrophages suppress the immune system at the systemic level," says Prof. Agrewala. "Thus the gene biomarkers in blood samples can be used for early diagnosis and prognosis of the gliomas. We need to carry out studies on more samples before being certain." Researchers from Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh were also a part of the study.