



## Current Affairs, 19th to 25th January, 2019

### International

#### California's Data Privacy Law

- California's new privacy law — the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) — is first-of-its-kind data legislation. As users' data are increasingly commodified by technology conglomerates, the law — which went into effect on January 1 — gives Californians new controls over how companies use their data. These controls include the right to access the data, the right to ask for its deletion, and the right to prevent its sale to third parties. Significantly, because of the global nature of the Internet, these changes will affect users worldwide. "What this new law comes down to is giving consumers the right to take back control over their information from thousands of giant corporations. This is about power: the more a company knows about you, the more power it has to shape your daily life. That power is exercised on the spectrum ranging from the benign, such as showing you a shoe ad, to the consequential, like selecting your job, your housing, or helping to shape what candidate you support in an election," Alastair Mactaggart, author of the 2018 ballot initiative that led to CCPA, wrote in the law's proposal.

#### What Rights Does the CCPA Give Californian Users?

They have the right to see what personal information businesses collect about them, and the purpose and process of the collection. Personal information refers to any information that can be linked back to the user. They can request and view what inferences the businesses make about them, and have the right to see details about their personal information being sold or given to a third party. Users can make businesses delete their personal information, and opt out of having their data sold to third parties. The law lays out some exceptions, such as information necessary for completing transactions, providing a service, protecting consumer security, and protecting freedom of speech. Users can get a copy of the collected personal information for free. Parents have to give permission to companies before the companies can sell the data of their children under the age of 13 to third parties.

#### To Which Companies Does the Law Apply?

The law only applies to businesses with gross annual revenues of more than \$25 million; those that buy, receive or sell the personal information of 50,000 or more consumers in California; or those that derive more than half of their annual revenue from selling consumers' personal information. The law applies to businesses collecting information of Californians; not just to businesses that operate in the state. Unintentional noncompliance will lead to fines of \$2,500 per violation; intentional noncompliance will attract a penalty of \$7,500 per violation. Some studies estimate it will cost businesses \$55 billion to initially meet the standards, of which \$16 billion will be spent over the next decade. One study has said that the law protects \$12 billion worth of personal information that is used for advertising in California every year.



### What Has Changed in Practical Terms?

The law went into effect on January 1, but the California Attorney General has not begun enforcing the act yet. The AG will be allowed to take action six months after the rules are finalised, or on July 1. At the very least, companies will need to set up web pages and phone numbers to take requests. Users also may begin to see a new button on websites stating “Do Not Sell My Personal Information”. Several large companies have set up new infrastructure to comply. Google launched a Chrome extension to block Google Analytics from collecting data. Facebook has said that the law doesn’t apply to them since they do not “sell” data, and that they already have features that comply with the law (such as a tool that allows users to access and delete their information). Bloomberg has reported that a wave of new start-ups is pitching products to companies to help them adhere to the new rules.

### How Does This Affect Non-Californians?

First, even Indian companies that have customers in California would have to comply with the law. Second, many firms are finding it easier to make the legal changes for all users rather than trying to distinguish users from California. Microsoft will roll out changes for all Americans, and Mozilla (which owns the Firefox browser) will make changes for all their users. The European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) too, shifted the entire Internet economy, not just that of the EU. California is often a trailblazer for legislation, inspiring other states and even countries to adopt similar regulations. In the US itself, there is bipartisan support for several new data privacy bills making their way through Congress now.

### What Are the Criticisms of The Act?

The Act gives users the right to stop the selling of their data, but not the collection of their data. So, while this reins in the data broker system, it does not do much to affect companies like Facebook and Google that make most of their money by collecting the data, not by selling it. Advertisers pay Facebook to target ads to users based off that data; they don’t pay Facebook for the data itself. Some say the act places the burden of navigating this complex economy on users. Others argue that many of the provisions are vaguely worded — leaving concepts such as “third-party sharing” or “selling” up to interpretation. Experts told The Verge that compliance challenges will be greater with CCPA than with the GDPR.

### How Does This Act Compare with India’s Proposed Data Protection Bill?

Several of these rights are also in India’s Personal Data Protection Bill. These include the right to access a copy of your data, and the right to deletion. India’s bill goes further in some regards, including the right to correction. However, India’s bill is more focused on users’ rights over collections, while California’s act is focused more on the third-party sharing and selling of a user’s data.

### How MBS Hacked Bezos

- A malicious file attached to an encrypted video message sent on WhatsApp is believed to have been used in **hacking Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos’s iPhone in May 2018. The sender of the message: Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman (MBS).** The Financial Times and The Guardian reported that a forensic analysis of Bezos’s phone showed that it was compromised via the WhatsApp message. A United Nations report released late

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on Wednesday evening confirmed the hacking and provided extensive forensic details. It said Bezos was “subjected to intrusive surveillance via hacking of his phone as a result of actions attributable to the WhatsApp account used by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman”, and **linked the break-in to criticism of the Saudi regime and Prince Mohammad personally by The Washington Post, the media organisation that Bezos owns.** The report has concluded the **Pegasus spyware developed by the Israeli firm NSO Group** was “most likely” used in the hacking. Pegasus was used last year to target some 1,400 devices in 20 countries across four continents, including at least two dozen academics, lawyers, Dalit activists, and journalists in India. The UN report called for further investigations into the contravention of the “fundamental international human rights standard”, as evidenced by the targeting of Bezos.

### Why Was Jeff Bezos’s Phone Hacked? What Exactly Happened?

That Bezos’s phone had been compromised was reported last year, and it was suspected that Saudi Arabia had a hand in the hacking. What has now been confirmed is the vector, and the method used for the hacking — and that Prince Mohammad was personally involved. **In February 2019, Bezos wrote a blog post alleging he was being blackmailed by David Pecker, the CEO of American Media Inc (AMI), which owns the tabloid The National Enquirer. The tabloid had published intimate text messages that Bezos had sent to his girlfriend Lauren Sanchez. One reason for the alleged blackmail was The Washington Post’s reporting, which had exposed The National Enquirer’s connections with the Saudi regime.** The Post, and especially its columnist Jamal Khashoggi, had been very critical of MBS. Khashoggi was subsequently lured into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and murdered by Saudi agents. In March 2019, Gavin De Becker a security expert hired by Bezos to investigate the blackmail, wrote a long post in The Daily Beast, explaining that the messages and intimate texts were likely obtained illegally from Bezos’s phone, and that the Saudis were responsible.

### So How Was Whatsapp Used to Hack into Bezos’s Phone?

The UN report says that on May 1, 2018, “a message from the Crown Prince account (was) sent to Bezos through WhatsApp”. The message was an encrypted video file, and “the video’s downloader infect(ed) Bezos’s phone with malicious code”. The spyware then stole “gigabytes worth of data” over months. An analysis of the suspect video file initially did not reveal the presence of malware; this was only confirmed by further analysis. The reason was that the video had been delivered via an encrypted downloader host on WhatsApp’s media server — and because WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted, it was not possible to decrypt or access the contents of this downloader. Once Bezos’s device was compromised, “there was an anomalous and extreme change in phone behaviour, with cellular data originating from the phone (data egress) increasing by 29,156 per cent”, the forensic report said. The “data spiking then continued over the following months at rates as much as 106,031,045 per cent higher than the pre-video data egress base line”.

### How Is the Saudi Regime Linked to The NSO Group?

In August 2018, international human rights organisation **Amnesty International** reported that one of its international workers from Saudi Arabia received a WhatsApp message, with content related to a Saudi protest in Washington. The message also included a suspicious link. Investigations by the organisation revealed that the message contained links that would have been used to deploy spyware — and that the links and domain names used were similar



to those previously used by Pegasus, the spyware sold by the NSO Group. The Amnesty report also found that another of its human rights activists from Saudi Arabia too, had received a suspicious text message with malicious links. In October 2018, **The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto in Canada revealed how the phone of Saudi activist Omar Abdulaziz was targeted by the Pegasus spyware. The Citizen Lab has published detailed reports on the deployment of Pegasus in various parts of the world. Abdulaziz was also a friend of Jamal Khashoggi's and, like the murdered journalist, a vocal critic of Saudi Arabia.** Abdulaziz too, was sent a suspicious link as part of an SMS, which claimed to be a package-tracking message. The Citizen Lab analysis showed the link was connected to the Pegasus spyware, which was then installed on this phone, and was used to track and monitor conversations.

### How Apple Vs FBI Frames A Big Tech Debate

- US Attorney General William Barr asked Apple to provide access to two iPhones used by Saudi Air Force officer Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani who shot and killed three people at a naval base in Pensacola, Florida, in December. Barr accused Apple of providing no “substantive assistance” to investigators trying to break into the phones. Apple says it has already handed over all the data in its possession to the FBI. But the FBI also wants data on the phone that might not be on the cloud. Two days after Barr’s demand, President Donald Trump tweeted his frustration with the company: “We are helping Apple all of the time on TRADE and so many other issues, and yet they refuse to unlock phones used by killers, drug dealers and other violent criminal elements. They will have to step up to the plate and help our great Country, NOW!” This is the second time in four years that Apple is at the centre of a battle that pits personal privacy against public safety. In 2015, the FBI went to court to force Apple to help them unlock an iPhone 5c that belonged to Syed Rizwan Farook who, along with his wife Tashfeen Malik, killed 14 people and injured 22 others in a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California.

### What Does the FBI Want This Time?

FBI wants Apple’s help to unlock an iPhone 5 and an iPhone 7 that belonged to Alshamrani. It appears the phones were damaged, but the FBI got them working again — but is unable to unlock them due to Apple’s encryption and enhanced security tools. As in 2015, this would require a “backdoor entry” to the phones, bypassing encryption. Apple insists it does not create back doors for anyone, including law enforcers and its own employees, because these can be exploited easily, and would compromise the security of all iPhone users. At the recent CES 2020 show in Las Vegas, Apple’s Senior Director of Global Privacy Jane Horvath defended the company’s position on encryption, saying iPhones contain a lot of personal data on health and financial matters, etc. that need to be protected in case a device is stolen.

### Can an iPhone Be Unlocked Without Apple’s Help?

As has been demonstrated earlier, it is not impossible to break the encryption. Alshamrani had models that were relatively old, and it is argued that they can be opened by specialised cyber-security firms that offer their services to law enforcement agencies. The FBI had ultimately got into the San Bernardino terrorist’s iPhone 5c with help from a third-party vendor that supplied the software, reportedly for \$900,000. It is being said that on this occasion too, the FBI might not need Apple’s help, especially if Alshamrani’s phones run an older (and therefore less secure) version of iOS. But the FBI has said in a statement that it





has turned to Apple only after exhausting all options. Since the 2015 showdown, Apple has fixed security vulnerabilities or ‘bugs’ in its software, thus making it harder to ‘hack’ into a device. However, **software such as Cellebrite and GrayKey can break into iPhones**. GraftShift, the company behind GrayKey, is focused exclusively on iPhones, and is believed to have been used by the FBI in the past.

### How Did Apple React on The Earlier Occasion (2015)?

After Apple refused the help that FBI wanted, the agency got an order from a judge who directed the company to provide “reasonable technical assistance” to the investigators. Apple was required to load a specific iOS recovery file onto the device so the FBI could recover the password. Apple CEO Tim Cook wrote a letter to all customers during the crisis, which was posted on the company’s website. Cook underlined in the letter that the order would have an impact far beyond the case at hand — and pointed out that basically, engineers who had worked to secure the device were now being told to undo those same protections. This would be opening the Pandora’s box, Cook said, because it would put consumers’ data at risk from cyber criminals. Apple did not have to ultimately comply, which it had seemed unlikely to anyway. The FBI managed to open the iPhone 5c, and the government moved to have the order vacated, arguing it was no longer needed.

### But Why Do Tech Companies Not Want to Allow Access to Phones?

The issue is not just about a terrorist’s or a criminal’s phone, as Trump said on Twitter. For the tech companies, this is a much wider issue of privacy. Smartphones are today the most important device for many people, who store personal information, including financial information, on their devices. For tech companies, be it Apple with its iOS devices or Google and its Android ecosystem, it is critical to secure devices against any kind of vulnerability. That is why companies push out monthly updates to the software — or sometimes a quick security update when they discover serious a flaw. No “back door” can be restricted only to law enforcement; it can be exploited by anyone, including hackers. If a key to open a device without a passcode is created, it can be easily replicated in the digital world by someone for whom the key was not originally intended. The knowledge that their devices could be accessed by someone else will result in a major loss of consumer trust — not something tech companies want. Across the world, there is deepening concern over unauthorised surveillance of devices by state agencies. The privacy vs encryption debate is playing out in India too. In several cases, law enforcement authorities have demanded that tech companies hand over consumers’ data. However, in end-to-end encrypted apps such as WhatsApp, data such as messages are with the user, and are not backed up to the company’s servers. Companies are saying they don’t have the data that the agencies are seeking. And as the Apple case shows, this tussle is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

### Russia

- ➔ Russian President Vladimir Putin’s government reshuffle is the latest phase of a calculated transition strategy aimed at his political relevance beyond 2024, when he demits office. The overhaul, detailed in his recent state of the nation address, includes sweeping constitutional changes, which he said would be put to a referendum. **Most significant is perhaps a two-term limit for future Presidents. Mr. Putin is currently serving his fourth. A 2008 manoeuvre, when the former KGB officer, at the end of a second successive term swapped the presidency with**



Dmitry Medvedev, installing himself Prime Minister for the next four years, caused outrage. A third term from 2013, was after an amendment to extend presidential terms to six years. There was a hint of the new revamp at a press conference in December, when Mr. Putin also pointed to a woman's eligibility for the country's highest office. Other changes include the expansion of the powers of Parliament and Prime Minister, besides strengthening the State Council. Speculation is rife that Mr. Putin could head the latter body, in a role similar in importance to Kazakhstan's former President Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 after a 30-year rule. Mr. Medvedev, and also the entire cabinet, who resigned soon after the address, is now deputy of the Kremlin's newly created security council. The staunch Putin ally has been replaced as premier by Mikhail Mishustin, Russia's highly regarded head of taxation, but with little political experience. The nomination has occasioned comparisons with past government overhauls. Mr. Medvedev was one prominent Putin associate who survived the changes effected after the President's 2018 re-election, when many long-time appointees made way for younger loyalists. The poll itself was criticised as a charade, as prominent Opposition candidate Alexei Navalny was earlier barred from the contest. The slant of Mr. Putin's proposals is in sync with his political stance, for instance in his public comments last year that liberalism had outlived its utility. Moscow's Syrian military intervention has bolstered its influence across West Asia. Similarly, the aggression in Ukraine and Georgia may have restored some of Russia's lost authority following the Soviet Union's disintegration. Mr. Putin has, perhaps not without justification, ascribed Russian expansionism as the appropriate response to the extension of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, beyond the former Eastern Bloc, to the erstwhile states of the Soviet Union. At home however, a persistent economic crunch has led his poll ratings to plummet. Paradoxically though, Mr. Putin is the only leader of any consequence a whole new generation of Russians has known. Therefore, despite the frequent protests against repressive policies and high prices, it may be premature to write him off.

### Libya Summit Seeks End to Foreign Meddling

- World leaders made a fresh push for peace in Libya at a summit in Berlin, in a desperate bid to stop the conflict-wracked nation from turning into a "second Syria". The Presidents of Russia, Turkey and France joined other global chiefs at the talks hosted by Chancellor Angela Merkel and held under the auspices of the United Nations. The summit's main goal is to get foreign powers wielding influence in the region to stop interfering in the war — be it through weapons, troops or financing. Haftar in Leaders of both warring factions — strongman Khalifa Haftar and the head of Tripoli's UN-recognised government Fayeze al-Sarraj — were also in Berlin for the first such gathering since 2018. But pro-Haftar forces upped the ante ahead of the talks by blocking oil exports at Libya's key ports, crippling the country's main income source in protest at Turkey's decision to send troops to shore up Mr. Sarraj's Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). Ahead of the talks, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lashed out at Mr. Haftar, saying he needed to drop his "hostile attitude" if Libya is to have any chance at winning peace. The flaring oil crisis underlined the devastating impact of foreign influence in the conflict, in which **Mr. Sarraj's GNA is backed by Turkey and Qatar while Mr. Haftar has the support of Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.** "Libya needs all foreign interference to stop," the United Nations' special envoy Ghassan Salame told AFP. The UN hopes all sides will sign up to a plan to refrain from interference, and commit to a truce that leads to a lasting end to hostilities, according to a draft of a final communique seen by AFP. That document also urges all parties to re-commit to a much-



violated UN arms embargo and raises the prospect of intra-Libyan political talks in Geneva at the end of the month.

- Russia has sent hundreds of mercenaries to back militias laying siege to Libya's capital. The United Arab Emirates has sent jets and drones, while Egypt has provided logistical support. To stop them, Turkey has sent dozens of military advisers and is now shipping in hundreds of Syrian militiamen. The conflict in oil-rich Libya has become one of the Middle East's most intractable proxy wars. Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt are backing the former Libyan army general Khalifa Hifter, who is laying siege to the capital, Tripoli. Turkey is defending the United Nations-backed government there.
- Mr. Hifter, a 76-year-old would-be strongman, began an assault on the capital last April. As his advance stalled out last fall, Russia and Turkey jumped in on opposing sides, establishing themselves as potential kingmakers.
- The United States and Europe, who have largely stood on the side-lines, now hope that the Berlin conference will allow them to wrest back control of the discussion of Libya's future. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the leaders of more than a dozen other countries plan to attend.
- But in Tripoli expectations are low. None of the foreign powers engaged in Libya — motivated by commercial interests, geopolitical games or regional and ideological rivalries — have so far shown any willingness to back off. Mr. Hifter has said he would participate in the conference, but has never shown a willingness to accept any deal that gives him less than full control of the country. His main foreign sponsor, the United Arab Emirates, had urged him to keep fighting rather than accept a cease-fire, according to three diplomats familiar with the discussions.
- Leaders of the United Nations-backed government in Tripoli have also shown a recent distaste for the need to compromise with Mr. Hifter, claiming that the new influx of Turkish support gave them the potential for military victory. Libya has struggled to emerge from chaos since NATO forces ousted the dictator Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi nine years ago. The power vacuum made Libya a tempting target for ambitious foreign powers eyeing its vast oil reserves and long Mediterranean coastline. **Its permeable desert borders have also made it a pressure point for the West, as both a haven for extremists and a jumping-off point for thousands of Europe-bound migrants.** For years, Washington exerted little public pressure to stop regional partners like the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Qatar or Turkey from fuelling the chaos by supporting rival Libyan militias.

### How Rohingya Issue Reached ICJ

- The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** ruled that **Myanmar must take effective measures to protect its Rohingya Muslims, including protecting evidence relating to allegations of genocide.** It is important to note that these directions are "provisional measures" until the ICJ can finally decide if Myanmar has been committing an ongoing genocide against the Rohingya. The final verdict could take several years.

### What Is the Case Against Myanmar?

In November last year, the **Republic of the Gambia** moved the ICJ against Myanmar over alleged violations of the **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.** The Gambia urged the ICJ to direct Myanmar to stop the genocide, ensure that persons committing genocide are punished, and allow the "safe and dignified return of forcibly displaced Rohingya". **The Gambia and Myanmar are parties to the Genocide**

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**Convention that allows a party to move the ICJ for violations.** According to Article 9 of the Genocide Convention, “Disputes between the Contracting Parties relating to the interpretation, application or fulfilment of the present Convention, including those relating to the responsibility of a State for genocide or for any of the other acts enumerated in article III, shall be submitted to the International Court of Justice at the request of any of the parties to the dispute”. The Gambia also sought six provisional measures against Myanmar including its cooperation with United Nations bodies investigating the Rohingya issue.

### How Did Myanmar Respond?

Myanmar asked the ICJ to remove the case from its list, **citing lack of jurisdiction of the court.** Myanmar alleged that the proceedings before the court were instituted by the Gambia, not on its own behalf, but rather as a “proxy” and “on behalf of” the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).** **Gambia is a member of the OIC, which includes 53 Muslim-majority nations.** Myanmar cited the Gambia’s reliance on OIC documents to allege genocide and said the Gambia did not point to specific violations of the Genocide Convention. **The court refused to accept Myanmar’s argument** and said the fact that the Gambia “may have sought and obtained the support of other States or international organizations in its endeavour” does not take away from its right to bring a case against Myanmar.

Arguing the defence in person during the three-day public hearings last month, **Ms. Suu Kyi,** who was elected in 2016, **insisted that the 2017 violence was proportionate to the threat of insurgency.** In a statement, it defended the army’s action as a legitimate response to violations of the law by the insurgent **Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.** However, the above claim is at odds with the findings this week of an Independent Commission of Enquiry established by the government. The Commission acknowledged that war crimes had indeed been committed during the military campaign, when about 900 people were killed. But there was nothing to back the assertions of gang-rape, or evidence to presume any intent of genocide, it held.

### Does the ICJ Ruling Indict Myanmar?

Although a ruling against Myanmar dents its image internationally, the order of provisional measures does not translate into a finding against Myanmar. While granting provisional measures, the court is not required to ascertain whether Myanmar violated the Genocide Convention. The court found that it is sufficient at this stage “to establish prima facie the existence of a dispute between the Parties relating to the interpretation, application or fulfilment of the Genocide Convention”. **Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s personal appearance before the ICJ to lead the defence of the military, however, shows the great stakes her country had in the case.** In her 30-minute speech, she said the military’s action against certain **local armed groups** was an ‘internal conflict’; she **did not use the term Rohingya** to define the ethnic minority.

### What Happens If Myanmar Does Not Comply with The Provisional Measures?

For its part, Myanmar has denied that its military or paramilitary has participated in a genocide of Rohingya and it is unlikely to alter its position. Provisional measures are essentially a restraining order against a state when a case is pending and can be seen as, at most, a censure. Provisional orders cannot be challenged and are binding upon the state.





However, **limitations in enforcing decisions of the ICJ are widely acknowledged by law experts.**

### What Are These Limitations?

As per Article 94 of the Charter of the United Nations, all member states are required to comply with decisions of the ICJ. However, any action by a state can be secured only through consent of the state in international law. When a state fails to comply, **the Security Council has the power to impose sanctions against it and ensure compliance when international security and peace are at stake. So far, the Security Council has never taken a coercive measure against any country to get an ICJ ruling implemented.** Even with the stepping in of the Security Council, there are several hurdles in enforcement of ICJ decisions. Any one of the five permanent **members of the Security Council with veto powers** can block the enforcement of an ICJ decision against itself or its ally. For example, **in Nicaragua v United States (1989) where the ICJ ruled against the US holding it responsible for illegal military and paramilitary activities in and against Nicaragua, the US refused to abide by the ruling.**

### Same Country, Different Script (Sudheendra Kulkarni Who Served as An Aide to Atal Bihari Vajpayee In the Prime Minister's Office)

- "Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is now jobless and withering away. It's so starved of funds that it is trying to retrench its operatives by finding livelihood opportunities for them in mainstream society. Terrorist organisations in Pakistan have never felt so squeezed by the authorities as they do now." I heard this, and much more, from Imtiaz Alam, at his office in Lahore. A well-known media person and secretary general of the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), he is a battle-hardened activist for peace between India and Pakistan. One of the fiercest critics of Islamisation, he spent five years in jail during General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorial regime. He has faced death threats in the past from LeT and other militant organisations. "But things have changed now," he told me, as we got into his car to go to his home. "Look, this is a bullet-proof car. I still use it, but there's been one important difference. Until last year, I used to have gun-carrying bodyguards travelling with me all the time. There is no need for them now. The Pakistan Army has broken the back of terrorist organisations." Yes, Pakistan is changing in significant ways, both for its own good and for the good of its neighbours. Specifically, my 10-day visit to Islamabad, Lahore and the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara last month convinced me that Pakistan is now ready — more ready perhaps than ever before — for peace with India. Not just the civil society, not only the political parties, but even its military establishment has come to favour peaceful and cooperative relations with India. Figuratively speaking, both Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan's two centres of power, are now on the same page in seeking "honourable peace" with New Delhi on the basis of "sovereign equality". There is now broad recognition in most sections of Pakistani society and polity that their country has paid a very heavy price by supporting the forces of Islamist extremism and terrorism, and by using these for achieving mistaken foreign policy ends in Afghanistan and India.

### Conducive for Dialogue

My host, Dr. Abid Qaiyum Suleri, who heads the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), one of the best think-tanks in South Asia, and who serves as a member of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's advisory council on economic matters, said to me: "Pakistan



has the best conditions now to support a fruitful dialogue with India. Domestically, there is consensus among all the stakeholders on this issue. Even our media is not as hostile towards India, unlike the jingoistic Indian media that routinely paints Pakistan as an enemy nation." Sadly, these winds of change are not adequately noticed, nor acknowledged, in India. Four factors have influenced the welcome winds of change in Pakistan. First, there is across-the-board realisation that Pakistan has suffered a lot, both domestically and in terms of damage to its global image, by supporting religious extremism and terrorism. Terrorists have killed a shockingly large number of civilians — certainly far many more than in India. Several thousand soldiers have lost their lives in the army's "war on terror" — more than the number of casualties in all the wars with India. Furthermore, Islamabad is under relentless pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to act decisively and irreversibly against terrorist organisations.

### Radicalisation on The Retreat

Second, the ideological influence of religious radicalisation on Pakistan's civil society is clearly on the wane, at a time when militant majoritarianism is on the rise in India. Let us hear the wise words of Fakir S. Aijazuddin, an eminent Pakistani scholar and a well-known friend of India, whom I met at his home in Lahore. "We Pakistanis have paid a heavy price — violent conflicts, sectarianism, extremism, intolerance and loss of rights and freedoms — because we allowed Islamisation of our state and society. If India wants to commit the same mistake by allowing its Hinduisation, you are most welcome. But remember that the price you will pay will be far higher." What has contributed to the diminished importance of religious radicalism is also the shrinking inflow of petro-dollars from Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries that promoted this agenda. Export of Wahhabism is no longer a foreign policy priority of the Saudi Arabian government. The United Arab Emirates has gone a step further. Under the leadership of Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, it is pursuing inter-religious tolerance with a zeal that has surprised Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

### Three-Nation Links

The third factor is China, which has emerged as Pakistan's most important economic and security partner. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has begun to modernise the country's infrastructure spectacularly. China has urged Pakistan's ruling establishment to take firm steps to curb the activities of Islamist groups, because they can easily foment trouble in China's Muslim-majority Xinjiang province. Furthermore, Beijing is also engaged in a steady effort to improve relations with New Delhi, in recognition of India's rising economic and geopolitical stature in Asia and globally. As was reported in this newspaper, China's President Xi Jinping even mooted — in his second informal summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Mamallapuram, off Chennai, last October — cooperation among China, India and Pakistan. Mushahid Hussain, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, told me that the "three-nation cooperation will be a game-changer". Lastly, I heard from several influential Pakistanis that the military establishment — in particular, Chief of Army Staff Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, who has got a three-year extension in office — is now fully convinced of the need for normalisation of India-Pakistan relations. The opening of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor, perhaps the greatest confidence-building measure between the two countries since 1947, is almost entirely due to Gen. Bajwa's personal commitment to the project. He is also said to be convinced of the need to open the doors for economic and trade cooperation



between the two countries. According to one person who has direct knowledge of it, he even asked the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to conduct a study on this subject, which revealed that Pakistan, currently facing a serious economic crisis, would greatly benefit from cooperation with India. The source told me: "The Pakistan Army may also be ready to discuss a solution to the Kashmir issue on the basis of a formula Gen. Pervez Musharraf had discussed with your PMs Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh." As I crossed the Wagah border to travel back from Lahore to Amritsar, my mind searched for an answer to a troubling question: Will Prime Minister Modi seize, or miss, this opportunity to resume fruitful talks with Pakistan?

### The Sultan Who Shielded Oman From Regional Turmoil

→ **Oman's Sultan Qaboos**, who died on 10<sup>th</sup> January aged 79, transformed the former Arabian Peninsula backwater into a modern state and sought-after mediator while shielding the sultanate from a region in turmoil. The intensely private Sultan — the longest-reigning ruler in the modern Arab world — left no apparent heir and the royal family was charged with selecting a successor. Instead, however, they opted for the Sultan's own choice, his cousin **Haitham bin Tariq**, who was named in a sealed letter that Sultan Qaboos had prepared in case of a deadlock.

On July 23, 1970, he deposed his father in a palace coup, pledging "a new era" for the nation. Oman is strategically located on the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow seaway through which much of the world's oil supply passes — and between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia. Sultan Qaboos maintained good ties with both nations, a balancing act that made his capital a must-stop for Western and Arab diplomats as well as military chiefs alike.

In 2015, Oman was the only GCC country not to join a Saudi-led military coalition against Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen. It leveraged this neutrality to mediate the release of multiple foreign hostages captured by Yemen's warring factions. Muscat also maintained close military and economic ties with Britain and the U.S. Unlike other Arab states, Sultan Qaboos did not contest Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel, opening a trade office in Tel Aviv in the mid-1990s — shuttered in 2000 during a Palestinian uprising.

Sultan Qaboos assumed power as an unknown and spent his first years cultivating the respect of his countrymen, from the mountainous interior to the coast. He channelled revenues from fledgling oil exports into infrastructure, taking the country from having just a handful of primary schools and some 8 km of paved roads to a modern state with well over 1,000 schools and a massive highway network. But Sultan Qaboos was no ceremonial monarch. He held every top post, from Commander of the Armed Forces to Finance Minister.

## Foreign Affairs

### Story of Sri Lanka's Citizenship Law

→ On December 18, a Home Ministry spokesperson seeking to address questions around the new citizenship law wrote on Twitter: "On different occasions special provisions have been made by Government in the past to accommodate the citizenship of foreigners who had to flee to India. E.g. 4.61 lakh Tamils of Indian origin were given Indian citizenship during 1964-2008." The reference was to the Indian Origin Tamils (IOTs) of Sri Lanka, and the **Lal Bahadur Shastri-Sirimavo Bandaranaike Pact of 1964**. The statement, though not accurate, highlighted

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



unwittingly the **disastrous consequences of exclusionary citizenship legislation enacted by Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) within months of gaining independence in February 1948.**

### Exclusion of the IOTs

Sri Lanka's November 1948 Citizenship Act was the first in a series of divisive moves by the Sinhala ruling elites to consolidate their political base in the majority Sinhalese (Buddhist and Christian) community. It was aimed at excluding IOTs — then as now, the predominant workforce in the upcountry tea estates — whose numbers and growing association with leftist parties were proving to be politically inconvenient. **The IOTs that India accepted through the 1964 agreement were not “fleeing” Sri Lanka; most were, in fact, reluctant to leave the country in which they had lived for three generations or longer. Those that remained, were stateless in Sri Lanka for decades until their status as citizens was settled through amendments in Sri Lankan law in 1987, 1993, and 2003 — ironically because the ruling party now wanted their votes.** One of the immediate fallouts of the 1948 Act was the formation of SJV Chelvanayakam's Federal Party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi). Its later avatar, Tamil United Liberation Front, demanded a separate Eelam in 1976 in its famous Vadukodai Resolution. The rest, as they say, is history. Political scientist Amita Shastri noted that the Citizenship Act sharply delineated ethnic differences, and distorted the political system to weight it in favour the Sinhalese majority. “This created an intractable dynamic of ethnic outbidding between the two major Sinhalese-dominated parties [the United National Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party] to attract Sinhalese [voters] at the expense of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority. This directly contributed to the latter's alienation, support for secessionism, and the outbreak of ethnic violence and civil war in the 1970s and 1980s.”

### The Indian Origin Tamils

Different from Sri Lankan Tamils who live predominantly in the North and East, the IOTs are descendants of indentured Tamil workers whom the British shipped to the island in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to work on tea estates in the five hill districts of the Central and Uva provinces. These people now call themselves **Malayaha (hill country) Tamils** — because of the historical stigma attached to being “Indian” Tamils. **At the time of Sri Lanka's independence, the IOTs numbered around 800,000. They were the backbone of the tea industry, politically active, and keen to ensure their rights in independent Sri Lanka through strategic alliances with unions and left parties.** Ahead of independence, Sri Lanka's ruling classes had held fraught discussions with the British on questions of citizenship, franchise, and the rights of minorities. In the 1947 elections to the Ceylon legislature, the IOTs represented by the Ceylon Indian Congress allied with the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (representing the Sri Lankan Tamils) and the left parties. The CIC won 7 seats, helped the left parties win 14, and influenced results in 5 or 6 other seats. The Sinhalese elite-dominated United National Party won 42 out of the 95 seats. Determined to blunt their political clout, the UNP described IOTs as “birds of passage” with no loyalty to the country, as India's fifth column in Sri Lanka, and as people who stole the locals' jobs. Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister D S Senanayake rushed the Citizenship Act through the legislature just seven months after independence.

### The Citizenship Act

Under the Act, citizenship could be only by patrilineal descent or registration. For citizenship by registration, unmarried persons had to show 10 years of uninterrupted stay in Sri Lanka





from the date of application; married persons had to show 7 years. Most IOTs were unlettered and poor, with no documents. Effectively an entire community was rendered stateless. Soon afterward came the Indian & Pakistani Residents' Act of 1949, which opened a window for those above a certain income level. Finally, the 1949 Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment was passed, under which only citizens could vote. The IOTs were stripped of voting rights, and the fallout was immediate: in 1947, there were 7 Indian Tamils in the legislature; in 1952, there were none. The Citizenship Act triggered panic similar to that seen in Assam during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process. By August 5, 1951, when the two-year deadline for applications for citizenship ended, 2,37,000 applications had been filed, covering most of the 8,24,430 Indian Tamils. By 1964, with the natural increase in population, the number of stateless IOTs reached nearly 10 lakhs. Only 1,40,000 had been granted citizenship under the Indian & Pakistani Residents' Act, and 2,50,000 were accepted by India as its citizens.

### India-Sri Lanka Relations

The treatment of Indian Tamils had cast a shadow on India-Sri Lanka relations even before independence; post-independence, the citizenship laws became a major irritant. They were denounced in India, and the Madras legislature passed a resolution against them. In 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had tried unsuccessfully to persuade Senanayake to give citizenship to all Indian Tamils who had lived in the country for 7 years prior to January 1, 1948. The two countries corresponded on this issue until Nehru's death in 1964. Nehru rejected the Sri Lankan position that the "stateless" IOTs were automatically Indian citizens, and would have to be shipped to India. After the 1962 war with China, Prime Minister Shastri was eager to mend fences with Sri Lanka. He gave in to Bandaranaike's demands, and it was agreed that Sri Lanka would accept 3,00,000 IOTs and their natural increase, while India would accept 5,25,000 IOTs and their natural increase. The status of the balance 1,50,000 IOTs was to be decided later. Some 4,00,000 reluctantly applied for citizenship of India; 6,30,000 applied for Sri Lanka's. By the time the window agreed upon in 1964 closed, only 1,62,000 IOTs had been given Sri Lankan citizenship. In the same period, India gave citizenship to over 3,50,000.

### Sinhala-Tamil Tensions

Majoritarianism had by then taken firm root in Sri Lanka's politics. In 1956, SWRD Bandaranaike, who had broken from the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1951, became Prime Minister on the Sinhala Only plank, which then became the Official Language Act. There were protests by Tamils, and Chelvanayakam's Federal Party demanded a new federal constitution with autonomy for the Tamil dominated north and east, and the scrapping of the Citizenship Act. The 1957 "Banda-Chelva agreement" followed, which the UNP opposed strongly. Ethnic riots broke out, and SWRD tore up the agreement. But the ethnic crisis was now out of control. In the coming decades it would morph into the LTTE's bloody war for independence. By the time the war came to its terrible end in 2009, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians had been killed, and both Tamils and Sinhala's had suffered irreparably. As for the IOTs, as the two major Sinhala parties came to realise the value of the chunk of their votes, substantive changes were made to the law in 1993 and 2003 to absorb them as citizens of the country. The decades-long absence of political representation, however, led to the complete exclusion of Indian Tamils from the Sri Lankan national imagination. The community became poorer, lacking access to education, better living and



work conditions. Until almost the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had the worst human development indices of any ethnic community in Sri Lanka. Small improvements have been registered since.

- As a majority of the repatriates who were first sent to Sri Lanka were Dalits from some of the most impoverished regions of Tamil Nadu, their return to India and rehabilitation in the Nilgiris was met with stern disapproval from the local communities. “There was definitely some stigma attached to us — first because we were Dalits, and second because the Tamil Eelam movement in Sri Lanka was gaining traction in the public consciousness, leading to suspicions that repatriates sympathised with the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam],” he says. The repatriates today have new worries. While they face an uncertain future due to the fall in tea prices, a bigger concern is the government’s proposal to rollout the National Population Register and the National Register of Citizens, which may require them to furnish documents to prove their citizenship. Many repatriates misplaced or lost their documents in transit several decades ago. Some others recently lost their documents in the rains that triggered landslips and floods in the hills. An activist working with the repatriate communities in the Nilgiris says many repatriates became victims of fraud when they first arrived in India. “When we first got here, many brokers approached us with promises of getting us resettled. They took away our travel documents and made a lot of money by applying for loans and settlement packages on behalf of the repatriates. Anywhere between 25% to 30% of the repatriates lost their documents under different circumstances. It’s unclear whether this will lead to problems for the community [in proving their citizenship],” he says.

### Myanmar’s Growing Dependence on China (Rajiv Bhatia - Former Ambassador to Myanmar)

- Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Myanmar last week is a vivid indicator of the region’s changing geopolitics, reflecting adversely on the West and its allies. Its real significance transcends the 33 agreements signed, although it is an impressive number in itself for a short sojourn of a day and a half. President Xi took his own time in coming to the southern neighbour which had to be content with largely one-way VVIP traffic, as Myanmar’s top leaders travelled to Beijing with noticeable regularity. Does the red-carpet treatment extended to the President of China show that today’s Myanmar, jointly led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the military, has taken sides? The optics may probably indicate this, considering how things have changed since 2012 when Barack Obama became the first sitting American President to visit Myanmar and initiate a historic rapprochement. The previous leader, President Thein Sein, played the U.S.-China game with dexterity, but the present leadership, hobbled by the Rohingya crisis and its own internal vulnerabilities, feels compelled to keep moving closer to Beijing.

The two governments plan to make good use of the 2+2 high-level consultations, comprising the two Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers. A close reading of what the Chinese stated before and during the visit confirms that the traditional “pauk-phaw” (fraternal) ties between China and Myanmar are in full bloom now. An explicit stipulation is that the relationship should encompass not only the governments but also the two peoples. Mr. Xi emphasised that the goal was to craft “a new blueprint for bilateral ties.” A major focus undoubtedly has been on the economic dimension of the relationship that goes beyond trade and investment, as China has been Myanmar’s top partner for years. In the domain of infrastructure, a



sustained push is being given to turn into reality the proposed **China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)**, a vital component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Chinese also made it clear that the Myanmar government, currently under intense international pressure due to its rigid position on the Rohingya issue, will continue to receive China's full support. Beijing has positioned itself as the great defender of Myanmar's legitimate rights, interests and national dignity at a time when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is about to pronounce on the charges of genocide against the Myanmar military. As regards the Myanmar people, their grievances against some of the Chinese projects are getting addressed, with an unspoken agreement reached not to push the controversial Myitsone Dam project just yet.

### Other Implications

Mr. Xi's conscious choice to spend ample time on discussions with Myanmar's top three leaders — President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing — conveyed a significant message. Despite past endeavours, the leadership has failed to deliver on ethnic reconciliation or constitutional reform and transition to full democracy. The Chinese side seemed comfortable with the status quo and may have advised its continuation, given the external challenges. This may well suit the NLD government and its military partners, as the nation heads to the elections later in the year. As long as Ms. Suu Kyi does not excessively exert herself to bring full-fledged democracy, her return to power, albeit with a reduced majority, may be on the cards. Her brave defence of the military before the ICJ last December turned her into a national hero, even as she further lost her international following. As to what happens to Myanmar's traditional inclination towards neutrality and independent foreign policy, the government is apparently running out of friendly nations that could help it to balance China. The U.S., the European Union (EU) and Japan are unable or unwilling (or both) to play that role any longer.

### Impact on India

The situation around India has taken an adverse turn in the recent months. Against the general backdrop of consolidation of China-Pakistan relations, Mr. Xi's visit to Nepal, his strategic gains in Myanmar, and forthcoming visit of the Sri Lankan President to Beijing form part of a pattern. It is one of the setbacks and challenges to India's diplomacy in South Asia. It calls for deep reflection and comprehensive consultations with the finest minds in the country.

### India Helps Maldives Tackle Measles Outbreak

- India has stepped in to help the Maldives tackle a recent outbreak of measles, identified at a government hospital about three weeks ago. The Indian Embassy in Male handed over 30,000 doses of measles and rubella (MR) vaccine to the Maldivian Health Ministry. The outbreak comes less than three years after the World Health Organisation declared the Maldives measles-free. As many as six persons have so far been affected by the contagious viral infection. Following the development, health authorities in the Maldives said they have intensified the vaccination drive, to prevent the infectious disease from spreading further. The six cases of measles so far identified are from Hulhumale — the reclaimed island adjoining capital Male — and capital Male, according to the Minister, who is heading a task force to handle the outbreak. The Maldives, he said, is observing 2020 as the year of public



health, when an unexpected public health challenge emerged. The vaccine provided by India reached Male within 72 hours after the government made a request, a statement from the Indian Embassy said, adding that Minister of Health Abdulla Ameen presented a certificate of appreciation to Indian Ambassador Sunjay Sudhir, thanking the Government of India for the “gesture of goodwill and solidarity.” The Indian government’s initiative comes even as the two countries implement the Memorandum of Understanding on Health cooperation — signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Male in June 2019. Secretary-level delegations met in Male early January to draw a roadmap for cooperation, in capacity building and training of doctors and medical professionals, disease surveillance, training of mental health professionals, setting up of digital health capacities in Maldives, officials said. India is also helping build a 100-bed Cancer Hospital in Hulhumale as part of its \$800 million Line of Credit to the island nation, a popular tourist destination and home to over 4,00,000 people.

### It’s Not Yet Howdy, Modi!

- U.S. President Donald Trump completed three years in office amid the chaos this week of an impeachment trial, initiated by the Democrats. If he goes on to win a second term in November as it now appears, Mr. Trump will have had six overlapping years with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in power by 2024. Persistent in their efforts to remake their countries and their engagement with the world, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump are shaking up the bilateral ties between the two countries, and the resultant flux could outlive their tenures. Mr. Trump is scheduled to make this first visit to India next month.

### As Leading A ‘Reawakening’

Both leaders continuously reiterate that their predecessors were incapable of protecting national interest. Such a premise commits them both to reframe the national interest, and both have articulated it with clarity and force. For instance, Mr. Modi, in Houston in September 2019 and Mr. Trump in Davos this week, went great lengths to lay out figures that presented their respective regimes as the most effective guardians, and ushers of progress, of India and America in history. Both have a cultural and an economic agenda. Both dispensations believe that “the people” had been given a raw deal by earlier regimes, controlled by the elites and the experts who were in collusion with their global counterparts. They are now leading a national reawakening, and working hard for the hard-working people, they point out. Both believe that cultural nationalism is a force for the good; and both believe that Islamism is a major challenge to the nation. Though it is transnational, Islamism has collaborators and facilitators within the borders, as per their shared world view. Both believe that national borders need to be strengthened by stricter monitoring and setting new bars for entry. “JOBS, JOBS JOBS” as Mr. Trump tweets frequently in all capital letters, has been the loudest promise of both of them. Both leaders try to renegotiate the contract between the union and the States, and between citizens and the state within their respective countries; they assert the supremacy of the executive over the legislature and the judiciary. Both have a grim view of critical and independent media. Despite his success in installing a legion of conservative judges, Mr. Trump has not gotten much far with his project of remaking America; for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court stalled a move to insert a question on citizenship in the census. Mr. Modi has been undoubtedly successful in warding off any meaningful scrutiny by the judiciary, and in subordinating Parliament. Categorical that the nation could not assert its rightful place in the world until they came to power under inept





predecessors, they are trying to rework the terms of engagement of their respective countries with the world. The notion of shared values of India and the U.S. has acquired a whole new meaning under Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi.

### True to Their Politics

Supporters of stronger U.S.-India ties had thought the nationalist politics of these two leaders would have a limited impact on bilateral ties that have autonomous drivers of convergence. But both leaders have been remarkably true to their politics in their governance. Mr. Trump has forced significant turns in the American approach to the world, blunting resistance from the security and corporate establishment, while Mr. Modi commanded the wholehearted support of the Indian military and security establishment for his disruptive security and strategic steps at home and abroad, though corporate India protests under its breath. Shared values notwithstanding, national interests as perceived by these leaders have several points of divergence and therein lies in the current tumult in India-U.S. ties. While Mr. Trump has been outspokenly confrontational with the “world order” that he says has worked against American interests, Mr. Modi swings between calling for adherence to order and chipping away at it. America under Mr. Trump has wrecked treaties such as the Paris climate agreement and institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations, making a mockery of “rule-based order”. India under Mr. Modi continues to push for more space for itself in global affairs by seeking a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. There has also been the cancellation of several bilateral investment treaties, based on the understanding that they were negotiated on a weak footing. India’s approach of cautiously challenging the world order predates Mr. Modi, as seen in its nuclear ambitions, but the current regime has been audacious, pre-emptive military action in a foreign country being the most instructive. Under Mr. Trump, America expanded the principle of pre-emptive strike to include the assassination of a senior official of Iran. Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi tried to renegotiate the neighbourhood policy of America and India, respectively. After dismantling the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mr. Trump forced Mexico and Canada to accede to his demands in a new trade deal. Mr. Modi’s spirited outreach in the neighbourhood is still playing out, as it has touched raw nerves in small countries always wary of a domineering India. India’s historically warm ties with Bangladesh have been frayed. While Mr. Trump does not care about its posturing, India also cannot expect any American support in realising its ambitions of reordering the global power structure in its favour.

### China and Pakistan

India’s ties with the U.S. are impacted by America’s ties with India’s adversaries and neighbours, China and Pakistan. Mr. Trump’s bluster against both had lit hope that there would finally be a near-complete alignment between India and the U.S. on strategy. Mr. Modi asked his audience in Houston which included President Mr. Trump: “Whether it is 9/11 in America or 26/11 in Mumbai, where were the conspirators found?” But there is no guarantee that cultural politics can align them. Despite his avowed opposition to America’s endless wars in West Asia, the cultural warrior in Mr. Trump has been tricked by the country’s military establishment into going against Iran headlong, which is not in India’s interest. Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi share strong bonding with the Gulf Cooperation Council kings, but their courses in the region are diverging. The American President’s impatience to get out of Afghanistan before the polling day had already pushed his administration closer to Pakistan,



which is now further necessitated by his adventurist Iran policy. As he appears to be lurching into fresh conflicts in the region, Pakistani generals are back in demand. While professional strategists have continued to read from the checklist on China in the last three years, Mr. Trump has been singularly focused on one question — trade. He cares little about China's expansionism and at any rate that is not a factor in his ties with other Asian countries. He forced new trade deals on Japan and South Korea, and continues to look for a grand deal with China itself.

### Points of Fission

Far from seeing India as deserving special concessions to counterbalance China as old wisdom demanded, Mr. Trump has bracketed India and China as two countries that have duped his predecessors to gain undue advantage. He has accused both countries, in the same tweet, of raising trade barriers, having weak intellectual property protections, and stealing American jobs. He finds little value in Mr. Modi's climate policy. And he has followed it up with restrictions on H-1B visa, ending of India's status under the World Trade Organization's Generalized System of Preferences and other punitive actions. This has been matched by India's own protectionist measures, in response to American actions and independent of it. By increasing hydrocarbon imports from the U.S., the Modi government is trying to reduce India's trade surplus. Meanwhile, the intemperate mobilisation of Indian diaspora in America by the government has resulted in the inevitable blowback. The diaspora has been divided, and the bipartisan support for India is now squandered. Progressive sections on the Democratic side and religious libertarians and evangelicals on the Trump side are both concerned about India's majoritarian turn. Nobody can shun India; but nobody celebrates India either. A robust economy has allowed Mr. Trump the political space to temper his polarising rhetoric while Mr. Modi has had to double down on his, amid a sluggish economy. Partnership with America is critical to Mr. Modi's plans for India, but the inverse is not true for Mr. Trump. The U.S. President's India visit scheduled for next month will be part of an ongoing exploration of a new equilibrium in ties.

### Nepal Invites Modi, Imran For Sagarmatha Dialogue

- Nepal has invited the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, along with several other heads of governments and states, for the **Sagarmatha Dialogue**, officials said. The three-day event from April 2 will be the biggest diplomatic dialogue in Nepal's recent history that will be attended by many global figures apart from the leaders of the SAARC countries. "Invitations have been sent to over 150 foreign guests including heads of government and heads of states, Ministers, business leaders, media, members of multilateral organisations, think tank experts, academics, civil society leaders and activists,". The official also confirmed that other leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have been invited. The Ministry, headed by Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, has been spearheading the preparations for the event, which is **expected to focus on the threat of climate change to the modern world**. Given the large number of global leaders, the event is expected to emerge as a venue for bilateral interaction among leaders. Earlier last week, the External Affairs Ministry announced that India had invited all heads of governments of SCO member countries for the heads of government council later this year.



### Nepal Pitches for Informal SAARC Summit

- Nepal will be “happy” to host an informal summit of the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on the side-lines of the coming Sagarmatha Sambaad here. This offer gives a chance to revive the forum, which has been unable to meet formally during the last four years because of the negative India-Pakistan relations. The SAARC summit could not be held in Islamabad in 2016 after India faced terror strikes blamed on elements in Pakistan. Mr. Gyawali said Kathmandu had invited all SAARC heads of government for Sagarmatha Sambaad, the first edition of a multi-stakeholder dialogue, to be held from April 2 to 4 and argued that an alternative to the formal summit model could be explored. He said **Nepal had served out its tenure as chair of the regional body and was “eager” to pass the position to the next in line, Pakistan.** The offer of an informal summit is in line with the current global trend whenever a formal agenda could not be worked out because of the contradictory positions of the stakeholders. Mr. Gyawali said Kathmandu wanted to broaden connectivity with China. “We want to build cross border railways, highways, and port connectivity with China.” Nepal hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping in October when both sides sealed several agreements, including the one for a **cross-Himalayan Keyrung-Kathmandu train project.** Mr. Gyawali referred to Nepal’s border dispute with India at Kalapani as a burden from history. “If India can resolve such issues with countries like Bangladesh, why can’t Kalapani be resolved,” he asked, advocating talks.

### Cane Farmers Flag Brazil’s WTO Case Against India

- Several farmers groups have demanded that the government push Brazil to withdraw its complaint against India’s sugar pricing policies at the World Trade Organisation. The demand comes just ahead of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s arrival in Delhi as chief guest of the Republic Day celebrations. Brazil has said it is open to finding a “non-litigious solution” to the dispute, adding that the issue would not affect bilateral collaborations on biofuels derived from sugarcane. In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements (ICCFM) noted that “the Brazilian government, under the leadership of Mr. Bolsonaro, is directly threatening the livelihoods of five crore Indian sugarcane farmers” by challenging the minimum price for sugarcane set by the Indian government. “The irony of the whole situation is that the Indian government only announces Fair and Remunerative Prices (FRP) to be paid by the sugar mills to farmers,”

### As India Prepares to Honour Bolsonaro (Krishnan Srinivasan - Former Foreign Secretary)

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi often does the unexpected, the surprise sometimes being agreeable, at other times the reverse. His invitation to leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at his inauguration in 2014 and hosting all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders at the Republic Day in 2019 were in the first category; the demonetisation in the second. He has now produced another surprise by inviting Brazilian President **Jair Bolsonaro to be his guest of honour** for Republic Day 2020. Mr. Bolsonaro, **a pro-gun lobby, homophobic, far-right religious former Army Captain,** came to power in 2018. The defining aspects of his administration have been **a strong inclination towards the U.S.** and **damaging policies affecting the Amazon rainforest.** In foreign policy, his affiliation with the U.S. is driven by admiration for President Donald Trump. **Brazil has been designated a ‘major non-NATO ally’,** a status held by close U.S. allies like Japan, Israel



and South Korea. Mr. Bolsonaro has also followed Washington by relocating its Israel Embassy in Jerusalem, a city contested by Palestinians. On the Amazon delta, his policy has been to withdraw regulation and enforcement, facilitating the utilisation of the indigenous people's land for the purposes of agri-business, mining and cattle-ranching. He has belittled climate activists like Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg and compared indigenous communities living in previously protected areas to animals in zoos. Under his presidency, the number of black and indigenous people murdered has increased. His domestic approval rating stands at only 30%.

### Imbalance Within the Bloc

Apart from Mr. Bolsonaro's woeful record as President, a larger question pertains to the future of BRICS, the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This was set up as a move towards greater multi-polarity; hence the spread across three continents and both hemispheres. The BRICS combination accounts for about one-third of global output, but a glance at the GDP table and growth rates will show the infirmities of the group: in terms of GDP, China is occupying the second position; India the seventh; Brazil the ninth; Russia the 11<sup>th</sup>; and South Africa the 35<sup>th</sup>. In terms of growth rates, China grew at 6%; India at 4.5%, Russia 1.7%, Brazil 1.2% and South Africa 0.1%. Both politically and economically, Brazil and South Africa have been the laggards in recent years. But, the leaders of the five nations still see purchase in keeping this group together. Each country has different economic and political leverage, and its own burden of domestic and external issues. But they all share the benefits of autonomous decision making and non-affiliation with any binding alliances and the group's informal structure is an advantage for coordination among the most influential non-Western countries. The BRICS summit in Brasilia last November was an exercise in diplomatic tightrope walking. Despite having made disparaging remarks about China in the past, Mr. Bolsonaro was aware that sharing a platform with the heads of China, Russia and India magnified his own significance both within and outside his country. The BRICS group can survive only if its members maximise their congruences to the extent possible, despite the growing intensity of Sino-Russian ties; the pro-American leanings in Brazil; the socio-economic difficulties of South Africa after nine years under the controversial Jacob Zuma; and India's many difficulties with China, including its abstention from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

### Achievements of The Grouping

The main achievement of BRICS is the New Development Bank, with each country contributing equally to its equity. The bank has so far financed over 40 projects at a cost of \$12 billion. The BRICS countries are also developing a joint payments mechanism to reduce foreign trade settlements in U.S. dollars. An offshoot of the group, dealing with climate change, is BASIC (BRICS without Russia), which met at the Spain conference last month and reiterated its support to the Paris Agreement. The closing statement of the last BRICS summit deftly steered clear of the pitfalls of clashing ideologies and interests, while containing many formulations of self-congratulation that officials in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs can produce in their sleep. It enumerated 30 statements and communiqués as a result of two summit meetings, 16 ministers meetings, and others at various levels totalling 116 gatherings. Under the forthcoming Russian chairmanship, this number could exceed 150. India is taking the lead role in digital health, digital forensics, film technology, traditional medicine, sustainable water management, internships and fellowships. Mr. Modi is evidently





not concerned about Mr. Bolsonaro's status as Washington's most loyal follower in Latin America, and could justify his invitation to Mr. Bolsonaro with references to the enduring quality of BRICS, Brazil's agreement to waive visa requirements for Indian citizens, and the potential for Brazilian investments in the sectors of space and defence, agricultural equipment, animal husbandry, post-harvest technologies, and bio-fuels. But the total two-way trade is at a paltry \$8 billion, and the prospect of closer economic ties, however desirable, would require considerable optimism. Mr. Trump will be pleased by the Indian honour for his Brazilian alter ego; perhaps this was what mainly motivated Mr. Modi's invitation.

### Guaranteeing Healthcare, The Brazilian Way (Miguel Lago - Executive Director At The Brazil-Based Institute For Health Policy Studies, Where Arthur Aguillar - Public Sector Specialist)

- As Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro visits New Delhi this Republic Day, one interesting field of cooperation to explore in the strategic partnership is healthcare. Achieving universal health coverage is a very complex task, especially for developing countries. Here, the example of Brazil, the only country where more than 100 million inhabitants have a universal health system, is worth studying. It can also provide lessons for Ayushman Bharat, currently the world's largest and most ambitious government health programme. Following the end of military rule, the Brazilian society decided to achieve universal coverage by establishing a government-funded system. The Unified Health System (SUS), which guaranteed free health coverage that included pharmaceutical services, was written into the new Constitution in 1988.

#### Progress Over 30 Years

In the last 30 years, Brazilians have experienced a drastic increase in health coverage as well as outcomes: life expectancy has increased from 64 years to almost 76 years, while Infant Mortality Rate has declined from 53 to 14 per 1,000 live births. In terms of service provision, polio vaccination has reached 98% of the population. A 2015 report said that 95% of those that seek care in the SUS are able to receive treatment. Every year, the SUS covers more than two million births, 10 million hospital admissions, and nearly one billion ambulatory procedures. This has been made possible even amidst a scenario of tightening budget allocation. While universal health systems tend to consume around 8% of the GDP — the NHS, for instance, takes up 7.9% of Britain's GDP — Brazil spends only 3.8% of its GDP on the SUS, serving a population three times larger than that of the U.K. The cost of the universal health system in Brazil averages around \$600 per person, while in the U.K., this number reaches \$3,428. A study conducted by the Brazil-based Institute for Health Policy Studies (IEPS) forecasts that public health spending in Brazil will need to increase by nearly 1.6 percentage points of the GDP by 2060 in order to cover the healthcare needs of a fast-ageing society. Achieving universal coverage in India, a country with a population of 1.3 billion, is a challenge of epic proportions. Hence, the advances in this field should be seen not in binaries but judged by its steady growth and improvement. For instance, India must record details of improvement in terms of access, production and population health on a year-by-year basis. A starting point for this daunting task is funding. Public health expenditure is still very low in India, at around 1.3% of GDP in the 2017-2018 fiscal year.



### Establishing Wellness Centres

The Brazilian experience can also inform the design of the expansion of primary care that underlies Ayushman Bharat, that is, the creation of 1,50,000 wellness centre by 2022. The Family Health Programme (Programa Saúde da Família), which relies on a community-based healthcare network, is the backbone of the rapid expansion of coverage in Brazil. The strategy is based on an extensive work of community health agents who perform monthly visits to every family enrolled in the programme. These agents carry out a variety of tasks. They conduct health promotion and prevention activities, oversee whether family members are complying with any treatment they might be receiving, and effectively manage the relationship between citizens and the healthcare system. The strategy works: a large body of research shows that the programme has drastically reduced IMR and increased adult labour supply. Equally impressive has been its expansion, from 4% of coverage in 2000 to up to 64% of the overall population in 2015; it was able to reach even the rural areas and the poorest States of the country. Both Brazil and India are composed of large States with a reasonable degree of administrative autonomy. This fact implies great challenges and opportunities. The major challenge is that a one-size-fits-all approach for such heterogeneous regional realities is inconceivable: Tamil Nadu, Sikkim, and Bihar differ in so many ways and this diversity must be met by an intricate combination of standardised programmes and autonomy to adopt policies according to their characteristics. Moreover, regional disparities in terms of resources and institutional capabilities must be addressed. This diversity, nevertheless, can be a powerful source of policy innovation and creativity.

### Steel Mesh to Replace Fences on The Borders

- The 'rickety' barbed wires along the Pakistan and Bangladesh borders are being replaced with meshed fence made of steel and coated with anti-rust paint, a senior government official said. **India shares a 4,096.7 km-long border with Bangladesh and 3,323 km with Pakistan.** The cost of around 1 km of fence is approximately ₹1.99 crore. The Border Security Force (BSF), deployed along the Pakistan and Bangladesh borders, has been tasked with ensuring that the fence is installed in a time-bound manner. Currently, a pilot project has been sanctioned at a cost of ₹14.3 crore at **Lathitila in Assam's Silchar district.** The clearance was first given in 2016. "This will be a complete overhaul of the security system. The unique quality of the new fence is that it cannot be snipped and nobody can climb it," the official said.

Nation

### The Kashmir Pandit Tragedy

- It is 30 years since the "exodus" from the Valley of its minority Hindu Kashmiri Pandit community. The hotly contested circumstances of their departure between January and March 1990, the numbers, and the issue of their return are an important side to the Kashmir story that has fed into the Hindu-Muslim polarisation in India over the years, in turn fuelling the Hindu-Muslim chasm in the Valley. The exodus took place at the same time that the BJP was upping the ante across northern India, and over the years, the plight of Kashmiri Pandits has become a potent Hindutva issue.



### The Run-Up: 1980s to 1990

In the lead-up to the events of 1990, Kashmir was in ferment. Sheikh Abdullah had died in 1982, and the leadership of the National Conference passed on to his son Farooq Abdullah, who won the 1983 election. But within two years, the Centre broke up the NC, and installed dissident Ghulam Mohammed Shah as Chief Minister. This led to huge disaffection and political instability. The Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) stepped up its activities, and the hanging of the militant leader Maqbool Bhat in 1984 added to the sense of foreboding. In 1986, after the Rajiv Gandhi government opened the Babri Masjid locks to enable Hindus to offer prayers there, ripples were felt in Kashmir too. In Anantnag, the constituency of then Congress leader Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, there was a series of attacks on Hindu temples, and shops and properties of Kashmiri Pandits, blamed on separatist and secessionists. In 1986, as opposition to the Shah government grew, Rajiv Gandhi resurrected Farooq Abdullah, who became CM once again. The rigged election of 1987 after which Abdullah formed the government was a turning point at which militants took the upper hand. The 1989 capitulation to the JKLF in the kidnapping of Mufti Sayeed's daughter set the stage for the next decade. By then, the Pandits had begun to be targeted. The Valley's BJP leader Tika Lal Taploo was shot dead on September 13. Neel Kanth Ganjoo, a retired judge who had sentenced Maqbool Bhat to death, was shot dead outside the J&K High Court in Srinagar on November 4. Journalist-lawyer Prem Nath Bhat was shot dead in Anantnag on December 27. Hit lists of Pandits were in circulation. Waves of panic hit the community, especially after a local newspaper published an anonymous message, allegedly from the Hizb-ul Mujahideen, asking Pandits to leave.

### The Night of January 19, 1990

Matters came to a head on January 19. By then, the Farooq Abdullah government had been dismissed and Governor's Rule imposed. According to accounts published by many eminent Kashmiri Pandits, there were threatening slogans over loudspeakers from mosques, and on the streets. Speeches were made extolling Pakistan and the supremacy of Islam, and against Hinduism. The Kashmiri Pandit community decided to leave. On January 20, the first stream began leaving the Valley with hastily packed belongings in whatever transport they could find. A second, larger wave left in March and April, after more Pandits were killed. On January 21, the CRPF gunned down 160 Kashmiri Muslim protesters at the Gawkadai Bridge, which has come to be known as the worst massacre in the long history of the conflict in Kashmir. The two events — the flight of the Pandits and the Gawkadai massacre — took place within 48 hours, but for years, neither community could accept the pain of the other, and in some ways, still cannot, as each continues to talk past the other. According to some estimates, notably by the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti (KPSS), of 75,343 Kashmiri Pandit families in January 1990, more than 70,000 fled between 1990 and 1992. The flight continued until 2000. The KPSS has placed the number of Kashmiri Pandits killed by militants from 1990 to 2011 at 399, the majority during 1989-90. Some 800 families have remained in the Valley through these three decades.

### Role of The Administration

The other contentious question about the exodus is the role played by the administration, and more specifically that of the J&K Governor, Jagmohan. Newly appointed, he had arrived in Srinagar on January 19. The Kashmiri Muslim view of the exodus is that he encouraged the



Pandits to leave the Valley and thus gave a communal colour to what was until then a non-religious Kashmiri cause. The Kashmiri Hindu view is that this is a disingenuous interpretation. They believe that Kashmiri Muslims, with whom they had lived amicably for centuries, drove them out with a vengeance in a frenzy of Islamism that they could not have imagined even months earlier. The truth, many commentators have concluded, may have been somewhere in the middle. Wajahat Habibullah, then a senior official in the J&K government and posted in Anantnag in 1990 as Special Commissioner, has written (Citizen, April 2015) that in March 1990, several hundred people gathered in front of his office demanding to know why the Pandits were leaving and accused the administration of encouraging them to go, "so that the Army would be free to unleash its heavy artillery on all habitations". Habibullah denied this and told them that the Pandits could hardly be expected to stay when every mosque was blaring threats and members of their community had been murdered. He asked Kashmiri Muslims to make Pandits feel more secure. Habibullah wrote he also appealed to Jagmohan "that he telecast an appeal to Pandits that they stay in Kashmir, assuring their safety on the basis of the assurance of the Anantnag residents. Unfortunately, no such appeal came, only an announcement that to ensure the security of Pandits, 'refugee' camps were being set up in every district of the Valley, and Pandits who felt threatened could move to these camps rather than leave the Valley. Those Pandits in service who felt threatened were free to leave their stations; they would continue to be paid salary..." Other commentary has pointed to how the government organised transport for fleeing Pandits so that they could get to Jammu.

### The Question of Return

The fleeing Pandits did not think they would never return to the Valley. But as the situation in Kashmir spiralled into a full-blown militancy, return began to look remote if not impossible. As the numbers arriving in Jammu increased from thousands to tens of thousands over the first few months of 1990, a mostly middle-class community found itself living in tents in squalid, filthy camps far removed from the homes they had left behind. Those who had means rebuilt their lives elsewhere in the country — Delhi, Pune, Mumbai and Ahmedabad have Pandit populations, also Jaipur and Lucknow — or went abroad. A township of two-room tenements called Jagti was built in Jammu in the last decade to house 4,000-5,000 Pandit families who remained there. In addition, there are hundreds of families living in government tenements in Purkhoo on the outskirts of Jammu, in Nagrota and in Muthi. Some built new homes and or moved into rented places. The longing to return to the Valley did not diminish over the years, though it may have become more an idea than a real ambition. Successive governments have promised that they will help this process, but the situation on the ground in Kashmir has meant this remains only an intention. The efforts to resettle Pandits in the Valley in the last two decades have seen ghetto-like structures come up in various parts of Kashmir, ringed by concertina wire with heavy security, underlining that normal life is impossible. There is an acute realisation in the community that the Valley is no longer the same that they left behind in 1990. In many cases, their properties were either immediately vandalised or sold quickly by the owners to Kashmiri Muslims. Many fell into disrepair. As the BJP continues to promise that Kashmiri Pandits will return, and #HumWapasJayenge trends on social media, Kashmiri Muslims also see the return of Pandits as essential, but reject the idea of their settlement in secured camps as a replication of Israel-like Jewish settlements in the West Bank. On August 5, 2019, when the government did away with special status to J&K, among the loudest to cheer were Kashmiri Pandits, who saw it as a long pending "revenge"





for what had happened to them three decades ago. Yet their return looks as difficult as it ever did.

- Indeed, the intriguing history of the Kashmiri Pandit community is an anomaly in contemporary times that has privileged stories of ideological clashes, confronting cultures and competing nationalisms. Where else would you find an educated (with 100% literacy) mostly professional, materially successful, religiously liberal, politically flexible, totally non-violent, microscopic minority inhabiting one of the most conflicted and contested parts of the country?
- Sadly, for most liberal political analysts and thinkers, the Kashmiri Pandit exodus became part of the larger tragedy of the Kashmiri issue and was forgotten or marginalised. Meanwhile, the Kashmiri Pandits struggled, adapted, built new lives, in the midst of adversity, in India and abroad, and succeeded. Apart from those who live in camps or makeshift accommodation, they are today a model of material success. But in many ways, the continuing displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits represents not just the continuous failure of successive governments, but is also a stark short-sightedness of the failures of the liberal Indian state. It is profound irony that in the 1990s, during the worst years of displacement, the Pandits, then one of the most liberal and accommodative of minorities, found succour only in the Shiv Sena's Balasaheb Thackeray who ensured reservations for them in professional colleges in Maharashtra. As analyst Rishi Razdan put it in a recent social media post, "a persecuted Hindu minority from a Muslim-majority state within a Hindu-majority country [was] a damning validation of all the fears that Hindutva had been peddling for decades". And one of the great failures of the Indian liberal Left was "losing the moral courage to speak loudly and clearly for those who needed their aid".
- In February this year, like every year for nearly three decades, more than 50 families will gather in Mount Martha, in the breath-taking Mornington Peninsula, about an hour's drive from Melbourne in Australia. They will perform the "vatuk puja" for Shivaratri: symbolising the wedding of Lord Shiva and his consort, Parvati, with the Bhairavas in attendance. All these 50-odd families belong to the Pandit community, most of them are outstanding professionals; almost all have moved to Australia in the last three decades of the troubles in Kashmir. They are cosmopolitan in almost every sense: they can adapt and be part of any professional culture across the world. They are liberal in a practical sense: they are not bound by dogmas or driven by orthodoxies of the past. They put a premium, as they have done for generations, on education; the younger generation is full of "toppers" even while their values and their accent may increasingly be Australian. Like with many diasporic communities, memories of the past continue to haunt the present. The Kashmiri Pandits can neither forget their beloved Kashmir nor the circumstances under which most of them have had to leave the Valley in 1990-1991. The families in Melbourne symbolise a microcosm of the world of the Pandits. Most Pandits who left J&K have flourished materially. From Sydney to the Silicon Valley we find stories of Pandit success. In almost every field of human endeavour, the KPs (as they are popularly known) have carved a niche for themselves, and made a place in the world they inhabit. They are seen as model law-abiding citizens.

### Those Who Stayed

It is difficult to get reliable evidence of numbers, but even by the most generous demographic figure, the Kashmiri Pandit community, across the globe, would count for less than a million. A little over 600 families continue to live in the Valley: they never left and these "non-migrants" have a "privileged" position with the Muslims in the Valley. A few thousand



employees (through a special package) have been given jobs in the Valley and live in special enclaves in Haal, Vesu, Matan, Sheikhpura, Baramulla and Kupwara, many with their families. Their story is mixed: they have returned for jobs, but whether they will stay on in what are mostly cramped, isolated conditions is debatable. Another 3,500 jobs will be soon made available under the package, but they are mostly at a lower clerical level. The Kashmiri Pandit professionals seemed to have vanished from the State. Not even one doctor and only a few engineers applied for the jobs advertised by the Public Service Commission in the last few years. Outside the Valley are about another 5,000 internally displaced families who live in the township of Jagti (built in the most disgusting Stalinist style of architecture) and the frightening camps in Nagrota, Purkhu and Muthi: all in the Jammu region.

### A Meeting Point?

Is there a prospect of reconciliation with the past and returning back to the Valley? In the Manichaean worlds that Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims inhabit today, their narratives are almost diametrically opposite. While most Pandits view their departure as part of a systematic “ethnic cleansing” by a section of the Kashmiri Muslims, most Muslims see in the departure of the Kashmiri Pandits a deliberate conspiracy of the Indian state with two objectives; to give them a bad name and simultaneously give a free repressive hand to the security forces. This divide shows few signs of being bridged. Under these circumstances, the prospects of reconciliation seem bleak unless there is a common project like a new Sharada Peeth University that could bring them together, and recreate the bonds of interdependence that had held them in good stead over much of history.

### Ending Inaction

- There are two significant aspects to the Supreme Court’s latest decision on the Speaker as the adjudicating authority under the anti-defection law. **The first is that Parliament should replace the Speaker with a “permanent tribunal” or external mechanism to render quick and impartial decisions on questions of defection.** Few would disagree with the Court’s view that initial fears and doubts about whether Speakers would be impartial had come true. **The second is its extraordinary ruling that the reference by another Bench, in 2016, of a key question to a Constitution Bench was itself unnecessary.** The question awaiting determination by a larger Bench is whether courts have the power to direct Speakers to decide petitions seeking disqualification within a fixed time frame. The question had arisen because several presiding officers have allowed defectors to bolster the strength of ruling parties and even be sworn in Ministers by merely refraining from adjudicating on complaints against them. Some States have seen en masse defections soon after elections. Secure in the belief that no court would question the delay in disposal of disqualification matters as long as the matter was pending before a Constitution Bench, Speakers have been wilfully failing to act as per law, thereby helping the ruling party, which invariably is the one that helped them get to the Chair. **The reference to a larger Bench, in 2016 in S.A. Sampath Kumar vs. Kale Yadaiah was based on the landmark judgment in Kihoto Hollohan (1992) which upheld the validity of the Constitution’s Tenth Schedule, or the anti-defection law. This verdict had also made the Speaker’s order subject to judicial review on limited grounds. It made it clear that the court’s jurisdiction would not come into play unless the Speaker passes an order, leaving no room for intervention prior to adjudication.** Finding several pending complaints before Speakers, the Bench, in 2016, decided that it was time for an authoritative verdict on whether Speakers can be directed to dispose of defection questions within a time frame.

**Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur**



While fixing an outer limit of three months for Speakers to act on disqualification petitions, in the present case, Justice R.F. Nariman given four weeks to the Manipur Assembly Speaker to decide the disqualification question in a legislator's case. He also held that the reference was made on a wrong premise. He has cited another Constitution Bench judgment (Rajendra Singh Rana, 2007), in which the Uttar Pradesh Speaker's order refusing to disqualify 13 BSP defectors was set aside on the ground that he had failed to exercise his jurisdiction to decide whether they had attracted disqualification, while recognising a 'split' in the legislature party. **As "failure to exercise jurisdiction" is a recognised stage at which the court can now intervene, the court has thus opened a window for judicial intervention in cases in which Speakers refuse to act.** This augurs well for the enforcement of the law against defection in letter and spirit.

### Return of Bonds

- In **declining to stay the operation of the Electoral Bonds Scheme (EBS)**, citing the fact that the plea for stay had been heard and refused last year itself, the Supreme Court is taking a narrow and technical view. In an order in April 2019, a Bench of the Supreme Court headed by the then Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi, had asked political parties to disclose to the Election Commission of India (ECI), in sealed covers, details of the donations they had received through the anonymous bonds. Given the "limited time" available then and "the weighty issues" involved in the matter, it declined to grant a stay. However, it is quite disappointing to note that nine months on, the court remains unmoved by submissions that a fresh window for purchase of bonds is set to be opened soon, coinciding with the Delhi Assembly election and that the scheme itself was being frequently opened so that the ruling party would stand to benefit. Fresh revelations suggest that the Reserve Bank of India and the ECI had voiced their reservations about the scheme, which was enabled by provisions of the Finance Act, 2017, and introduced in 2018. The Association for Democratic Reforms, the petitioner, has disclosed that an overwhelming majority of the donations made through electoral bonds had gone to the Bharatiya Janata Party. Further, the ECI has already made clear its strong opposition to the various amendments to the law on contributions to political parties. In particular, the ECI, in its response filed in the court, said **the provisions would enable the creation of shell companies for the sole purpose of making political donations and no other business, that the abolition of the clause that says firms must declare political contributions in their profit and loss accounts would compromise transparency, and the amendments to the law on foreign contributions would mean that there would be unchecked foreign funding of political parties, leading to foreign influence on India's policy-making.** Overall, it had recorded its unequivocal position that the EBS would help the use of black money for political funding. In this backdrop, it is quite intriguing that the top court has given the ECI a fortnight to reply to the petition for stay when its position is quite clear. The least the court can do now is to expedite the final hearing of the petitions challenging the scheme. There are indeed strong grounds for putting an end to the system of anonymous bearer bonds being used to fund parties. Such anonymity gives a clear and unfair advantage to the ruling party of the day. It must be remembered that the failure to have an early hearing has already led to the scheme being opened ahead of every major election. It may not be possible to assess the adverse impact that such opacity can have on the electoral process. This is a matter crying for an early and expeditious decision.



## Can States Challenge the Validity of Central Laws?

- Amid nationwide protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, or CAA, 2019, and the threat of non-cooperation by some States with the Central government's plan to update the National Population Register (NPR) and possibly establish a National Register of Indian Citizens, Kerala has filed a suit in the Supreme Court of India seeking to declare the CAA as unconstitutional. Meanwhile, Chhattisgarh has also filed a similar suit, challenging the constitutional validity of the National Investigation Agency Act. Both have invoked Article 131, which confers exclusive jurisdiction on the top court to adjudicate disputes between two or more States, or between States and the Centre. Punjab has also decided to challenge the CAA in the Supreme Court.

### What Does Article 131 Say? Why Is It Necessary?

Article 131 confers exclusive jurisdiction on the Supreme Court in disputes involving States, or the Centre on the one hand and one or more States on the other. This means no other court can entertain such a dispute. It is well-known that **both High Courts and the Supreme Court have the power to adjudicate cases against the State and Central governments**. In particular, the validity of any executive or legislative action is normally challenged by way of writ petitions — under Article 226 of the Constitution in respect of High Courts, and, in respect to fundamental rights violations, under Article 32 in the Supreme Court.

### What Happens When A State Feels Its Legal Rights Have Been Violated by Another State or By the Centre?

Unlike individuals, State governments cannot complain of fundamental rights being violated. Therefore, the Constitution provides that whenever a State feels that its legal rights are under threat or have been violated, it can take the "dispute" to the Supreme Court. States have filed such cases under Article 131 against neighbouring States in respect of river water sharing and boundary disputes. There have been instances of such cases being filed against the Centre too.

### What Does Kerala's Suit Ask For?

Kerala's suit asks for a declaration that the CAA, 2019, is violative of the Constitution, and against the principle of secularism that is a basic feature of the Constitution. Simultaneously, it challenges the validity of notifications issued under the **Passport (Entry into India) Amendment Rules** and the **Foreigners (Amendment) Order**, in 2015-16, as being contrary to the Constitution. **The notifications of 2015 had given exemption to persons belonging to minority communities in Bangladesh and Pakistan — namely, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians who were compelled to seek shelter in India due to religious persecution or the fear of religious persecution and entered India on or before December 31, 2014, without valid documents — from the purview of the laws against illegal entry of foreigners into India. In 2016, further notifications were issued to add those who arrived from Afghanistan too.** As these notifications formed the basis for creating the categories of people who were not to be treated as illegal migrants, and as the CAA chooses the same groups for conferment of citizenship on a fast-track mode, the Kerala government has challenged the validity of these notifications too. Another reason is that the term "religious persecution" is not found in the CAA, but **it mentions that those exempted from the Foreigners' Act under the 2015 and 2016 notifications will not be treated as "illegal migrants"**.





### What Is the Prayer in Chhattisgarh's Suit?

Chhattisgarh has sought a declaration that the NIA Act, 2008, is unconstitutional on the ground that it is "beyond the legislative competence of Parliament". It argues that 'Police' is a subject reserved for the States, and having a central police agency, which has overriding powers over the State police, with no provision for consent from the State government for its operations, is against the division of legislative powers between the Centre and the States. And that it is against the federal spirit of the Constitution.

### Is Such A Suit Maintainable?

There are two conflicting opinions of the Supreme Court on this point. In 2011, in State of Madhya Pradesh v. Union of India and Another, the court said: "...when the Central laws can be challenged in the State High Courts as well and also before this Court under Article 32, normally, no recourse can be permitted to challenge the validity of a Central law under the exclusive original jurisdiction of this Court provided under Article 131." However, in State of Jharkhand vs. State of Bihar and Another (2014), another Bench said it was unable to accept the view that the constitutionality of a law cannot be raised in a suit under Article 131. Therefore, the matter was referred to a larger Bench for an authoritative pronouncement. One of the issues to be decided is whether such a suit involves a question "on which the existence or extent of a legal right depends". Does Kerala's objection to the CAA involve one of its "legal rights"? Bharatiya Janata Party leader Kummanam Rajasekharan has sought to intervene in the matter against the Kerala government's plea, contending that Kerala has raised a dispute that does not involve any legal right, but is **only a political question**. And that, therefore, it cannot file a suit under Article 131 based on political questions. However, possibly in anticipation of such an objection, **Kerala's suit points out that under Article 256 of the Constitution, the State would be compelled to comply with the CAA and rules and orders passed by the Centre. As it believes that these laws and rules are arbitrary, unreasonable, and violative of fundamental rights, a dispute involving law and fact has indeed arisen between Kerala and the Centre.** This dispute involves both the legal rights of the State and the fundamental rights and other legal rights of its inhabitants.

### What Is Likely to Happen?

Given the reference by a two-judge Bench, the Supreme Court may have to constitute a larger Bench to decide the question whether the suits challenging central laws are maintainable. If the suits are declared maintainable, the same Bench may also adjudicate the disputes.

### How 2019 Amendment Changed 2008 NIA Act

- The central leadership of the Congress has backed the legal challenge mounted by the party's government in Chhattisgarh to The National Investigation Agency (NIA) Act, 2008, enacted when the UPA was in power. AICC general secretary in-charge of Chhattisgarh P L Punia told The Indian Express that the Act has undergone "drastic change" as a result of amendments brought last year.

The NIA Act was enacted in the aftermath of the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008. A decade later, the Act was amended with the objective of speedy investigation and prosecution of certain offences, including those committed outside India. The National Investigation Agency (Amendment) Bill, 2019 was passed by Lok Sabha on July 15, 2019, and by Rajya Sabha on July 17, 2019. Punia said the amendment had made the NIA "a parallel police structure", and the



amended Act “has gone against the federal structure of the Constitution”. The original Act of 2008 itself had given the NIA powers to supersede the state police in the investigation and trial of terror-related offences. Also, the Chhattisgarh government’s petition has challenged the original Act, and not the amended law. The 2019 amendment in the law focused on three main areas.

**OFFENCES OUTSIDE INDIA:** The original Act allowed NIA to investigate and prosecute offences within India. The amended Act empowered the agency to investigate offences committed outside India, subject to international treaties and domestic laws of other countries. The amended section reads: “Where the Central Government is of the opinion that a Scheduled Offence has been committed at any place outside India to which this Act extends, it may direct the Agency to register the case and take up investigation as if such offence has been committed in India.” **The NIA special court in New Delhi will have jurisdiction over these cases.**

**WIDENED SCOPE OF LAW:** The NIA can investigate and prosecute offences under the Acts specified in the Schedule of the NIA Act. The Schedule originally had The Atomic Energy Act, 1962, The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and The Anti-Hijacking Act, 1982, among other entries. The amendment has allowed the NIA to investigate, in addition, cases related to (i) human trafficking, (ii) counterfeit currency or banknotes, (iii) manufacture or sale of prohibited arms, (iv) cyber-terrorism, and (v) offences under the Explosive Substances Act, 1908.

**SPECIAL COURTS:** **The 2008 Act constituted Special Courts for conducting the trial of offences under the Act. The 2019 amendment allowed the central government to designate Sessions Courts as Special Courts for the trial of scheduled offences under the Act.** The central government is required to consult the Chief Justice of the High Court under which the Sessions Court is functioning, before designating it as a Special Court. When more than one Special Court has been designated for any area, the seniormost judge will distribute cases among the courts. State governments too, may also designate Sessions Courts as Special Courts for the trial of scheduled offences.

### **Controversy Over Role of Governor**

- The endless squabbles between the Governors and respective State governments in Kerala and West Bengal are disconcerting. **Arif Mohammad Khan** and **Jagdeep Dhankhar**, Governors of Kerala and West Bengal, respectively, have arrogated to themselves an activist role, which is at the heart of the tensions. Mr. Khan has made repeated public statements on controversial questions such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019; he has even said that it was his duty to defend the laws made by the Centre. It is a dubious claim to make, and at any rate, there is no discernible precedent as such. His view that his office is not a rubber stamp is true, but he must also be mindful that the Constitution envisages the execution of popular will through an elected government. Mr. Dhankhar has placed himself at the centre of several controversies, and often appears eager for the next spectacular showdown with the State government. Kerala’s Left Democratic Front has been more restrained than the combative resistance by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, but parties barring the BJP in both States are agitated over the proactive, and often provocative roles of their



respective Governors. The boisterous profiles of these Governors are symptomatic of a larger malaise of degrading relations between the Centre and States ruled by parties opposed to the BJP, aggravated by an insatiable yearning of the former for centralisation of power. The Constitution seeks to bolster centripetal forces in this vast and diverse country, and the Centre's power to appoint Governors is one such. The Governor's constitutional role has been debated and interpreted through several cases, but ingenious occupants of the office have managed to push the boundaries with unprecedented moves. Sagacious occupants have used the Governor's office to promote national integration. Many others have merely acted as agents of the ruling party at the Centre. Using a pliant Governor to undermine a State government or engineer a legislative majority is an old and secular trick used by all parties at the Centre. State government-Governor conflicts have hence not been rare, but what makes the current situation extraordinary is the political context. No other government in the past has sought to construct a centralising narrative for the nation as the current one at the Centre; and no government in the past has been as intolerant towards its diversity. In this schema, the Governor appears to have a critical, instrumental role. The ignominious role played by the then Governor of Jammu and Kashmir in ending its special constitutional status last year is instructive. The Governor's role as a link between the State and the Centre shall not be an imperial one. The office of the Governor must be a dialogic and consultative one. The combative posturing in Kerala and West Bengal will bring more disarray, no unity. The Centre must treat State governments with the respect that democratically elected governments deserve.

### EC Orders FIR Against Kapil Mishra

- A FIR was filed against BJP's candidate from Model Town, Kapil Mishra, over certain tweets found in violation of the Representation of the People Act. While the official also claimed that the offending posts had been deleted by Twitter upon the request of the CEO Ranbir Singh, the tweets were still up late on 24<sup>th</sup> January evening. The returning officer for Model Town had sent a show-cause notice to Mr. Mishra, asking for a reply over certain tweets comparing the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections to a fight between India and Pakistan and describing Shaheen Bagh, the site of an ongoing agitation against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as a "mini Pakistan". It said his tweet was a violation of these provisions and was punishable under the law and asked him to furnish a reply by 24<sup>th</sup> January afternoon. In a four-page reply, Mr. Mishra defended his tweets arguing that protests at Shaheen Bagh had witnessed "antisocial" elements raising "seditious" slogans "intended to disturb communal harmony". The show-cause notice stated that failing to provide a satisfactory reply, further action would be taken against him.

### Needless Impatience

- The Centre's application in the Supreme Court for additional guidelines regarding the execution of condemned prisoners betrays a needless impatience to hang the four convicts facing the gallows for the rape and murder of 'Nirbhaya' in 2012. The Ministry of Home Affairs essentially seeks the incorporation of measures aimed at reducing the scope for death row convicts to adopt dilatory tactics. Even though there may be some evidence to believe that convicts tend to file review petitions, mercy petitions and curative petitions in such a way that their execution is indefinitely delayed, it is difficult to attribute their conduct to the supposedly "accused-centric" nature of the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court in



Shatrughan Chauhan (2014). These guidelines were undoubtedly aimed at protecting the constitutional rights of prisoners in the context of a sound body of jurisprudence that maintains that such rights extend right up to the moment of their execution. The court was anxious about enforcing their right to be informed about the scope for filing petitions for clemency, for being given legal assistance in drafting them, and for exploring judicial remedies even after their appeals for mercy are rejected. Further, the 14-day time lag between the closure of the clemency route and their hanging is aimed at preventing secret executions. The court was concerned about the right of the convicts' family members to be informed, as well as the time needed by the prisoners for settling their affairs and preparing themselves mentally. It is strange that the government wants the Supreme Court to frame a rule imposing a seven-day limit on the time that convicts have to file a mercy petition after a death warrant is issued. And that courts, governments and prison authorities should all be mandated to issue death warrants within seven days of the rejection of mercy petitions and to carry out the sentence within seven days thereafter. To believe that these are matters that contribute to substantive delay in carrying out death sentences is misconceived. Nothing prevents the government from introducing rules to address such situations. On the need for a time limit for filing curative petitions, the government is right in believing that the absence of such a stipulation gives scope for convicts in the same case to take turns to file such petitions. However, there is no sign that the apex court delays disposal of curative petitions. If and when one is filed, it results in no more than a few days' delay. In a country that unfortunately retains the death penalty, there is no excuse for delaying the disposal of any petition, either in court, or before constitutional functionaries. Nor is there any need to expedite executions by revisiting sound guidelines. As the death penalty is limited to the "rarest of rare" cases, nothing is lost if those facing execution are allowed to exhaust all possible remedies.

### Women Politicians Trolled More

- Twitter is a toxic space for Indian women politicians, who face substantially higher abuse on the social media platform than their counterparts in the U.S. and the U.K., according to a recent study. **In fact, one out of every seven tweets mentioning them is problematic or abusive, with many women targeted by a relentless flow of threats and sexist, religious, racist and casteist slurs. While all women are targeted, Muslim women politicians faced 55% more abuse than others, according to the study of 95 politicians carried out by Amnesty India during the 2019 Lok Sabha election.** Apart from Muslims, women from marginalised castes, unmarried women, and those from non-BJP parties faced a disproportionate share of abuse. The Troll Patrol India study trained volunteers to sift through the tweets mentioning these 95 women between March and May 2019.

### India Slips Two Places on Corruption Index

- India's ranking in the **Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI-2019)** has slipped from 78 to 80 compared to the previous year, said Transparency International, while questioning the **"unfair and opaque political financing"** in the country. Its score of 41 out of 100 remains the same. In democracies like India and Australia, **unfair and opaque political financing, undue influence in decision-making and lobbying by powerful corporate interest groups**, has resulted in stagnation or decline in the control of corruption, observed the report. The latest CPI report has revealed that a majority of countries are showing little to no improvement in





tackling corruption. “Our analysis also shows **corruption is more pervasive in countries where big money can flow freely into electoral campaigns and where governments listen only to the voices of wealthy or well-connected individuals,**” said Transparency International. The 2019 CPI draws on 13 surveys and expert assessments to measure public sector corruption in 180 countries and territories, giving each a score from zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). In the Asia Pacific region, the average score is 45, after many consecutive years of an average score of 44, which “illustrates general stagnation” across the region. **China has improved its position from 87 to 80 with a score of 41 out of 100,** a two-point jump. “Despite the presence of high performers like New Zealand (87), Singapore (85), Australia (77), Hong Kong (76) and Japan (73), the Asia Pacific region hasn’t witnessed substantial progress in anti-corruption efforts or results. In addition, **low performers like Afghanistan (16), North Korea (17) and Cambodia (20)** continue to highlight serious challenges in the region,” the report said. According to Transparency International, while often seen as an engine of the global economy, in terms of political integrity and governance, the region performs only marginally better than the global average. “Many countries see economic openness as a way forward, however, governments across the region, from China to Cambodia to Vietnam, continue to restrict participation in public affairs, silence dissenting voices and keep decision-making out of public scrutiny,” it said. Given these issues, it comes as no surprise that vibrant economic powers like China (41), Indonesia (40), Vietnam (37), the Philippines (34) and others continue to struggle to tackle corruption, according to the report. The top ranked countries are **New Zealand and Denmark, with scores of 87 each, followed by Finland (86), Singapore (85), Sweden (85) and Switzerland (85).** The countries ranked at the bottom of the list are **Somalia, South Sudan and Syria with scores of 9, 12 and 13.** These countries are closely followed by Yemen (15), Venezuela (16), Sudan (16), Equatorial Guinea (16) and Afghanistan (16). In the last eight years, **only 22 countries significantly improved their CPI scores, including Greece, Guyana and Estonia.** In the same period, among the **21 countries that saw a significantly fall in their scores are Canada, Australia and Nicaragua.** In the remaining 137 countries, the levels of corruption show little to no change, the report said.

### India Drops 10 Ranks in Democracy Index

- India **slipped 10 places to 51<sup>st</sup> position in the latest Democracy Index** global rankings. The report, “A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest”, was done by **The Economist Intelligence Unit** — the research and analysis division of **The Economist Group**, which is the sister company to **The Economist newspaper**. India’s score, down from 7.23 in 2018 to 6.90 in 2019, is its lowest ever since the Democracy Index was begun in 2006, the report shows. **The report ranks 165 independent states and two territories, covering almost the entire population of the world.** “The primary cause of the democratic regression was an **erosion of civil liberties in the country,**” the report said. It mentioned the **stripping of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status with the repeal of Articles 370 and 35A,** the various security measures that followed the bifurcation of the state including **restriction of Internet access,** and the **exclusion of 1.9 million people from the final NRC (National Register of Citizens) in Assam.** “Civil liberties” is one of five categories on which the Democracy Index is based. The other four are electoral process and pluralism; functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. On a scale of 0 to 10, India’s scores were 8.67 in electoral process and pluralism, 6.79 in functioning of government; 6.67 in political participation; 5.63 in political culture; and 6.76 in civil liberties. **Based on the total score, countries are classified as “full democracy” (scores greater than 8); “flawed democracy” (greater than 6 and up to**



8); “hybrid regime” (greater than 4 and up to 6); or “authoritarian regime” (less than or equal to 4). By that yardstick, India’s score of 7.23 places it in the “flawed democracy” category, which also includes Bangladesh (5.88). Pakistan, with a score of 4.25, is categorised as a “hybrid democracy”; China (2.26) and North Korea (bottom-ranked with 1.08) are categorised as “authoritarian regimes”; and Norway (top-ranked with 9.87) is counted as a “full democracy”. Following Norway at the top of the rankings are Iceland (9.58), Sweden (9.39) and New Zealand (9.26). Other “full democracies” include Germany, the United Kingdom and France. The United States, with a score of 7.96 that is just below the benchmark for a “full democracy”, is a “flawed democracy”, in the same category as India. In 2019, the average global score fell from 5.48 in 2018 to 5.44, the worst result since 2006.

### Another Extension for OBC Sub-Categorisation Panel

- The Union Cabinet approved a six-month extension in the tenure of the commission to examine sub-categorisation of Other Backward Classes (OBC), which was appointed in 2017 with an initial time frame of 12 weeks. Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar said the Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved a proposal to extend the commission’s term till July 31. The Cabinet also approved an addition to the commission’s terms of reference. The commission will now also “study the various entries in the Central list of OBCs and recommend correction of any repetitions, ambiguities, inconsistencies and errors of spelling or transcription”, a statement said. **The commission has been appointed to look into the existing list of OBCs and categorise the castes that have not benefited from reservation in government jobs and education.** It is also expected to give its recommendations to ensure that these marginalised communities get the benefits of various schemes. **The commission is headed by the G. Rohini, former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court.**

### Preventing Mob Lynching (M.P. Nathanael - Retired Inspector General of Police, CRPF)

- The spate of incidents of lynching over the past few years has led to a heightened sense of insecurity among the marginalised communities. Though no data has been compiled by the NCRB of the number of cases of lynching in the country since 2015 for reasons unknown, the figures reported by various sections of the media are troubling. In 2018, the Supreme Court described lynching as a “horrendous act of mobocracy”. The Court exhorted the Centre and State governments to frame laws specifically to deal with the crime of lynching and laid down certain guidelines to be incorporated in these laws including fast-track trials, compensation to victims, and disciplinary action against lax law-enforcers.

#### State Laws

In this backdrop, the **Manipur government came up first with its Bill against lynching in 2018**, incorporating some logical and relevant clauses. The Bill specified that there would be nodal officers in each district to control such crimes. **Police officers who fail to prevent the crime of lynching in their jurisdiction are liable to be imprisoned for a term that may extend from one to three years with a fine limit of ₹50,000.** Additionally, **no concurrence of the State government is required to prosecute them for dereliction of duty.** It devolves upon the State to protect victims of mob violence and witnesses from any inducement or coercion apart from initiating schemes for rehabilitation and setting up relief camps where a community is



displaced. The law provides for adequate monetary compensation to the victims or their immediate kin. The Rajasthan government passed a bill against lynching in August 2019, not a moment too soon, given that according to Parliamentary Affairs Minister Shanti Dhariwal, "After 2014, 86% cases of mob lynching reported in the country happened in Rajasthan." However, not only has the government accepted only a few guidelines issued by the apex court, it is also silent on any action to be initiated against police officers who may be accused of dereliction of duty. West Bengal came up with a more stringent Bill against lynching. Punishment for lynching to death is punishable with the death penalty or life imprisonment and a fine of up to ₹5 lakh. West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar has invited the Chief Minister and leaders of all legislature parties for a meeting this month to discuss the Bill. Most other guidelines of the Supreme Court have been adopted by the State.

### What the Centre Can Do

While adopting the guidelines, the Centre would do well to incorporate sections in the law for penal action against doctors who stand accused of dereliction of duty, for delay in attending to victims of mob violence, or submitting false reports without carrying out a proper and thorough medical examination of the victims, either under coercion by the police or due to their own prejudice against the community or religion of the victims. Under the compensation scheme for the victims, the amount to be paid to the victims should be recovered from the perpetrators of the crime or collective fines be imposed on the villagers where the lynching takes place. While framing the laws, the Centre could even provide for punitive action against political leaders found guilty of inciting mobs. Until a zero-tolerance attitude is adopted in dealing with mob lynching, this crime will continue to show a rising trend. Punitive action to be taken against police officers accused of dereliction of duty, as incorporated in the law enacted by the Manipur government, could be replicated in the Central law too as it would deter police officials acting in a partisan manner in favour of the lynch mob.

### How to Crack TNPSC

- The Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) on January 24 debarred 99 candidates for life on charges of indulging in malpractice in the Group-IV Services examination conducted on September 1, 2019. Three persons have been arrested so far in the case. Crime Branch CID officers, probing the case, said the 99 candidates used evaporating ink to mark the answers to objective type questions. After the markings vanished a couple of hours later, two officials of the State government, entrusted with transporting the answer scripts to safe custody, inked in the right answers on the scripts.

### 39 In Top 100

While 39 such candidates passed the exam and made it to the top 100 in the rank list, others could not clear the examination since the suspect officials did not have time to make entries in all the 99 answer scripts of candidates who appeared in the Rameswaram and Keelakarai centres of Ramanathapuram district, investigating officials said. "Further investigation also revealed that the suspected agents along with those in examination duty in these centres, had replaced answer sheets of 52 candidates," the TNPSC said earlier in the day. The TNPSC had conducted the Group-IV exams for filling up 9,398 posts for which 16,29,865 candidates appeared. The results were declared on November 12, 2019, and the certificate verification



of the successful candidates was under way when the fraud came to light. A First Investigation Report (FIR) has been registered against the 99 candidates and suspected agents, the Commission said. Hours after registering a case, a special team under the direct supervision of Director-General of Police M.S Jaffar Sait cracked the case and unravelled the modus operandi of the suspects. The two suspect tahsildars were taken into custody in Ramanathapuram and brought to Chennai for interrogation.

### Given Two Pens

According to officials, a source in the Directorate of Public Instruction campus passed on the details of applicants to the two tahsildars, who then contacted them with offers to help during the exam. After asking them to opt for Rameswaram or Keelakarai as the examination centre, the suspect officials collected ₹10-12 lakh from each of them as “service” charge. The candidates were then given two pens on the day of the examination — one was a regular pen for writing the registration number and other identification details, the other was filled with evaporative ink to mark the answers. “After the ink vanished an hour later, the suspect officials who had the list of their candidates then made fresh markings with the help of readily available answer keys. This is the first time that we have come across such a fraud,” a senior investigator told The Hindu. However, the official said though the fraud came to light now, there was credible input that the suspects deployed the same modus operandi in an earlier examination conducted by the TNPSC.

### Answers Outsourced

On how the suspect tahsildars knew the answers, the official said they leaked a copy of the question paper to a third party soon after the commencement of the examination. The answers were kept ready by the time the duo reached a pre-determined place. Asked why the candidates had to use an evaporative ink while they could have left the answer scripts blank, the official said the TNPSC had introduced a procedure where invigilators had to check and sign every script, certifying the number of questions answered. Since only 39 candidates could make it through the fraudulent manner, the suspects were in the process of refunding the money taken from other candidates. “Since they didn’t have much time, they left many answer scripts of candidates who used the evaporative ink untouched and they are lying blank in the custody of the TNPSC now. The seal applied on the answer script bundles at the examination centres have also been tampered with,” the official speaking on conditions of anonymity said. On how the scam surfaced, another CB-CID official said under a new provision introduced by the TNPSC to bring about transparency, candidates could access the answer scripts of others. It was during this cross checking that some candidates found that most of the toppers belonged to Rameswaram and Keelakarai centres and flagged the issue. The CB-CID on January 24 night arrested three persons R. Nitish Kumar, 21, who cleared the 2019 Group-IV exam; M. Thirumurgan, 35, who passed allegedly by using the same fraudulent means in 2017, and is working as an assistant in the Energy Department; and E. Ramesh, 39, Office Assistant in the DPI campus. The suspect tahsildars are being questioned on their involvement malpractice in other competitive examinations, sources in the agency added.





## Tussle Over Belagavi

- In the first week of December, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray appointed Ministers Chaggaan Bhujbal and Eknath Shinde as coordinators to oversee the government's efforts to expedite the case related to the boundary issue with Karnataka. On the floor of the Assembly, Mr. Thackeray said Prime Minister Narendra Modi understands the PoK issue, but not Maharashtra's border issue. This triggered a response from Karnataka, with the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike condemning Mr. Thackeray's statement, and also questioning the silence of leaders from North Karnataka region on the issue. Adding fuel to the fire was blackening of Kannada boards in Kolhapur in Maharashtra and stopping of a Kannada film being screened citing law and order issues. **The border areas, including Belagavi (earlier Belgaum), the epicentre of the issue for over six decades, remain tense.**

### What Is the Controversy?

In 1957, slighted by the implementation of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, Maharashtra demanded readjustment of its border with Karnataka. It invoked Section 21 (2) (b) of the Act, and submitted a memorandum to the Ministry of Home Affairs stating its objection to Marathi-speaking areas being added to Karnataka. It claimed an area of 2,806 square miles that involved 814 villages, and three urban settlements of Belagavi, Karwar and Nippani with a total population of about 6.7 lakh, all part of the Mumbai Presidency before independence. The villages are spread across Belagavi and Uttar Kannada in north-western Karnataka, and Bidar and Gulbarga districts in north-eastern Karnataka — all bordering Maharashtra. Later, when a four-member committee was formed by both States, Maharashtra expressed willingness to transfer predominantly Kannada-speaking 260 villages with a population of about 3.25 lakh and total area of 1,160 square miles in lieu of accepting its demand for 814 villages and three urban settlements, which was turned down by Karnataka.

### What Was the Basis of Maharashtra's Claim?

Maharashtra's claim to seek the readjustment of its border was on the basis of contiguity, relative linguistic majority and wishes of the people. If the claim over Belagavi and surrounding areas was based on Marathi-speaking people and linguistic homogeneity, it laid its claim over Karwar and Supa where Konkani is spoken by citing Konkani as a dialect of Marathi. Its argument was based on the theory of village being the unit for calculation and enumerated linguistic population in each village. Maharashtra also points out the historical fact that the revenue records in these Marathi-speaking areas are also kept in Marathi.

### What Is Karnataka's Position?

Karnataka has argued that the settlement of boundaries as per the States Reorganisation Act is final. The boundary of the State was neither tentative nor flexible. The State argues that the issue would reopen border issues that have not been contemplated under the Act, and that such a demand should not be permitted. Initially, Karnataka was open to adjusting the border in the 10-mile belt from the drawn boundary. Karnataka also points out that when Congress, which redrew its circles on linguistic basis in 1920, included Belagavi in the Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee. Besides, the States Reorganisation Commission vested Belagavi with Karnataka.



### Did the States Make an Effort to Find A Solution?

In 1960, both States agreed to set up a four-man committee with two representatives from each State. Except on the issue of contiguity, the committee could not arrive at a unanimous decision, and respective representatives submitted reports to their government. Between the 1960s and 1980s, chief ministers of Karnataka and Maharashtra have met several times to find a solution to the vexed issue but with no avail.

### How Has the Union Government Responded?

Under sustained pressure from Maharashtra, in 1966, the Centre announced setting up a one-man commission under former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India Meher Chand Mahajan to look into border issues between Karnataka (then Mysore state) and Maharashtra. The commission was also asked to look into Karnataka's demand for integration of Kannada-speaking areas in Kasargod in Kerala. While Maharashtra reiterated its demand, Karnataka sought areas in Kolhapur, Sholapur and Sangli districts from Maharashtra, and Kasargod from Kerala. The commission received more than 2,200 memoranda and met over 7,500 people. It submitted its report to the Union government in 1967. After much delay and debates over the content, the commission's report was placed in Parliament in 1972. The commission rejected Maharashtra's claim over Belagavi city while recommending transfer of about 260 villages in the border to Maharashtra and about 250 villages in Maharashtra to Karnataka. Maharashtra said the report was inconsistent and an unfair application of its own principle. It also said the report was not a final word on the issue. Karnataka, however, agreed to the report. Last week, in response to Mr. Thackeray's statement, Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa also reiterated that the Mahajan Commission report was final and "the question of transferring even an inch of land does not arise." In 2004, Maharashtra approached the Supreme Court for a settlement under Article 131(b) of the Constitution. Karnataka has questioned the suit. With one of the judges recusing, the court has to set up a new bench.

### India's Under-5 Girls Face High Mortality

- India is among the few countries in the world where, in 2018, the mortality for girls under 5 years of age exceeded that of boys, according to the 'Levels and Trends in Child Mortality' report by the United Nations (UN) inter-agency group for child mortality. The report states that in 2018, fewer countries showed gender disparities in child mortality, and across the world, boys are expected to have a higher probability of dying before reaching age 5 than girls. But this trend was not reflected in India. "In some countries, the risk of dying before age 5 for girls is significantly higher than what would be expected based on global patterns. These countries are primarily located in Southern Asia and Western Asia," said the report. According to India's 2017 Sample Registration System, the States with the highest burden of neonatal mortality are Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, with 32, 33 and 30 neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births, respectively. India's neonatal mortality rate is 23 per 1,000 live births. Further, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttarakhand showed the largest gender gaps in under-5 mortality. Half of all under-5 deaths in 2018 occurred in five countries: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia. India and Nigeria alone account for about a third. The major causes of neonatal mortality are pre-term birth, intrapartum related events, and neonatal infection. The report adds that despite advancements made over the past two decades, one child or young adolescent died every



five seconds in 2018. "Current trends predict that close to 10 million 5- to 14-year-olds, and 52 million children under 5 years of age, will die between 2019 and 2030," said the report.

## Taking Stock of Infant Deaths

- Every day, India witnesses the death of an estimated 2,350 babies aged less than one year. Among them, an average 172 are from Rajasthan and 98 from Gujarat. **In 2014, of every 1,000 children born in the country, 39 did not see their first birthday. Today, that figure has come down to 33.** That is 1,56,000 fewer deaths every year. As outrage continues over the deaths of babies in J K Lon Hospital in Kota, Rajasthan, and in the civil hospital in Rajkot, Gujarat, the fact remains that India has the most child deaths in the world. In 2017, UNICEF estimated 8,02,000 babies had died in India.

### How High Are the Mortality Numbers?

India has an annual birth cohort of approximately 26 million. The infant mortality rate (IMR) in the country currently stands at 33 per 1,000 live births. This means babies numbering in the region of 8,50,000 die every year in India, or an average daily toll to 2,350. Gujarat has an annual birth cohort of 1.2 million. In 2017, the infant mortality rate in the state was 30 per 1,000 live births. This means the state sees about 36,000 deaths a year, or an average 98 a day. In Rajasthan, an estimated 1.65 million births take place every year. The infant mortality rate is 38 per 1000 live births which implies an estimated 62,843 deaths annually, or an average 172 every day.

### Do Gujarat And Rajasthan Have the Highest Infant Mortality?

No. Between 2014 and 2017, India's IMR has declined by 15.4%. At a decline rate of 17.4%, Rajasthan has been ahead of the national average in reducing IMR while Gujarat has a decline rate of 14.3%. The IMR in Rajasthan dropped from 46 per 1,000 live births in 2014 to 38, and in Gujarat from 35 to 30. **In 2017, states such as Arunachal Pradesh (42), Madhya Pradesh (47), Assam (44), Uttar Pradesh (41), Meghalaya (39), Odisha (41) and Chhattisgarh (38) had a higher IMR than Gujarat and Rajasthan.** Arunachal, Tripura and Manipur have recorded a negative reduction rate between 2014 and 2017, which means child death rates there have gone up. In Arunachal it went up from 30 to 42, in Tripura from 21 to 29 and in Manipur from 11 to 12.

### Why Do So Many Infants Die in India Every Year?

On January 1, 2020, according to a UNICEF estimate, India, with an estimated 67,385 babies born that day, accounted for 17% of the estimated 392,078 births globally. This is higher than the 46,299 babies born in China that day, the 26,039 born in Nigeria and 16,787 born in Pakistan. Among the factors that have been proved detrimental to child survival are lack of education in the mother, malnutrition (more than half of Indian women are anaemic), age of the mother at the time of birth, spacing, and whether the child is born at home or in a facility. According to a UNICEF factsheet on child mortality in India, "... Children born to mothers with at least 8 years of schooling have 32% lesser chances of dying in neonatal period and 52% lesser chances in the post-neonatal period, as compared to the illiterate mothers." It also notes that infant and under-five mortality rates are highest among mothers under age 20. The rates are lowest among children born to mothers between the ages of 20-24, remain low up to 25-34, and increase again after that age. According to the National Family Health



Survey-4, **only 78.9% births in India happen in a facility.** This means 21.1% or about 54 lakh births in a year still happen outside of a facility where hygiene levels can be low, sometimes without the help of a trained health worker. **Apart from the obvious infection risks in a non-institutional birth, vaccine compliance too is usually worse in these cases. According to the Health Ministry, the vaccination cover in India after several rounds of Intensified Mission Indradhanush (MI) and the original MI, now stands at 87%.** This means over 33 lakh children continue to miss out on some or all vaccinations every year.

### What Measures Are in Place for Sick New-borns?

Special new-born care units (SNCUs) have been established at district hospitals and sub-district hospitals with an annual delivery load more than 3,000 to provide care for sick new-borns: that is, all type of neonatal care except assisted ventilation and major surgeries. It is a separate unit in close proximity to the labour room with 12 or more beds, and managed by adequately trained doctors, staff nurses and support staff to provide 24×7 services. According to officials in the Health Ministry, approximately 1 million children are admitted to the 996 SNCUs in the country every year with an average death rate of 10%. “The death rates are usually higher in medical college-based SNCUs like J K Lon (Kota) because they tend to get sicker babies, sometimes from faraway districts when parents rush them there in a last-minute effort. J K Lon (Kota) for example has a 20% death rate. But that is because the challenges are higher,” said a senior Health Ministry official dealing with child health. In AIIMS, New Delhi, usually only those new-borns are admitted who are born there and these usually come from high-risk pregnancies. “The mortality rate for intramural cases is about 1.5% but these are low birth weight babies, pneumonia, sepsis. Extramural cases we only take those that are very sick, babies that nobody else will take such a heart disease kidney failure etc. Overall 10% has been the mortality figure since the time SNCUs began to be monitored nationally,” says Dr Vinod K Paul, member NITI Aayog and former professor of paediatrics at AIIMS.

### Why Mounted Police Are Back in Mumbai

- Mumbai Police announced the return of the force’s Mounted Unit after a gap of 88 years. For the last four months, the force has been training 13 horses and their riders for the Republic Day Parade at Shivaji Park, Dadar.

### Why Was the Mounted Unit Discontinued?

In 1932, Bombay Police Commissioner Sir Patrick Kelly noted that the rising number of motor vehicles left little space for police horses to move about. Retired Assistant Commissioner of Police and police historian Rohidas Dusr said Kelly decided to replace the animals with patrol cars. The same year, a Motor Transport Unit replaced the Mounted Unit, and stables in South Mumbai, were replaced with garages, fuel pumps and parking spaces.

### So, Why Revive the Mounted Unit?

A constable astride a horse is seen as more able to command fear and respect from an unruly crowd, which he or she might not have commanded on the ground. “Just because it is an old idea, that does not mean it is obsolete. All major cities of the world have mounted units. When used judiciously, they help a lot in crowd control,” said Pranaya Ashok, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Operations) and Mumbai Police spokesperson. Among the states,





Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, MP, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttarakhand, UP and West Bengal have mounted units, some of which date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Subedar (Retd.) R T Nirmal, of the 61<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, who is training the Mumbai Police's horses and riders, says the horses will be able to navigate Mumbai's congested roads better. "A rider on a horse will be able to reach a spot much quicker than a police car and report back."

### How Large Is the Unit?

In 2018, then Mumbai Police Commissioner and Subodh Kumar Jaiswal (now Maharashtra DGP) submitted a proposal to acquire 30 horses at a cost of ₹1.5 crore. The government sanctioned the proposal in March last year, and a 2.5-acre plot at Mumbai Police headquarters in Andheri East was identified to build stables, a riding school, a sand bath, a swimming pool for horses and an administrative unit for riders. Additional provisions were made in the police budget for the upkeep of the horses. In the week leading up to Republic Day, the horses have been staying at makeshift stables in Shivaji Park. From next week, they will return to stables in Karjat in Raigad district until the new facility is ready. In a video tweeted by Mumbai Police, the riders wore a blue sherwani with silver trimming, white breeches and a pagdi designed by Manish Malhotra.

### How and When Will the Unit Be Deployed?

The present stable of 13 — seven thoroughbreds named Padmakosha, Shivalik Skies, Divine Solitaire, Beekwerk, Severus and Golden Orchid and six Marwaris named Veer, Toophan, Shera, Chetak, Baadal and Bijli — is still several months away from being deployed. Schedules and details of deployment are yet to fixed. Since last year, Subedar Nirmal has been getting them acclimatised to patrolling on the beach, walking in water and among dense crowds at Dadar Chowpatty. He also plans to get the horses used to walking on tar, concrete and paver-block surfaced roads, but they will not do so full time. "As and when a law and order situation arise, we will transport the horses to the spot by car and deploy them to bring crowds under control," an official said.

### What Are A Police Commissionerate System?

- The Uttar Pradesh Cabinet approved the Commissionerate system of policing for state capital Lucknow, and Noida. The system gives more responsibilities, including magisterial powers, to IPS officers of Inspector General of Police (IG) rank posted as commissioners. Depending on its success here, the policing system may gradually be implemented in other districts as well.

### What Are Police Commissionerate System?

Under the 7<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution, 'Police' is under the State list, meaning individual states typically legislate and exercise control over this subject. **In the arrangement in force at the district level, a 'dual system' of control exists, in which the Superintendent of Police (SP) has to work with the District Magistrate (DM) for supervising police administration. At the metropolitan level, many states have replaced the dual system with the Commissionerate system, as it is supposed to allow for faster decision-making to solve complex urban-centric issues.** In the Commissionerate system, the Commissioner of Police (CP) is the head of a unified police command structure, is responsible for the force in the city, and is accountable



to the state government. The office also has magisterial powers, including those related to regulation, control, and licensing. The CP is drawn from the Deputy Inspector General rank or above, and is assisted by Special/Joint/Additional/Deputy Commissioners.

### How Many States Have It?

Almost all states barring Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, UT of J&K, and some North-eastern states have a Commissionerate system. The British brought the system first in Kolkata and followed it in Mumbai and Chennai presidencies. Delhi turned into a Commissionerate during the Morarji Desai regime. In 1978, an initiative to introduce the system in UP, beginning with Kanpur, never materialised. Prakash Singh says the delay in UP was due to resistance from the IAS lobby. "Bureaucracy in India has resisted it (Commissionerate system) tooth and nail. Even in 1978, it was resisted by Delhi bureaucracy," Singh said. He added that even now in UP, the bureaucracy has wrenched some powers off the Commissionerate. "Only 15 Acts have been kept under police Commissionerate's. Bureaucracy has kept with itself issues of licensing, the Arms Act, Excise laws etc with themselves," Singh said. UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has said that as per the Police Act, the system is to be implemented in cities with more than 10 lakh population and added, "But because of lack of political will it could not be implemented. For years, there was a demand in Uttar Pradesh but it was neglected." How well policing improves depends on the leadership the government gives to a Commissionerate. "Commissionerate system only gives police an enabling environment to delivering policing in a complex region. Ultimately, the officer in charge and the culture the ushers will matter. What will matter the most is how the government deals with him," said Singh.

### What Is Different Under the System?

**Policing is based on the Police Act of 1861.** Under the colonial system, the overall in-charge of a district or region was the district collector; the SP reported to him. The powers of the executive magistrate, such as issuing orders for preventive arrests or imposition of Section 144 CrPC, were vested in the district collector. This was called the dual system of police administration. "The primary objective of the British was revenue collection in rural India. They needed a force that could support this objective and unleash tyranny and oppression when needed to suit the objective. The worst of officers from the British police were sent to India. So, there was need to put them under the District Collector. That system continued post-Independence," former UP DG Prakash Singh said. Under the Commissionerate system, the commissioner does not report to the DM. In Mumbai and Delhi, he reports directly to the government. "It gives an integrated command structure. It helps fix responsibility with the Commissioner and eliminates blame game between civil administration and police when something goes wrong," Singh said.

### Three Capitals for Andhra Pradesh

- ➔ The Andhra Pradesh Assembly passed **The Andhra Pradesh Decentralisation and Equal Development of All Regions Bill, 2020**, paving the way for three capitals for the state. Amaravati, where former Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu had hoped to build his dream capital, will now be only the legislative capital, while Visakhapatnam will be the executive capital and Kurnool the judicial capital.



### Rationale for Three Capitals

The YSR Congress Party government says it is against building one mega capital while neglecting other parts of the state. "We do not want to develop one area utilising all our available financial resources while other areas suffer due to lack of funds," Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy told. The government has given several reasons for its "decentralised development" project.

- ❖ Historically recommended: According to the government, decentralisation was the central theme in recommendations of all major committees that were set up to suggest a suitable location for the capital of Andhra Pradesh. Finance and Legislative Affairs Minister B Rajendranath said it had been agreed in the November 16, 1937 Sri Bagh Pact (between leaders of coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema) that two university centres should be established in Waltair (Visakhapatnam) and Anantapur in Rayalaseema, and that the High Court and Metropolis should be in the coastal districts and Rayalaseema respectively. In December 2010, the Justice B N Srikrishna Committee, set up to look into the demand for a Telangana state, said Rayalaseema and North Coastal Andhra were economically the most backward, and the "concentration of development efforts in Hyderabad is the key reason for demand of separate states". In August 2014, the K Sivaramakrishnan Committee appointed to identify locations for the new capital of AP said the state should see decentralised development, and that one mega capital city was not desirable.
- ❖ G N Rao Committee: A Committee constituted by the YSRCP government under former IAS officer G N Rao, in its December 2019 report, recommended three capitals for balanced growth, and four regional Commissionerate's along the lines of Karnataka.
- ❖ BCG recommendation: The government sought an opinion from the global management consulting firm Boston Consultancy Group, which on January 3, 2020, recommended that Visakhapatnam should be the seat of the Governor, Chief Minister, and all government departments, and a High Court Bench, and have provisions for a Legislative Assembly for use in an emergency; Vijayawada/Amaravati should have the Assembly and a High Court Bench; Kurnool should have the High Court and tribunals.
- ❖ High-powered Committee: A high-power Committee appointed by the government to study the recommendations of the G N Rao Committee and the BCG suggested that the state should be demarcated into zones with separate zonal planning and development boards in order to ensure inclusive development, and that infrastructure projects focussed Rayalaseema and North Coastal Andhra should be prioritised.

### Major Practical Problems

The government argues that the Assembly meets only after gaps of several months, and government Ministers, officers, and staff can simply go to Amaravati when required. However, coordinating between seats of legislature and executive in separate cities will be easier said than done, and with the government offering no specifics of a plan, officers and common people alike fear a logistics nightmare. The distances in Andhra Pradesh are not inconsiderable. Executive capital Visakhapatnam is 700 km from judicial capital Kurnool, and 400 km from legislative capital Amaravati. The Amaravati-Kurnool distance is 370 km. The time and costs of travel will be significant. The AP Police are headquartered in Mangalagiri,



14 km from Vijayawada, and senior IPS officers who may be required to visit the Secretariat will have to travel 400 km to Visakhapatnam. Likewise, government officers who may have to appear in the High Court will have to travel 700 km to Kurnool, which does not have an airport. All officers and Ministerial staff who may have to be at hand to brief Ministers when the Assembly is in session, will probably have to stay put in Amaravati, leaving behind their other responsibilities in Visakhapatnam.

### Infrastructure Requirements

There are no plans to construct new buildings in Visakhapatnam. Municipal Administration and Urban Development Minister Botsa Satyanarayana has said there is enough vacant government office space available in the city. Sources said government buildings on Hill 1 and 2 at Rushikonda IT Special Economic Zone have space to house the Secretariat and offices of the heads of departments. The government is considering allotting plots of government land at subsidised rates to over 14,000 state employees who are likely to move from Vijayawada and Guntur to Visakhapatnam.

### Jagan Mohan vs Naidu

After the creation of Telangana, truncated Andhra Pradesh pinned its hopes on N Chandrababu Naidu, who is credited with transforming sleepy Hyderabad into a global Information Technology hub during the time he was Chief Minister from 1995 to 2004. After the TDP swept the 2014 elections with help from its then ally BJP, Naidu focussed on building a world class capital in Amaravati. Through an innovative land pooling scheme, 33,000 acres of fertile land were taken from 29 villages, with landowners being promised developed, highly valuable plots in return, apart from monetary compensation per acre per year. However, due to lack of funds and support from the Centre, Naidu could not build his dream capital; he did, however, build a plug-and-play Interim Government Complex, a temporary High Court building, and a permanent Legislative Complex; and commissioned several bungalows and apartments for lawmakers, judges, and officers. Naidu's bitter rival Jagan Mohan Reddy, however, scrapped the project. There is widespread feeling in Andhra Pradesh that the three-capitals plan is essentially intended to deny Naidu credit for building a signature capital after his own style.

### NCRB's Crime in India Report 2018

- Only three months after the release of the much delayed "Crime in India report" for 2017, the National Crime Records Bureau's 2018 report was unveiled last week. While the fact that this document has been made available so soon should be welcomed, this report, as with those for earlier years, carries the caveat that crime records and statistics are only as good as their reporting. **Some States are better than others in tracking and registering crimes. This is why Kerala and the National Capital Region having the highest crime rates in the country — 1463.2 per one lakh population and 1342.5, respectively — is also a reflection of the fact that crime reporting, follow-up and subsequent steps in trial and punishment are much better undertaken in these two States/UTs.** Yet, what should be worrying for the capital city region is that unlike Kerala, the number of cognisable crimes has steadily increased to 2,62,612 in 2018 from 2,16,920 in 2016. Better reporting could also perhaps explain why there is a 15% increase in the total crimes against women across all States, but the fact that this number went up by 66% in a large State such as Uttar Pradesh must be cause for concern.

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)





Conversely, crimes against women fell 20.8% after reaching a peak number of 17,222 in Delhi. It is well understood that the protests against the gangrape in Delhi in 2012 had significantly contributed to greater reporting of crimes against women. The fall in these numbers, corresponding to the general increase in crimes, could reflect the outcomes of better gender sensitisation in the capital region. Unlike crime numbers that are difficult to interpret due to registration and policing issues, the number of murders across States is a stark reflection of violent crime. The finding in the 2017 NCRB report that north-eastern States such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya have a relatively higher murder rate compared to most States bears itself out in 2018 as well. Other States which have a worrisome record here include Jharkhand (4.6 murders per one lakh population, the highest in the country) and Haryana (3.9). Among cities, Patna (4.4) has an egregious murder rate. While protests and violence related to them have occupied the news cycle in the last month or so, data from the report suggest that there has been a marginal decrease in the total cases related to rioting from 2016 (61,974) to 2018 (57,828). Cases related to caste and communal/religious riots, political violence and agrarian conflicts registered a dip while there was an increase in industrial rioting and other personal disputes. Among cases registered as "offences against the State", there has been an ominous increase under "sedition" with the number of those booked in 2018 double that of 2016, even as most such cases under this section came under the "Prevention of Damage of Public Property Act"; Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh led with nearly half of the overall cases.

### Police Don't Care Much for Rights Bodies

- In a country like India, access to the criminal justice system is often determined by how much money, power, and influence the complainant has, suggests the latest crime data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Who the complainant is able to approach to register her complaint, therefore, becomes important? According to the 2018 report, a person has the best chance of getting a complaint registered as a FIR if she is able to go to the police station with an order from a court. Ninety-nine per cent of complaints that are routed through a court are registered as FIRs, the data show. As many as 1,09,392 of the 1,10,338 complaints that were forwarded by courts to police were registered as FIRs in 2018. According to the data, a written complaint sent to the officer in charge of a police station has 72% chances of being converted into a FIR. In 2018, of the 37,46,600 complaints sent to SHOs, 2,68,8182 were converted into FIRs. A written complaint has a better chance of being registered than a verbal complaint, in which the duty officer takes down details. **The data show that 53% of written complaints were registered, while only 5% of oral complaints saw legal action by police. Complaints made through Dial 100 had only a 1% success rate. Complaints filed online, a new initiative by police in some states such as Delhi and UP, too have a very slim chance. In 2018, only 3% of complaints filed online were converted to FIRs.** "While it is true that people with influence and contacts have better chances of getting their complaints registered, many complaints are not converted into FIRs because they are either not worth investigating or are found patently false on verification. But burking is a problem across all police forces. Often the uneducated and unlettered are unable to get their complaints registered," a senior police officer from UP said. The data also show how toothless central commissions are in dealing with complaints of human rights abuses and atrocities on women, children, and Dalits. According to the data, only 4% of complaints sent to the National Human Rights Commission or State Human Rights Commissions ended up being converted into FIRs. Of the 24,343 complaints lodged with the NHRC in 2018 only 1,002



were converted into FIRs. The Commissions for Scheduled Castes (both in the states and at the Centre) fare no better. Only 7% of complaints registered with them were converted into FIRs. Of the 5,766 complaints received by them, only 413 became FIRs. For the Commissions for Scheduled Tribes, the number was worse — only 5%. In 2018, a total 880 complaints were received by these Commissions, but only 48 were converted into FIRs. Only 5% of complaints received by National and State Commissions for Women were converted into FIRs in 2018. Children Welfare Boards/Commission had a success rate of 20%. In contrast, complaints of which police took suo motu cognizance had a success rate of 80%. **Overall, complaints sent to police through various sources had a success rate (of turning into an FIR) of just 26%.**

### The Long Wait for Empowered Mayors

- As he attempts to repeat the overwhelming 2015 victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Assembly election, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is challenging political Goliaths on just one plank: his government's performance.

#### The Face of Changes

The iconoclast who overran Delhi's established political trenches with an anti-corruption campaign is pinning his hopes on the unprecedented fiscal measures he has taken to change the paradigm of education, health and urban development in the National Capital. In office, he has pressed on even in the face of non-cooperation from the Central Government, which controls important departments providing civic services mainly through the Urban Development and Home Ministries. The AAP's annual budget five years ago raised the outlay for education by 106% over the previous year's plan of ₹2,219 crore, and focused on building 20,000 additional classrooms. It sent government teacher-mentors abroad for training to modernise the system. Shiny classrooms, new teaching tools and eager students changed the public view of government schools as decrepit dungeons. Delhi's ambitious budgets for development stand apart from those of other cities, and built the Chief Minister's reputation more as a super Mayor in a city-State. The 2015 education outlay was no flash in the pan. Four years later, it was 27.8%, says an analysis by PRS Legislative Research, and continues to tower over the States that average 15.8%. For health, the allocation of 13.8% dwarfs the 5.2% that others spend on average, and Delhi's Mohalla Clinics — to provide coverage to all within a range of 1 km — are seen by public health researchers as a good model for a national universal health coverage programme. In budget 2019-20, the highest increase was for transport, at 38%, raising hopes of reduced pollution partly through support for electric vehicles. Municipal budgets for 2014-15 analysed by Open Budgets India reflect a similar trend for urban education expenditure vis-à-vis Delhi. On the income side, cities collect far less property tax than they should due to undervaluation and lack of scientific assessment. Although he is criticised for his style of functioning, the AAP leader does not have his back to the wall and is pushing to extend his authority, fighting the Central Government's attempts to clip his wings. This is not the situation in other big metropolitan cities, which cannot aspire to have strong leadership due to the prevailing system.

#### Hardly Empowered; A 'Threat'

Metros have been deprived of empowered Mayors who can raise efficiency, productivity and liveability. Mayors in many global cities go on to lead their country, which possibly explains why they have been reduced to obscure, ceremonial figures by national parties in India. The



Economic Survey of 2017-18 notes that a third of the population now lives in urban areas which produce three-fifths of the GDP. But India's overflowing cities lack capacity, infrastructure and leadership. The Survey acknowledges this, attributing it to the absence of a single city government in charge, and low spending on infrastructure. State governments amass the large economic output from urban agglomerations, but are averse to a strong Mayoral system. Chief Ministers see a potential threat from a charismatic and empowered Mayor with progressive policies. Some of them have used the excuse of poor performance of urban local bodies as a justification to replace direct election of Mayors with an indirect system. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government in Tamil Nadu issued an ordinance last year to amend the law, and remove any possibility of prominent Opposition politicians becoming the face of any big city. The memory of M.K. Stalin, son of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader M. Karunanidhi as a high-profile Mayor in Chennai even after a quarter century is obviously still fresh. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi refreshingly promised ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha poll that he would support directly-elected Mayors, since smart cities depend on good leaders.

### Weakening Governance

In some States, elections to urban local bodies have not been held for years, defeating the lofty goal of decentralised governance. Tamil Nadu is a prominent example. The idea of giving more authority to the third tier of governance has suffered serious stunting, in spite of the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Act of 1992 identifying 18 local level functions to be devolved, including planning for economic and social development, regulation of land, construction of buildings, urban planning and public health. The average of subjects devolved in all these years is nine, and does not include the major municipal services which continue to be run by parastatal authorities that answer to State governments. Newer devices used to bypass local bodies and priorities are styled as special schemes, such as urban renewal and smart cities, directly supervised by the Central government and partnered by State governments. Several States are averse to directly-elected Mayors even for their biggest cities, in spite of the Mayor being deprived of any significant powers. The appointment of the executive in-charge, the Municipal Commissioner is a good example. Empowered Mayors, such as those in New York, Paris, London or even Shanghai, could steal the limelight through spectacular successes, leaving Chief Ministers and legislators with little direct connect with urban voters. Even on a salient issue such as climate change, Mayors are much in demand. The Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, assumed the leadership of the climate movement in iconic ways, with a move to prescribe green roofs in the vast French capital capturing the public imagination worldwide. Mr. Kejriwal is alert to the global traction that climate change is getting, and addressed Mayors gathered in Copenhagen via video link last year, because the Central government refused him permission to attend. The AAP Health Minister was similarly denied permission to go to Australia to explain the working of Mohalla Clinics. The present system, of course, does not help directly-elected Mayors. They have not been able to raise service delivery standards, regardless of long or short tenure, and the poor outcomes are quite evident, as the Economic Survey points out. Ironically, because powerless Mayors have running battles with municipal councillors, States such as Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, to name just two, abandoned direct elections to the post. The Annual Survey of India's City-Systems (ASICS) 2017 covering 23 cities across 20 States published by Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy found 33% of medium and large cities with a provision for directly-elected Mayors, but none in the mega cities. A tenure of five years for Mayors is



available only in a fifth of the biggest cities, and half of urban Indians live in cities where Mayors can be in office for just two-and-a-half years, ASICS found. Unified governance and empowerment through elected municipal systems is a distant prospect, but the Central government glibly claimed at the UN Habitat Conference in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016, that the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment had made Indian cities self-governing entities with adequate powers and financial autonomy. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth, but then the statement was made by the Secretary to the Union Ministry of Housing. At the conference plenary, the Indian statement did not contain any reference to Mayors.

### Hampering Development

Much hard work must be done, before cities can progress beyond John Kenneth Galbraith's famous description of India as a "functioning anarchy". Government departments will feel accountable for urban services and infrastructure only under the watch of an empowered leader, who enjoys the mandate of the city's residents. A lot of time has been lost, as recalcitrant State leaders, who often have remote rural bases of support, stymie the pace of orderly urban development. Lack of coherence in government is hindering better productivity, and causing losses through pollution, congestion and poor outcomes on infrastructure investments. The priorities are flawed, the administration is fragmented and the capacity of city governments is low. In the coming decade, progress on Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN Habitat New Urban Agenda will come under close international scrutiny. India's cities need a new deal, one that is focused on development. Only elected, empowered and accountable Mayors can deliver on that.

### Doing Away With Ad Hoc Teachers (Shiv Sethi Is Head, Department English Language And Linguistics, Dev Samaj Postgraduate College For Women, Ferozpur)

- Even as students in JNU were protesting against fee hike, another protest has been going on in Delhi, spearheaded by the Delhi University Teachers' Association. It began after the university issued a circular, which ad hoc teachers saw as an attempt to hire them as guest teachers instead. According to the university's guidelines, an ad hoc appointment may be made "in case there is a sudden, unexpected and short vacancy, arising out of sudden sickness or death, on medical grounds (including maternity leave), abrupt leave or any other situation that may disrupt the normal process of teaching learning." There are an estimated 4,500 ad hoc teachers in Delhi University.

### A Damocles' Sword

It is a fact that the Indian higher education system continues to be in a shamble. There are many factors that have pushed the education system to the brink of collapse. Among these is the fact that there is lack of job security among a vast majority of teachers who have been rendering their services on ad hoc or contractual basis in universities, colleges and schools. Development experts say that a healthy and civilised society depends in part on the quality of higher education. However, there is less recognition that while **a fulfilled teacher can create a healthy society, a frustrated teacher can be equally destructive**. Colleen Wilcox, an educator and administrator, describes teaching as the greatest act of optimism. What hope





will teachers instil in students when a Damocles' sword constantly hangs over their heads? A regressive culture of ad hocism has unfortunately percolated through India's education system and engendered a sense of despondency among the temporary and contractual teachers. This class of educators remains on the periphery of the system and is not allowed to mingle with the mainstream segment of teachers, even when they fulfil the rigorous guidelines that the UGC has laid down for the recruitment of teachers to permanent positions. Despite the guidelines, many amongst this cohort are hired only for a fixed number of months, and at the end of every academic session their services are dispensed with. Without any certainty of future, as no job security act is applicable in their case, they have no choice but to reappear for interviews at different places at the start of each academic session. Add to this the humiliating and exploitative experience of such teachers who do not receive the full salary that they are entitled to in accordance with the guidelines of the UGC and are, instead, often appointed on a consolidated sum considerably lower than stipulated amounts. The problem of underpayment of temporary and contractual teachers is rampant in private universities and colleges, going by recent accounts. The knock-on effects of these unchecked distortions in the teacher compensation systems can be profound. **When a well-qualified teacher is compelled to bear the brunt of financial exploitation, he desperately seeks other measures to enhance his income and make up for the losses. Inevitably this leads to demands that students join private coaching or tuition classes, to augment the meagre official pay.** Often, the quality of educational inputs provided in such settings declines considerably.

### Revamp the Education Policy

In this context, it is the broader canvas of higher education as a core ingredient of development that shows a troubling picture. Given the importance of human capital and skill acquisition in emerging economies, how are India's development prospects impacted by the state of immense material insecurity that is forced upon its educators? No matter how brilliant the mind of educators, if they are operating under the fear of expulsion or some other such threat, they are likely to be incapable of delivering the goods. To restore India's long-term developmental prospects there is no choice for the government but to revamp its flawed education policy which has created and encouraged the scourge of ad hocism in our paralysed higher education system.

### Playing with Learning

- The **Annual Status of Education Report 2019** data on early childhood education in rural areas makes the case that the pre-school system fails to give children a strong foundation, especially in government-run facilities. Going by the findings, the percentage of girls in government schools is higher than in private institutions, the cognitive skills of children attending official anganwadis playschools do not match those attending private schools, and there is a significant percentage of underage children in the first standard of formal school, in violation of the stipulated age of six. It is beyond question that children will be benefitted greatly if they are provided a properly designed environment to acquire cognitive skills. These skills are critical to their ability to verbalise, count, calculate and make comparisons. What the ASER data sampled from 26 Indian districts seem to indicate is an apparent imbalance in State policies, which is disadvantaging the less affluent as anganwadis and government schools are poorly resourced. Official policies are also not strict about the age of entry, resulting in four- and five-year olds accounting for a quarter of government school



enrolment, and over 15% in private schools. Substantive questions of pre-primary and early children education raised even by meagre surveys such as ASER call for a deeper look at how governments approach funding of institutions and teacher training for better outcomes. It is as important to let teachers feel invested in anganwadis as play-and-learn centres aiding children in acquiring cognitive skills, as it is to provide physical infrastructure. Building human resource capabilities would depend on teachers being recruited on the basis of aptitude, their training in credentialed colleges and assurance of tenure of service. It is unsurprising that in the absence of policies with strong commitment, according to the ASER data, **two-thirds of those in the second standard cannot read a text at age seven that they were meant to read a year earlier. The performance only marginally improves for those in the third standard. There are similar inadequacies for numeracy skills. It is a paradox that students appear to fare somewhat better in private schools with poorly paid teachers.** Nationally, the problem is of a weak educational foundation with little scope for creative learning in the three-to-six-year age group, and a governmental system disinterested in giving children motivated, well-trained teachers. There is no dearth of literature on what works for creative teaching and learning, including from programmes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Neither is there a lack of financial resources. What remains is for governments to show commitment to education.

### Teaching Research Ethics Better

- Years after ignoring the elephant in the room, the UGC has finally made it compulsory for PhD scholars to take up a course on research and publication ethics as part of their pre-registration course work. Effective from the coming academic session, the course carries two credits and entails 30 teaching hours. It covers several aspects of research conduct, publication ethics and misconduct, open access publishing and databases, and research metrics. But on closer scrutiny, it looks like the course will not help much. It will create “awareness about publication ethics and misconduct” but it will not equip students to steer clear of unethical research practices. For instance, **‘scientific conduct’ deals with a range of issues that research students might face during research. This includes plagiarism, falsification and fabrication, misrepresentation of data, selective reporting, duplicate publication, and segregation of data and publishing as multiple papers.** All this is to be magically covered in just five hours. Substantial copying of text from previously published papers and even paraphrasing without due citation are quite common in papers published from India, particularly from state universities. The introduction of plagiarism-checking software in most universities and compulsory checking for plagiarism prior to paper publication by most journals has largely addressed the problem.

### Preparing Images

While the course does cover data falsification and fabrication, there is no mention of teaching researchers the basics of preparing images for publication. While certain changes to images are acceptable, hundreds of papers are corrected or retracted every year for image duplication and manipulation. Unlike plagiarism, journals have woken up to inappropriately altered images and manipulation only since the early 2000s. As Dr. Elisabeth M. Bik and others had noted in a June 2016 paper in the journal mBio, the instances of “inappropriately duplicated images” suddenly peaked in 2003 and has been 4-5% since then. Over 8,100 papers screened from PLOS One for a 16-month period from 2013 to 2014 revealed that **papers published from India had 1.93-fold higher probability of containing “problematic**



images”, the highest in the world. Unlike in the case of data falsification and fabrication, duplication and manipulation of images is relatively easy to identify post-publication. That PubPeer, a website that allows independent scientists to publish post-publication review of scientific papers, is flooded with reviews of papers with questionable images is proof that the scientific community has become alert to a malice that has so far been largely overlooked.

### A Big Indian Problem

In India, dozens of papers with questionable images have been published by researchers from a few Council of Scientific and Industrial Research labs, and reputed institutions such as IIT-Dhanbad, the Indian Institute of Science, and Bose Institute. It is far worse in the case of state universities. Recently, Dr. Bik identified problematic images and plagiarised text in over 200 papers from Annamalai University in Tamil Nadu. Several papers from Periyar University in Tamil Nadu and Banaras Hindu University too can be found on PubPeer. The magnitude of the problem can be judged by scanning the largest database of retracted papers maintained by the Retraction Watch blog. The blog reveals that of the 1,050 papers from India retracted since the 1970s, 330 have been for plagiarism and nearly 200 for image duplication and/or manipulation. There is no ballpark figure for papers corrected for problematic images. Though the U.S. and China have the most number of journal papers retracted, India has a higher rate of retractions, says a paper in Science. If UGC is serious about teaching research and publication ethics, it should make scientific conduct and publication ethics separate courses with sufficient teaching hours or retain it as a single course and devote more time to teach research ethics and include image preparation as part of the course.

### Bull and Gore

- Seen by the courts as cruelty on bulls, but celebrated in Tamil Nadu as a display of valour, the rural sport of jallikattu is an inevitable part of the Pongal season in the State. It is promoted as a tourist attraction by the government and its appeal as a symbol of Tamil culture remains the same year after year. It is only the odd voice that sees it as a relic of a feudal past. However, one aspect that remains unchanged — through the years in which the legality of the bull-taming sport was questioned, the event itself banned, and then restored by law — is that every season, it leaves a few dead and scores wounded. Often, these wounds are a trauma doctor’s nightmare, given the grievous nature of the bull gore injuries. It is an event that cries for maximum regulation. The regulations have been tightened from time to time, and no event takes place without official permission or medical supervision. The playing arena is protected by double barricades, the entry point and ‘collection point’, where the bulls are to be taken back by the owners after they leave the arena, are supposed to have sufficient protective features to minimise incidents that lead to injuries and fatalities. Yet, some have died in the main events that took place in the last few days; they include bull owners, spectators and an organiser. The victims were mostly gored or stomped upon. Over a hundred are being treated for injuries, some of which are quite serious, marked by internal ruptures that may have a lasting effect on the victims. **The truth about jallikattu is that it is well nigh impossible to hold an incident-free event.** Even conceding that every sport has an element of the danger of injury, especially contact sports, **the distinguishing feature of events involving animals is that they are driven by the instinct of self-preservation and anxiety, and are not bound by rules and reason the way human participants are.** Inevitably, the human casualty list is higher, even though it has been long argued, and even judicially determined

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that jallikattu constitutes a grave violation of animal rights and a perpetration of cruelty on them. Popular sentiment, political patronage and the cultural instinct to preserve practices that hark back to a hoary past contribute collectively to the continuance of the sport. Other virtues attributed to it include giving native breeds a good shot at survival and an opportunity to youth to develop a robust outlook even while earning rewards. What should ultimately matter, above all, is that any activity that endangers participant and onlooker alike should be held under rigorously monitored regulations and restrictions. It is also time that appropriate protective gear is devised and made mandatory for participants.

### A Case for Including Tulu In the Eighth Schedule (Rajmohan Unnithan - Member of Parliament in The Lok Sabha From Kasaragod)

- According to the 2001 Census, India has 30 languages that are spoken by more than a million people each. Additionally, it has 122 languages that are spoken by at least 10,000 people each. It also has 1,599 languages, most of which are dialects. These are restricted to specific regions and many of them are on the verge of extinction. India must accommodate this plethora of languages in its cultural discourse and administrative apparatus. **Article 29** of the Constitution provides that a section of citizens having a **distinct language, script or culture** have the right to conserve the same. Whose burden is it to conserve the distinct language, script or culture of such a section of citizens? Does it fall on the state or the citizens concerned? Actually, both the state and the citizens have an equal responsibility to conserve the distinct language, script and culture of a people.

#### Thousands of Speakers

Among the legion of languages in India, the Constitution has **22 blue-eyed languages**. They are protected in **Schedule VIII** of the Constitution. But many languages that are kept out of this favoured position are in some ways more deserving to be included in the Eighth Schedule. For example, **Sanskrit, an Eighth Schedule language, has only 24,821 speakers (2011 Census)**. **Manipuri, another scheduled language, has only 17,61,079 speakers**. However, many unscheduled languages have a sizeable number of speakers: Bhili/Bhilodi has 1,04,13,637 speakers; Gondi has 29,84,453 speakers; Garo has 11,45,323; Ho has 14,21,418; Khandeshi, 18,60,236; Khasi, 14,31,344; and Oraon, 19,88,350. Tulu is a textbook example of linguistic discrimination. **Tulu is a Dravidian language whose speakers are concentrated in two coastal districts of Karnataka and in Kasaragod district of Kerala**. Kasaragod district is called 'Sapta bhasha Samgama Bhumi (the confluence of seven languages)', and Tulu is among the seven. The Census reports 18,46,427 native speakers of Tulu in India. The Tulu-speaking people are larger in number than speakers of Manipuri and Sanskrit, which have the Eighth Schedule status.

### How Malappuram Topped the List of World's 'Fastest Growing Cities'

- In a chart posted on its official Twitter handle last week, **The Economist** put Malappuram at the top of the **"Top ten fastest-growing cities"** in the world, based on **"Total % change, 2015-20 forecast"**. The list, based on data from the United Nations Population Division, appears unusual; this is because the total fertility rate (TFR, the number of children a woman is likely to have in the childbearing age of 15-49) in Kerala is 1.8 as per NITI Aayog data from 2016 — below the replacement rate of 2.1. Another Kerala city, Thrissur, is No. 13, and the capital Thiruvananthapuram is No. 33 on the UN list. Tirupur in Tamil Nadu — which has an even

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lower TFR of 1.6 — is No. 30. Surat in Gujarat (TFR of 2.2) is No. 27. There is no representation on the list from high population growth states like Bihar and UP.

### So, does “Fastest Growing” Refer to Population? How Is A “City” Defined?

The UN list refers to “urban agglomerations” (UA), which are extended areas built around an existing town along with its outgrowths — typically villages or other residential areas or universities, ports, etc., on the outskirts of the town. The Census defines a UA as “a continuous urban spread consisting of a town and its adjoining urban outgrowths or two or more physically contiguous towns together”. Thus, the UA of Greater Mumbai includes Greater Mumbai and the municipal corporation areas of Mira-Bhayander, Thane, Navi Mumbai, and Kalyan-Dombivali, plus the municipal council areas of Ulhasnagar, Ambernath and Badlapur. The National Capital Territory of Delhi is a UA that includes the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) areas, as well as 107 “Census towns” — erstwhile surrounding villages where more than 75% of the population is now engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. The Economist has listed the rate at which the populations of the UAs are expected to increase between 2015 and 2020. Since data on India and many other countries were not available for 2015 (the last Census in India was in 2011), the UN report used projections of UAs’ populations — estimates based on past population growth data. The rate of growth between 2015 and 2020 thus calculated provides a measure of the pace of urbanisation.

### How Does Urban Population Grow?

Urban populations can grow when the birth rate exceeds the death rate (natural growth); when workers migrate to the city in search of jobs; when more areas get included within the boundaries of the city; or when existing rural areas are reclassified as urban. **The low fertility rate in Kerala means the increase in the population of Malappuram and other cities is not because women are having more children; rather it is because more villages are being transformed into towns, and city borders are expanding.** According to the Census definition, an urban area is either a census town (CT) or a statutory town (ST). An ST is any place with a municipal corporation, municipal council, or cantonment board. **A CT can be a village with “urban characteristics” — a population more than 5,000, population density more than 400 people per sq. km, and with more than 75% of the population not engaged in agriculture for their livelihood. When a village becomes a CT, its population is included in the urban population of the district.**

### Could Migration Have Caused the Increase?

Migration can either increase or decrease the population of a town. Kerala sees both emigration — migration from the state to other places — and immigration — the migration of workers to the state, said Shamindra Nath Roy of the Centre for Policy Research. Also, Roy said, “the remittances that emigrants send allow the residents of villages to move away from agriculture, which changes the status of a village to census town.”

### Why Then Are Malappuram (44%), Kozhikode (34.5%), And Kollam (31%) Growing So Fast?

These cities are seeing rapid urbanisation, and the main reason is the inclusion of new areas in the UA’s limits. In 2001, there were two municipal corporations within the UA of

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Malappuram. In 2011, the number of municipal corporations had doubled to four, and an additional 37 CTs were included within Malappuram. The population of the UA (excluding the residents of the outgrowths) increased almost 10 times in the same period — from 1,70,409 to 16,99,060 — obviously because of the inclusion of existing urban areas in the town. Similarly, Kollam UA grew from one municipal corporation in 2001 to 23 CTs, one municipal corporation, and one municipal council in 2011. Its population increased by 130%, even though the population of the original ST of Kollam actually decreased by 4%.

### Why Is This Not Seen Elsewhere in India?

In Kerala, urbanisation is driven by a move away from agriculture, which leads to a change in a village's Census classification status. This is evident from the large number of CTs that were included in the UAs of the state since the last Census. On the other hand, except Delhi, the more populous cities in the North had fewer CTs in 2011. For example, Ahmedabad, with a population of 71,09,000, had only 10 CTs; Pune (population 57,46,000) had one CT; Surat (population 56,71,000) had four CTs in 2011. While the pace of urbanisation has been slower in the North, some unnaturally high increases in the population can be expected after the 2021 Census — because in some cases, villages on the peripheries were brought within the administrative boundaries of the cities. In 2017, Maharashtra approved the inclusion of 34 villages in the Pune Municipal Corporation; comparing the population of Pune in 2011 to that in 2021 would therefore, be like comparing apples and oranges, since the city itself will have changed in that period. Similarly, 65 villages may be added to Ahmedabad by the end of 2020.

### But Is This Kind of Increased Urbanisation Good for The Economy?

Yes and no. Urbanisation leads to the growth of cities, which are sites of infrastructure like universities, hospitals, and public transport facilities. There are more opportunities for the youth, which is why they attract young people and entrepreneurs. In India, people moving to cities leave behind (to some extent) caste and class divisions that dominate life in the villages, and can hope to climb up the social ladder. However, unplanned urbanisation can be "exclusionary", making it difficult for migrants to live there given the high cost. "Unregulated housing, lack of reliable public transport, and longer commutes within these towns puts a strain on the meagre resources of migrants," said Kanhu Charan Pradhan of CPR, who studies patterns of urbanisation, interaction between rural and urban areas, and migration in India.

### No Progress on World's Second Tallest Buddha Statue Project

- No progress has been made on the Gujarat government's plan to build the world's second tallest statue of Gautam Buddha in Sabarkantha district and to develop the place into an international Buddhism destination, a member of a Buddhist organisation claimed. The government had proposed to develop Dev Ni Mori in Sabarkantha district into an "international Buddhist destination" with "the second tallest statue of Buddha (108 metre) in the world after the Spring Temple statue in China (153 metre). The proposed statue will be more in height than the Thailand-based Sitting Buddha statue (92 metre). The estimated cost of the project is around ₹1200 crore. 4<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist Conference on Peace and Solidarity, which was inaugurated, being organised at the Gujarat University. 129 Buddhist monks from different parts of the country and abroad, apart from common people, are participating in the three-day conference. The state archaeological department had carried



out excavation at Dev Ni Mori near Shamlaji, an important Hindu pilgrimage destination, during 1960-1963. During excavation, remains of a Buddhist monastery dated 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> century AD were found. A casket was found, which as per its inscription, contained relics of Gautam Budhha. The 1700-year-old casket is currently kept at the MS University of Baroda in Vadodara. Gautam said Sanghakaya Foundation had also proposed to construct a 80-120 metre tall statue of Lord Buddha for which land was identified at Aluva village in Gandhinagar district.

### Inscriptions Confirm Presence of Medieval Monasteries

- A study of inscriptions on clay tablets recovered from recent excavations at Moghalmari, a Buddhist monastic site of the early medieval period in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district, have confirmed the presence of two monasteries — **Mugalayikaviharika** and **Yajñapindikamahavihara**. Details of the study of these inscriptions were published earlier this month in *PratnaSamiskha*, a leading peer-reviewed journal from Bengal on Indian Archaeology. "The presence of two monasteries dating to the same period within a single compound is unique in eastern India. Earlier excavations had indicated the presence of two monasteries on the basis of the structural plan," Rajat Sanyal, who deciphered these inscriptions, and is the author of the paper, told *The Hindu*. The monasteries at Moghalmari date from 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and were functional till the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. During one of the later seasons of excavations by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, six tiny fragments of inscribed seals were found. "Each of them contained a set of letters accompanied by the deer-dharmachakra symbols. We had to arrange them through different permutations to read and make sense of names inscribed on these tablets," Prof. Sanyal said. **The inscriptions are in Sanskrit and the script is a transitional phase between later north Indian Brahmi and early Siddhamatrika.**

### Centre Eases CRZ Rules For 'Blue Flag' Beaches

- The Environment Ministry has relaxed Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules that restrict construction near beaches to help States construct infrastructure and enable them to receive 'Blue Flag' certification. Last year, the Ministry selected 13 beaches in India to vie for the certificate. This is an international recognition conferred on beaches that meet certain criteria of cleanliness and environmental propriety. The earmarked beaches are — Ghoghala beach (Diu), Shivrajpur beach (Gujarat), Bhogave beach (Maharashtra), Padubidri and Kasarkod beaches (Karnataka), Kappad beach (Kerala), Kovalam beach (Tamil Nadu), Eden beach (Puducherry), Rushikonda beach (Andhra Pradesh), Miramar beach (Goa), Golden beach (Odisha), Radhanagar beach (Andaman & Nicobar Islands) and Bangaram beach (Lakshadweep). **The Blue Flag certification, however, requires beaches to create certain infrastructure — portable toilet blocks, grey water treatment plants, a solar power plant, seating facilities, CCTV surveillance and the like. However, India's CRZ laws don't allow the construction of such infrastructure on beaches and islands. Via an order on January 9, the Environment Ministry eased these restrictions for the "purposes of Blue Flag certification".** "...Central Government hereby declares that for the purpose of Blue Flag Certification in such identified beaches, the following activities and facilities shall be permitted in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), including Islands, subject to maintaining a minimum distance of 10 meters from HTL (High Tide Line)," the gazette notification notes. **The certification is**



accorded by the Denmark-based Foundation for Environment Education, with 33 stringent criteria under four major heads for the beaches, that is, (i) Environmental Education and Information (ii) Bathing Water Quality (iii) Environment Management and Conservation and (iv) Safety and Services. The 'Blue Flag' beach is an 'eco-tourism model' and marks out beaches as providing tourists and beachgoers clean and hygienic bathing water, facilities/amenities, a safe and healthy environment, and sustainable development of the area. The Blue Flag Programme started in France in 1985 and has been implemented in Europe since 1987, and in areas outside Europe since 2001, when South Africa joined.

## Business & Economics

### Direct Tax Collections Set to Drop for First Time in Two Decades

- India's corporate and income tax collection for the current year is likely to fall for the first time in at least two decades, over half a dozen senior tax officials told Reuters, amid a sharp fall in economic growth and cut in corporate tax rates. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government was targeting direct tax collection of ₹13.5 lakh crore (\$189 billion) for the year ending March 31, a 17% increase over the prior fiscal year. However, a sharp decline in demand has stung businesses, forcing companies to cut investment and jobs, denting tax collections and prompting the government to forecast a 5% growth for this fiscal year — the slowest in 11 years. The tax department had managed to collect only ₹7.3 lakh crore as of January 23, more than 5.5% below the amount collected by the same point last year, a senior tax official said. After collecting taxes from companies in advance for the first three quarters, officials typically garner about 30-35% of annual direct taxes in the final three months, data from the past three years shows. But eight senior tax officials interviewed by Reuters said despite their best efforts, direct tax collections this financial year were likely to fall below the ₹11.5 lakh crore collected in 2018-19. "Forget the target. **This will be the first time that we'll see a fall in direct tax collection ever,**" a tax official in New Delhi said. He estimates that direct tax collections for this year could end up roughly 10% below fiscal 2019. **Direct taxes typically account for about 80% of the government's projections for annual revenue, and the shortfall may leave the government needing to boost borrowing to meet expenditure commitments.** The tax officials also say that a surprise cut in headline corporate tax rate last year aimed at wooing manufacturers and boosting investment in Asia's third-biggest economy is another key reason behind the sluggish tax collections.

### IMF Lowers India's Growth Forecast To 4.8%

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) lowered India's economic growth estimate for the current fiscal to 4.8% and listed the country's much lower-than-expected GDP numbers as the single biggest drag on its global growth forecast for two years. In October, the IMF had pegged India's economic growth at 6.1% for 2019. Listing decline in rural demand growth and an overall credit sluggishness for the lowering of India forecasts, IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath, however, said the growth momentum should improve next year due to factors like the positive impact of corporate tax rate reduction. "Global growth, estimated at 2.9% in 2019, is projected to increase to 3.3% in 2020 and inch up further to 3.4% in 2021," the IMF said, while releasing an update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO). Compared to the October WEO forecast, the estimate for 2019 and the projection for 2020 represent 0.1





percentage point reduction for each year while that for 2021 is 0.2 percentage point lower. "A more subdued growth forecast for India... accounts for the lion's share of the downward revisions," the IMF said ahead of the start of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual summit. Ms. Gopinath said growth in India slowed sharply owing to stress in the non-bank financial sector and weak rural income growth.

### Is the Indian Economy Staring at Stagflation?

- The rise in retail price inflation to a nearly six-year high of 7.35% in December has led to increasing worries that the Indian economy may be headed towards stagflation. The current rise in retail inflation has been attributed mainly to the rise in the prices of vegetables such as onions. Still, the steady rise in wider inflation figures over the last few months amidst falling economic growth has led to fears of stagflation. Notably, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh writing in The Hindu in November had warned about the imminent risk of stagflation facing the economy.

#### What Is Stagflation?

Stagflation is an economic scenario where an economy faces both high inflation and low growth (and high unemployment) at the same time. The Indian economy has now faced six consecutive quarters of slowing growth since 2018. Economic growth in the second quarter ending September, the most recent quarter for which data is available, was just 4.5%. For the whole year, growth is expected to be around 5%. Most economists have blamed the slowdown on the lack of sufficient consumer demand for goods and services. In fact, insufficient demand was cited as the primary reason behind the low price inflation that was prevalent in the economy until recently. Subsequently, the government and many analysts prodded the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cut interest rates in order to boost demand. This led to significant friction between the government and the RBI that led to the exit of several top-ranking officials (including the RBI's former Governor) from the central bank. Eventually, the RBI under Governor Shaktikanta Das obliged by cutting its benchmark interest rate, the repo rate, five times in 2019. The expectation among analysts was that these interest rate cuts would spur demand and boost the economy. In the second half of 2019, prices of goods began to rise at a faster pace on the back of the RBI's rate cuts. But the growth rate of the economy continued to fall significantly. This combination of rising prices and falling growth has led many to believe that India may be sliding into stagflation. Perhaps the only thing right now that stops many from concluding that the economy is in full-fledged stagflation is the fact that core inflation, which excludes items such as vegetables whose prices are too volatile, remains within the RBI's targeted range.

#### Can Economists Explain Stagflation?

The conventional view among economists is that there is an inverse relationship between economic growth and inflation. The idea was first proposed by New Zealand economist William Phillips, after whom the "Phillips Curve" is named, based on statistical studies of inflation and unemployment. It later gained widespread acceptance among mainstream economists. The inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment was seen as a confirmation of the hypothesis that inflation helps the economy function at its full potential. The logic behind the belief is that, at least in the short term, inflation (by boosting nominal wages but not real wages) can trick workers in an economy to accept lower real wages.



Without inflation, it is argued, workers would be unwilling to accept these lower real wages, which in turn would lead to higher unemployment and decreased output in the economy. At the same time, economists argue that an inflation rate beyond a certain level, at which point labour and other resources in the economy are fully employed, will have no employment or growth benefits. Accordingly, policymakers are often advised to maintain a certain inflation rate to ensure that unemployment is kept to a minimum and the economy is operating at full capacity. The simultaneous presence of high inflation and low economic growth under stagflation, however, challenges the conventional view that inflation helps an economy operate at full capacity. It was the stagflation in the United States in the 1970s, caused by rising oil prices after the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries cut supplies abruptly, which first led many to question the validity of the Phillips Curve.

### Why Is Stagflation A Problem?

Economists who believe that the current slowdown is due to the lack of sufficient consumer demand prescribe greater spending by the government and the central bank to resuscitate the economy. But stagflation essentially ties the hands of the government and the central bank from taking such countercyclical policy steps. With retail inflation now well above the RBI's targeted range of 2-6%, the central bank is unlikely to assist the economy any time soon by cutting its benchmark interest rate. If the central bank decides to inject fresh money into the economy either by cutting its benchmark interest rate or other unconventional means, it could lead to a further rise in prices and make things worse. A similar rise in inflation could result if the government engages in deficit spending that is funded by the RBI. All this is considered to be bad news at a time when the economy, with significant unemployed resources, is not functioning at its full capacity. Stagflation can also be politically costly to the ruling government. On the one hand, the slowdown in growth could affect peoples' incomes. On the other, higher inflation could cause a reduction in people's standard of living as they can afford fewer things.

### What Is the Way Out?

Economists are divided along ideological lines on what needs to be done for an economy to recover from stagflation. Some economists suggest that policymakers should stop worrying about inflation and instead focus exclusively on boosting aggregate demand in the economy. India's nominal GDP growth, a measure of the overall level of spending in the economy, is expected to hit a 42-year low of 7.5% this year. They consider the RBI's target of keeping inflation from rising above 6% as an arbitrary one and believe that the central bank should further ease its policy stance and the government should spend more on infrastructure and other sectors to boost the economy. Another point raised by these economists is that inflation on the broader level, as measured by the core inflation figures, remains within the RBI's target range. Core inflation in December was at 3.7%. So greater spending by the government and the RBI will not cause inflation levels to run out of control, they argue. Others, however, are more cautious about advocating a big-spending approach to rescue the economy from stagflation. They point to the fact that monetary easing in the last one year has only raised prices without leading to higher growth rates. So injecting further liquidity into the economy may only stoke higher inflation without boosting economic growth. Some economists even see the severe drop in consumer demand simply as a symptom rather than as the primary cause behind the current slowdown. According to this view, it is natural for spending to drop after the end of a credit-fuelled boom. India's growth



rate, it is worth noting, was boosted by the availability of easy credit over the last decade, or even longer. Further credit expansion by the central bank and debt-fuelled government spending, these economists argue, will not lead to genuine and sustainable economic growth but only to another unsustainable boom followed by a bust. So they instead advocate supply-side reforms to bring about genuine economic growth.

## Budgeting for Jobs, Skilling and Economic Revival (Ram Singh - Professor at The Delhi School of Economics)

- The unemployment rate at 6.1% (Financial Year 2017-2018) is the highest in 45 years. The rate for urban youth in the 15-29 years category is alarmingly high at 22.5%. These figures, however, are just one of the many problems, as pointed out by the Periodic Labour Force Survey. The Labour Force Participation Rate has come down to 46.5% for the '15 years and above' age category. It is down to 37.7% for the urban youth. Even among those employed, a large fraction gets low wages and are stuck with 'employment poverty'.

### Structural Factors

The prolonged, and ongoing, slowdown, is the main reason behind the depressing employment scenario, though several structural factors have also contributed to the situation. The GDP growth for the second quarter of Financial Year 2019-2020 is 4.5%, the lowest in the last six years, for which a decline in private consumption and investment are the factors primarily responsible. The aggregate investment stands at less than 30% of the GDP, a rate much lower than the 15-year average of 35%. The capacity utilisation in the private sector is down to 70%-75%. While the structural factors need addressing, in the interim, the Budget should also focus on reviving demand to promote growth and employment. Schemes like PM-KISAN and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) are good instruments to boost rural demand. It is really unfortunate that in the current fiscal year, a significant proportion of the budgetary allocation for PM-KISAN will go unutilised. Farmers and landless labourers spend most of their income. This means that income transfers to such groups will immediately increase demand. Further, rural India consumes a wide range of goods and services; so, if allocation and disbursement is raised significantly, most sectors of the economy will benefit. And, the payoff will be immediate. Besides, rural unemployment can be reduced by raising budgetary allocation for irrigation projects and rural infrastructure like roads, cold storage and logistical chains. These facilities, along with a comprehensive crop insurance scheme, can drastically increase agricultural productivity and farmers' income. Moreover, by integrating farms with mandis, such investments will reduce wastage of fruits and vegetables, thereby leading to a decrease in the frequency of inflationary shocks and their impact.

### Boosting Urban Employment

In urban areas, construction and related activities are a source of employment for more than five crore people; across the country, the sector's employment figures are second only to those of the agriculture sector. These projects, along with infrastructure, support 200-odd sectors, including core sectors like cement and steel. However, due to the crisis in the real-estate and infrastructure sectors, construction activities have come to a grinding halt. At present, many real-estate projects are caught up in legal disputes — between home-buyers



and developers; between lenders and developers; and between developers and law enforcement agencies like the Enforcement Directorate. The sector has an unsold inventory of homes, worth several lakh crores. Even worse, **multiple authorities — the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA); the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT); and the many consumer courts — have jurisdiction over disputes. Consequently, restructuring and liquidation of bad projects is very difficult, and in turn, is a main source of the problem of Non-Performing Assets faced by the Non-Banking Financial Companies.** To revive demand for housing, the Budget can raise the limit for availing tax exemption on home loans. The ₹25,000-crore fund set up by the centre to bailout 1,600 housing projects should be put to use immediately. The funds should be used to salvage all projects that are 80% complete and not under liquidation process under the NCLT. Several additional measures can also help. For example, there should be a single adjudication authority. The **multiplier effects** of spending on infrastructure and housing in terms of higher growth and employment are large and extensive. Therefore, the **₹102-lakh-crore National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP)** programme is a welcome step. If implemented successfully, it will boost the infrastructure investment over the next five years by 2%-2.5% of the GDP annually.

### Private Sector's Risk Appetite

Here, the problem is that more than 60% of the planned investment is expected from the private sector and the States. The government does not seem to realise that for private investment, regulatory certainty is as important as the cost of capital. Many infrastructure projects are languishing due to regulatory hurdles and contractual disputes between construction companies and government departments. As a result, infrastructure investment has come to be perceived as very risky. This is the major reason behind non-availability of private capital for infrastructure. In this scenario, where the private sector has very little appetite for risky investments and State finances are shaky due to low GST collection, the onus is on the Centre to ensure that the programme does not come a cropper. The budgetary support to infrastructure will have to be much more than the NIP projection at 1.11% of the GDP. Bidding and contracting for new roads, highways, railway tracks and urban development projects is a lengthy process. This is also the reason why several infrastructure-linked Ministries like those for civil aviation and roads have not been able to spend money allocated to them in the current fiscal year. Therefore, rather than earmarking budgetary support for new projects, the focus should be on projects that are currently under implementation so as to complete them as soon as possible. That is, funding should be front-loaded. In addition to creating employment, a timely completion of infrastructure projects will help increase competitiveness of the economy. The distress among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is another area of concern. For many products produced by these enterprises, **the GST rates are higher for inputs than the final goods.** Due to this anomaly, **around ₹20,000 crore gets stuck with the government annually in the form of input tax credits. This has increased cost of doing business for SMEs,** which employ over 11 crore people. Next, according to some estimates, there are more than 22 lakh vacancies in various government departments. Such dereliction is baffling when the unemployment among youth is very high. Job openings that arise in the private sector put a premium on practical skills and work experience. Here, popular perception is that a good job requires a college or university degree. This misperception is the result of failure of the governments to provide affordable and good quality vocational training programmes. **To stop the demographic dividend from becoming a national burden, there is a need to invest heavily in skilling of the**





**youth.** Besides, the Budget should give tax incentives to companies and industrial units to encourage them to provide internships and on-site vocational training opportunities. This work experience can be supplemented with teaching of relevant theories at educational centres set up at district levels. Distance education mode can also be used for the purpose.

## What New Govt Order Changes in AGR Crisis

- The Licensing Finance Policy Wing of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) directed all departments not to take any action against telecom operators if they failed to clear **adjusted gross revenue (AGR)**-related dues as per the Supreme Court's recent order.

### What It Means for Operators

The order comes as a huge relief for operators — mainly Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea — that would have otherwise faced possible contempt action for not paying dues by the deadline that ran out on 23<sup>rd</sup> January. There is no change in the amount they have to pay — however, it buys them time as they hope for relief from the Supreme Court, which will next week hear their plea seeking permission to negotiate the timeline for payment of dues with the DoT. Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea together owe the telecom department ₹88,624 crore. Prior to the DoT order restraining coercive action, the companies had told the government that they would wait for the outcome of the Supreme Court hearing. Reliance Jio paid up its dues of ₹195 crore on 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

### What It Means for Consumers

A lot depends on what the Supreme Court rules. The promoters of Vodafone Idea have shown reluctance to invest more following the October verdict that asked that AGR-related dues be deposited by January 23. Thursday's DoT order is an interim measure; a setback in the Supreme Court could potentially lead to Vodafone Idea's exit, and the creation of an Airtel-Jio duopoly. This could lead to bigger bills, considering it was the cutthroat competition in the sector that made mobile telephony and Internet almost universally affordable.

### What It Means for Banks, MFs

The AGR issue has triggered panic in the banking industry, given that the telecom sector is highly leveraged. Vodafone Idea alone has a debt of ₹2.2 lakh crore that it has used to expand infrastructure and fund spectrum payments over the years. The mutual fund industry has an exposure of around ₹4,000 crore to Vodafone Idea.

### Supreme Court Stance So Far

On October 24, the court agreed with DoT's definition of AGR, and said the companies must pay all dues along with interest and penalty. Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea tried to persuade DoT to relax the deadline and, after failing, moved the court seeking a review of its judgment. The court dismissed the review petition last week, and also did not extend the deadline for paying AGR dues. It did, however, agree to hear the companies' modification plea.



## Green Nod for Oil, Gas Exploration Waived

- The Environment Ministry has exempted oil and gas firms, looking to conduct exploratory drilling, from seeking an environmental clearance. The clearance is for both on-shore and offshore drilling explorations and the process is an ecologically-intensive exercise that involves digging multiple wells and conducting seismic surveys offshore. Until today, even exploratory surveys have merited the highest level of environmental scrutiny — called category 'A' — that required project proponents to prepare an environment impact assessment (EIA) plan, have it scrutinised by a Centrally constituted committee of experts and subject the proposal to a public hearing involving the local residents of the proposed project site. While public hearings, even for category A projects are frequently exempted if they are offshore, the new amendments demote exploratory projects to the category of 'B2'. This means it will be conducted by the States concerned and will not require an EIA. The move is part of a larger process of 'decentralisation' by the Centre in that it seeks to farm more regulatory actions to State and local units. Environmentalists aver that this can mean lax oversight. Developing an offshore or onshore drilling site as a hydrocarbon block will however continue to merit a "category A" treatment, the Ministry notification, made public on January 18, clarifies. In 2019, the ONGC and the Vedanta group were granted permission to conduct exploratory oil surveys in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry and this had led to protests led by the Opposition DMK and the Congress, which argue that the exploratory drilling will lead to destruction of agricultural fields in the Cauvery delta.

## The Flawed Spin to India's Cotton Story (Imran Siddiqi - Emeritus Scientist At The Centre For Cellular And Molecular Biology, Hyderabad)

- Genetically Modified (GM) pest resistant Bt cotton hybrids have captured the Indian market since their introduction in 2002. These now cover over 95% of the area under cotton, with the seeds produced entirely by the private sector. India's cotton production in 2019 is projected as the highest ever: 354 lakh bales. Bt cotton's role in increasing India's cotton production, which GM proponents have highlighted as being instrumental, has also been used to argue for extending GM technology to increase food crop yield. However, critics say that Bt cotton hybrids have negatively impacted livelihoods and contributed to agrarian distress, particularly among resource-poor farmers.

### The Indian Experience

This year, India is expected to be the world's largest cotton producer, surpassing China in output. However, India's productivity (yield per unit area), is much lower than other major cotton-producing countries, meaning a much larger area is used for cotton production. Indeed, India's productivity has been only a third of these countries for over four decades. Why is this so? It cannot be explained by agronomic or socio-economic differences because these countries include both developed and developing countries, and different geographies. Which feature of cotton cultivation in India differs from other countries and might account for this large anomaly? India is the only country that grows cotton as hybrids and the first to develop hybrid cotton back in 1970. Hybrids are made by crossing two parent strains having different genetic characters. These plants have more biomass than both parents, and capacity for greater yields. They also require more inputs, including fertilizer and water. Though hybrid cotton seed production is expensive, requiring manual crossing, India's low cost of manual labour make it economically viable. All other cotton-producing



countries grow cotton not as hybrids but varieties for which seeds are produced by self-fertilization. A key difference between hybrids and varieties is that varieties can be propagated over successive generations by collecting seeds from one planting and using them for the next planting; hybrid seeds have to be remade for each planting by crossing the parents. So for hybrids, farmers must purchase seed for each planting, but not for varieties. Using hybrids gives pricing control to the seed company and also ensures a continuous market. Increased yield from a hybrid is supposed to justify the high cost of hybrid seeds. However, for cotton, a different strategy *using high density planting (HDP) of compact varieties has been found to outperform hybrids at the field level.*

### Cotton Planting Strategies

For over three decades, most countries have been growing cotton varieties that are compact and short duration. These varieties are planted at high density (5 kg seeds/acre), whereas hybrids in India are bushy, long duration and planted at ten-fold lower density (0.5 kg seeds/acre). The lower boll production by compact varieties (5-10 bolls per plant) compared to hybrids (20-100 bolls/plant) is more than compensated by the ten-fold greater planting density. The steep increase in productivity for Brazil, from 400 to 1,000 kg/hectare lint between 1994 and 2000 coincides with the large-scale shift to a non-GM compact variety. Cotton is a dryland crop and 65% of area under cotton in India is rain-fed. Farmers with insufficient access to groundwater in these areas are entirely dependent on rain. Here, the shorter duration variety has a major advantage as it reduces dependence on irrigation and risk, particularly late in the growing season when soil moisture drops following the monsoon's withdrawal. This period is when bolls develop and water requirement is the highest. The advantages of compact varieties over hybrids are considerable: more than twice the productivity, half the fertilizer (200 kg/ha for hybrids versus 100 kg/ha for varieties), reduced water requirement, and less vulnerability to damage from insect pests due to a shorter field duration. Yet, India has persisted with long-duration hybrids, many years after benefits of compact varieties became clear from global experience.

### Impact of Policy

If one grants that India would have benefited greatly from deployment of compact cotton varieties as supported by the evidence, then the question arises: why was this not done? Two phases of policy have contributed to this situation. The first is before GM cotton, when India persisted with hybrids from 1980-2002, while other countries shifted to HDP. Why was such a significant innovation in cotton breeding ignored for so long and what kept public sector institutions and cotton research centres from developing and releasing such varieties? The answers lie with the agricultural research establishment. The second phase where the question of hybrids versus compact varieties could have been considered, was at the stage of GM regulation when Bt cotton was being evaluated for introduction into India. It would not have been out of place to have evaluated the international experience, including the context of introduction of this new technology. Information should have been considered on the form in which it would be deployed (hybrids versus varieties). Importantly, agro-economic conditions where it would be used should have been a guiding factor. However, the scope of evaluation by the GM regulatory process in India was narrow, and did not take this into account. Consequently, commercial Bt hybrids have completely taken over the market, accompanied by withdrawal of public sector cotton seed production. The Indian



cotton farmer today is left with little choice but to use Bt hybrid seed produced by private seed companies.

### Farmer Distress

The current annual value of cotton seed used for planting is about ₹2,500 crore, and that of lint cotton produced is ₹68,000 crore. Therefore, it appears that the interests of the cotton seed industry have constrained the very much larger value of cotton production and the overall cotton industry. **It is likely that production levels could have been much higher, with considerably lower risk and input costs, had compact varieties been developed and used in India.** Agricultural distress is extremely high among cotton farmers and the combination of high input and high risk has likely been a contributing factor. Compact varieties would have significantly reduced distress as well as increased yield. Therefore, **the hybrid seed model for cotton that India, and India alone, has followed for over three decades, is inferior to the HDP model being used in other countries on three important counts: much lower productivity; higher input costs; and increased risk particularly for low resource farmers in rain-fed areas.** There are several takeaways from the experience of Bt cotton worldwide, and in the context of hybrids in India. First, we must be clear that the outcome of using a technology such as Bt is determined by the context in which it is deployed, and not just by the technology itself. If the context is suboptimal and does not prioritise the needs of the principal stakeholders (farmers), it can have significant negative fallouts, especially in India with a high proportion being marginal and subsistence farmers. Second, there is a need for better consultation in policy, be it agriculture as a whole or crop-wise. Notably, India is a signatory to international treaties on GMO regulation (the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety), which specifically provide for inclusion of socioeconomic considerations in GMO risk assessment. However, socioeconomic and need-based considerations have not been a part of GMO regulatory process in India. It is important to recognise that adoption of any new technology such as Bt is a choice and not an imperative. For example, **some of the major cotton-producing countries such as Brazil (until 2012) and Turkey (up to the present) have achieved high productivity without the use of GM cotton by using alternative pest-management approaches.** The purpose of risk assessment in GMO regulation is to enable exercising of this choice by careful and comprehensive evaluation of costs and benefits. In the case of Bt cotton hybrids, the benefits were limited and costs may well have been too high, particularly for resource-poor farmers.

### Untapped Soft Power (Damini Chopra - An Actor)

- Last year, Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad cited the earnings of three blockbuster movies to dismiss the economic slowdown. He went on to suggest that the film industry is largely immune to the recession that is slowing down other major industries. He is right about this. **A PWC report states that the media and entertainment industry outperformed expectations in FY19 and was amongst the fastest-growing sectors with a growth rate of 13%. India produces the maximum number of films in a year worldwide. Despite this, it is still far from being recognised as an important sector for the government. Initially, under the Goods and Services Tax regime, the film industry was slotted under the 'luxury' category. A tax rate of 28% was imposed on it. After an outcry, this was revised to 18%. However, GST poses a challenge: if a particular movie appeals to a State government, that government can grant 'tax free' status to that film. With the GST in place, States can waive off the SGST (9%) alone. Therefore, a movie deemed 'tax free' is still be liable to pay CGST.**

**Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur**





### Lack of Infrastructure and Courses

Deeming the entertainment sector as a 'luxury' sector undermines its soft power. The president of the Producers Guild of India, Siddharth Roy Kapur, observed how the spread of American content helped create desirability for the American dream and way of life and how this further cemented the hegemony of the U.S. The soft power of the Indian industry is seen in the many public service messages and political campaigns that use film actors to propagate their messages. Yet, India lacks the infrastructure to take films to interior areas. For a population of 1.37 billion people, India has less than 10,000 screens, of which 6,700 are single screens. The procedure to convert a single screen theatre to a multiplex is tedious and costly. New permission and licenses are required, and existing licenses often hold little value. In stark contrast, China has about 60,000 screens for a population of 1.4 billion. These were created over the last decade with government support in the form of public-private partnership models, which makes the country a viable market for foreign film industries as well. This has created revenue for the Chinese government as foreign films have to share a sizeable amount of their profit with the state. Ironically, films set in the interiors of India, such as **Secret Superstar** and **Dangal**, have more footfalls in China than they do here. A large portion of the Indian population does not have access to the content that is derived from them. **The Hindi film industry was accorded industry status only in 1998, even though the first Indian film was made in 1913.** The industry employs a vast number of technicians and creative professionals. But there are no formal guidelines for courses related to the film industry. The government created the Film and Television Institute of India, but its curriculum is not binding on other private film schools. There are barely any government academies catering to the industry. In contrast, film education in the U.S. is accorded the same importance given to journalism or biotechnology.

### Not Enough Incentives

Much like the U.S., India allows its States to decide incentives for film shoots that take place within their territories. American states provide incentives such as tax shelters, cash rebates and grants to productions taking place in their territories. During a film shoot, the location gains tourist attention. Films also generate seasonal employment by hiring local staff and parts of the crew. It is a lucrative venture to have a film shoot at site. It is because of this that countries like the U.K. and Malta provide incentives such as easy clearances and rebates upto 30-40% of the total cost of the projects filmed there. In India the incentives are much lower, and in most States the cash rebates are capped at nominal amounts which are not lucrative for big-budget productions. Moreover, though there is now a single-window clearance for shoots in many States, shooting at various spots such as archaeological sites requires multiple permissions and is a time-consuming and arduous process. The film industry deserves more support for its growth and protection. **With high export potential, the content created helps disseminate the uniqueness of India's culture.** Yet, there are hardly any support tools from the government. The risk may be high, but the returns are good. Various countries are realising this and working to either strengthen their content-creating industries or become viable destinations for hosting shoots. Tapping into the potential of this multi-seasonal industry opens a plethora of opportunities: from better international awareness about the country to creating employment opportunities within.



## No 'Word Play' In Health Insurance Policies

- Health insurance policy clauses, at least a clutch that are common, will soon be easier to comprehend, become more transparent and not vary across companies, with regulator IRDAI setting in motion the process towards uniformity in wordings of the contracts. "It is proposed to standardise some of the general clauses that are commonly incorporated in the health insurance policy contracts of indemnity-based health products," the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) said, soliciting comments on an exposure draft. One of the key aspects under the proposed guidelines on 'Standardisation of General Clauses in Health Insurance Policy Contracts' will be insurers committing to a timeline in handling claims and in the event of failure to comply, pay interest to the policyholder. "The company shall settle or reject a claim, as the case may be, within 30 days from the date of receipt of the last necessary document. In case of delay in the payment of a claim, the company shall be liable to pay interest from the date of receipt of the last necessary document to the date of payment of claim at a rate 2% above the bank rate," the IRDAI draft said. Where a claim warrants an investigation in the company's opinion, it has to be settled within 45 days from the date of receipt of the last necessary document. Beyond that, the insurer will be liable to pay interest at a rate of 2% above the bank rate from the date of receipt of last necessary document to the date of payment of claim. Another aspect for which wordings are proposed to be common relates to action against the insured. "The policy shall be void and all premium paid thereon shall be forfeited to the company in the event of misrepresentation, mis-description or non-disclosure of any material fact," the draft said. Uniformity in wordings have been proposed by IRDAI with regard to complete discharge, multiple policies, cancellation, renewal of policy, including the company not being bound to give any notice for renewal, as well as migration and portability. The proposed guidelines assume significance in the backdrop of robust growth in the segment. Health insurance premium continues to grow over 20% year-on-year in the past four fiscal years, IRDAI's annual report for 2018-19 said.

## Life & Science

### Meet Vyom Mitra, First Indian 'Woman' To Ride to Space

- In the end, a "young woman" named **Vyom Mitra** will ride to space in the first test flight of the human space mission, Gaganyaan. The ISRO unveiled its first 'woman' astronaut to an international gathering. Seated at a desk in a uniform and sporting her name on a custom-made the ISRO identity badge, Vyom Mitra created a sensation as she introduced herself to the ISRO Chairman K. Sivan and Principal Scientific Adviser K. Vijay Raghavan at the symposium on human space flight. "I am Vyom Mitra," the **half-humanoid** tells her visitors. Her body stops at the torso and has no legs. Detailing her functions, she says, "I can do switch panel operations, ECLSS [environment control and life support systems] functions, be a companion, converse with the astronauts, recognise them and also respond to their queries." Dr. Sivan said the humanoid will simulate the human functions required for space before real astronauts take off before August 2022. **Two trial flights without crew will take place with a humanoid — the first around December 2020 and the second around July 2021.** Vyom Mitra is the result of a year-long toil of the ISRO Inertial Systems Unit, Thiruvananthapuram, according to IISU Director Sam Dayalan. The ISRO will send the



human-resembling model in a space capsule by the end of 2020 or early 2021 to study how she — and later real astronauts — respond to living outside earth in controlled zero-gravity conditions. She can detect environmental changes within the cabin and change the air condition, he said.

### India Wants Hawaii Telescope Shifted Out of Proposed Site

- India, a partner in the construction of one of the largest telescopes in the world, has said it wants the project to be moved out of the proposed site at Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano in Hawaii. **The TMT or Thirty Metre Telescope, as it is called, is a joint venture (JV) involving five countries**, but the \$2 billion project has been marred by protests for over a decade. The proposed site is **considered sacred to indigenous Hawaiians**, and also has too many observatories for one more such massive establishment to come up, say groups that have contested the site. Protests at the site last year saw scientists unable to access other telescope facilities in Mauna Kea. **The project has been delayed by nearly five years and should have begun operations by 2025**. India has committed \$200 million, which is about a tenth of the proposed cost. **The telescope needs 492 precisely polished mirrors and India is to contribute 83 of them**. The project delay has meant that these manufacturing contracts have also been delayed.

### What Is A Giant Straight-Tusked Elephant?

- About 800,000 years ago, a giant straight-tusked elephant migrated out of Africa and spread across Europe and Asia. Marked by a huge head (4.5 feet from the top of the skull roof to the base of the tusk sheaths), the elephant divided into many species, such as *Palaeoloxodon antiquus* (in Europe), *Palaeoloxodon namadicus* (India) and *Palaeoloxodon naumanni* (Japan). All these species are now extinct. Now, an international study in Quaternary Science Reviews has sought to bring some order into our understanding of these species. One key point of confusion was the different sizes of skull crests in fossils found in Europe. For a long time, it was thought that the European species had a rather slenderly built skull roof crest, whereas the Indian species was characterised by an extremely robust skull crest that extended near to the base of the trunk from the top of the skull. But some skulls, found in Italy and Germany, with almost the same exaggerated skull crest as the Indian form, raised confusion whether these were the same as the Indian species. The new study has concluded that there was a single European species. Measurements showed that even in European skulls with pronounced crests, the skull roof never becomes as thickened as in the Indian specimens. On the other hand, fossils found in Asia and East Africa represent distinct species that evolved.

### New Snake Eel Species Discovered

- A new snake eel species residing in the Bay of Bengal has been discovered and documented this month (January) by the Estuarine Biology Regional Centre (EBRC) of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) at Gopalpur-on-sea in Odisha. This new marine species has been named *Ophichthus kailashchandrai* to honour the vast contributions of Dr. Kailash Chandra, Director of ZSI, to Indian animal taxonomy. *Ophichthus kailashchandrai* is the eighth species of the *Ophichthus* genus found on the Indian coast. It is the fifth new species discovered by the Gopalpur ZSI in the last two years. In 2019, two new species of marine eel, *Gymnothorax andamanensis* and *Gymnothorax smithi* were been discovered by this ZSI centre.



## How IVF Is Reversing an Imminent Extinction

- ➔ Researchers said last week that they had created another embryo — the third — of the **nearly extinct northern white rhino**, a remarkable success in an ongoing global mission to keep the species from going extinct.

**FUNCTIONALLY EXTINCT SINCE 2018:** The Kenyan conservancy looking after the last male northern white rhino was forced to euthanise it in March 2018. The 45-year-old rhino, Sudan, was suffering from age-related complications that had eaten at his bones and given him skin wounds. **The death of Sudan, who was earlier at the Dvur Králové Zoo in the Czech Republic, left the world with only two northern white rhinos, Najin, 30, and Fatu, 19 — both female.** Sudan had steadfastly refused to mate with either, and conservationists had even tried to raise \$9 million for a fertility treatment by putting him on Tinder with a profile that read: “I don’t mean to be too forward, but the fate of the species literally depends on me”, and “I perform well under pressure.” Najin and Fatu, mother-daughter pair in a species that in the 1960s numbered some 2,000 individuals, live at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy near Mount Kenya, where Sudan too, lived. **The northern white is one of the two subspecies of the white (or square-lipped) rhinoceros, which once roamed several African countries south of the Sahara. The other subspecies, the southern white is, by contrast, the most numerous subspecies of rhino, and is found primarily in South Africa. There is also the black (or hook-lipped) rhinoceros in Africa, which too, is fighting for survival, and at least three of whose subspecies are already extinct. The Indian rhinoceros is different from its African cousins, most prominently in that it has only one horn. There is also a Javan rhino, which too, has one horn, and a Sumatran rhino which, like the African rhinos, has two horns.**

**REVERSING THE EXTINCTION:** In July 2018, scientists reported a major breakthrough — IVF for rhinos. They created a test-tube embryo by fertilising the egg of a southern white female with the frozen sperm of a northern white male. Immediately, there was hope for the northern white subspecies — if eggs from Najin and Fatu could be fertilised by the available frozen sperm from four (now dead) northern white males. The task of collecting oocytes from Najin and Fatu was difficult and delicate, but in September 2019, researchers announced they had created two embryos, the decisive turning point in the effort to save the northern white. The success announced last week was the third. Four eggs were collected from Najin and six from Fatu; all three viable embryos were, however, created using Fatu’s eggs. **The embryos have been preserved in liquid nitrogen, and will be transferred to a southern white surrogate. Neither of the two-living northern white females can carry a pregnancy. Since the gestation period for a rhino could be 18 months, the first northern white calf is expected to arrive in the world in 2022.** The ultimate goal, scientists say, is to create a herd of perhaps five northern white rhinos that could be returned to the wild. That, however, could take several decades, given that the task of collecting eggs from Najin and Fatu will likely become increasingly more complex and riskier as they grow older.

## Irrawaddy Dolphins Sighted in Chilika

- ➔ Odisha Forest Department officials, wildlife experts and researchers on Sunday sighted **146 endangered Irrawaddy dolphins in Chilika Lake, which boasts of the highest single lagoon population of the aquatic mammal in the world.** The dolphin census was simultaneously

**Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur**





taken up in Chilika and off Odisha coast. The Chilika Development Authority (CDA) is elated that the direct sighting of 146 dolphins meant that its population in the lake would stabilise well above 150. According to last year's census, the Irrawaddy dolphin population in Chilika was 151. His confidence stemmed from the fact that dolphins were **colonising new areas, which had been freed from encroachments by prawn farming gherries**. He expressed hopes that that the population is likely to increase in the next couple of years as there are enough signs of dolphins migrating from the Satpada side to other areas. According to hydrophone monitoring carried out round the year in Chilika, the highest number of Irrawaddy dolphins (20-25) was moving around Rajhans, followed by the Magarmukh and Malatikuda areas, where dolphins numbering between 17-20 were expected.

### Lone, Rare Migratory Eagle Sighted in Andhra Pradesh

- A lone **endangered steppe eagle (Aquila nipalensis)** has been sighted by a group of birdwatchers in a paddy field at Velagaleru near Vijayawada. The bird watchers -- Y. Sravanthi, Bala Subramanyam and Bandi Sekhar -- recorded the steppe eagle during the 'Asian Waterbird Census', a citizen science programme, recently. Mr. Sekhar, citizen science coordinator of Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER-Tirupati), told The Hindu: "This is the second time to sight steppe eagle in Andhra Pradesh in the past two decades." "The sighting of the endangered species highlights the need for exploration of the diversity of avian life in the State. **Steppe eagle is believed to be the second-largest migratory eagle species to India,**" said Mr. Sekhar. **In winter, steppe eagle breeds in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia.** Conversion of open habitats to aquaculture, pesticides and various effluents are a few threats to the species.

### There's Hope for The Rare Great Indian Bustard

- Once the frontrunner to be named India's national bird, the Great Indian Bustard has long been on the brink of extinction. **The Great Indian Bustard (GIB), is one of the heaviest flying birds,** and is found mainly in the Indian subcontinent. Barely 150 of these birds are estimated to be surviving now globally. However, a major conservation effort launched about four years ago is bringing a ray of hope.

#### Nine chicks

Since June last year, nine GIB eggs collected from the Desert National Park in Jaisalmer where a conservation centre has been set up, have hatched, and the chicks are reported to be doing well. This is the largest number of hatchings reported within a six-month frame by any GIB conservation programme in the world, say officials. Forest officials have identified seven females and one male among the GIB chicks; the sex of the ninth and youngest chick, which hatched a couple of months ago, is not yet known. Giving the chicks the right diet is a challenge, the officials said. "Very little is known about their food habitat. With inputs provided by our counterparts in Gujarat, scientists have identified bird feed that is rich in proteins and calcium,". **The GIB is known to eat insects, harvested foodgrains, and fruit.** "The **uncontrolled use of pesticides and insecticides** in farms has badly hit their food habitat,". **Vanishing grasslands, and attacks by dogs and foxes have contributed to the threat to the GIB's survival.**



### Challenges

Male birds reach sexual maturity between the ages of 4 and 5; females at age 3-4. Generally, the GIB lives up to age 15 or 16, experts said. A female lays an egg once in 1-2 years, and the chicks' survival rate is 60%-70%. "Being such long-lived and slow reproducing species, adult mortality remains high," the WII report said. Tomar said: "Once these birds mature and can produce offspring, there must be enough habitats to support their growth. Readying the necessary habitat will be key in the coming months and years." **According to the WII report, the bird was once abundant in Kutch, Nagpur, Amravati, Solapur, Bellary, and Koppal districts in the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka.** "Karnataka has expressed interest in working with us, but there is nothing concrete from Maharashtra so far," the officer said. Globally and in India, **high voltage power lines are a major threat to the GIB**, the WII report says. The bird **has poor frontal vision**, which restricts it from spotting power lines early. "...About 15% of the population (dies) due to the power lines in Jaisalmer alone. This, in comparison to the natural cause of deaths contributed only 4% to 5% cases," the report says.

### Kaziranga Records 96 Species of Wetland Birds

- **Kaziranga, home of the world's most one-horned rhinos, has 96 species of wetland birds — one of the highest for wildlife preserves in India.** Kaziranga, about 220 km east of Guwahati, has a total area (tiger reserve) of 1,030 sq. km with a core area of 430 sq. km. "With 6,181 individuals, the bar-headed goose led the species count, followed by the common teal at 1,557 and northern pintail at 1,359. All three belong to the family anatidae," **The first wetland bird survey in Kaziranga, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985, was conducted in 2018.** Rabindra Sarma, the park's research officer said avian surveys could have been done in the 115-year-old Kaziranga earlier, but no records were maintained. "Data on avian wealth is important because the wetlands nourish Kaziranga's ecosystem. Increase or decrease in the number of birds is indicative of the park's health," he said.

### Mediterranean Diet

- The Mediterranean Diet has been declared the best diet for 2020 by U.S. News & World Report. Nuts, cheese, fruit, fish... as far as diets go, the one followed in Mediterranean countries in the 1960s was definitely attractive. What we term the Mediterranean Diet today was **followed matter-of-factly by the inhabitants of Greece, Italy, Spain and other countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea for years.** There are a number of reasons to assume its effectiveness. The World Health Organization talks of its benefits in Europe's new Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report, saying it **protects against cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes.** But then it **also says the same about The New Nordic diet**, and also credited other Mediterranean habits — like shared eating practices, afternoon naps and lengthy mealtimes — for the health of people in the region. In everyday terms, the appeal of this diet is clear: it relies heavily on the **local and seasonal**, which are buzzwords in the world of food today. Moreover, unlike some other diets, this one offers its followers plenty of choice. The main foundation of the Mediterranean diet is a **daily consumption of fresh vegetables, fruits, lentils, herbs, nuts and whole, unrefined grains.** Besides these, there is also a **strong emphasis on fish (had weekly)** and other sources of **healthy fat like olive oil.** The diet also allows for the consumption of **dairy (particularly yoghurt and unprocessed varieties of cheese), poultry, and eggs.** **Red meat, however, is avoided or had only occasionally, as are foods rich in sugar.** Medical research backs the diet too. From 1984 to 2004, a study funded



and supported by the US-based National Institutes of Health (NIH) looked at the diet and health of 74,886 women aged between 38 and 63 years. The researchers were mainly looking for incidences of fatal and non-fatal stroke, and coronary heart disease (CHD), and computed their Alternate Mediterranean Diet Scores from data submitted by the women themselves. They concluded that “A greater adherence to the Mediterranean diet, as reflected by a higher Alternate Mediterranean Diet Score, was associated with a lower risk of incident CHD and stroke in women.”

## Yada Yada Virus

- Merriam-Webster says yada yada is “boring or empty talk”, a way to recount words that are “too dull or predictable to be worth repeating”. The Cambridge dictionary says yada yada is only “blah blah blah”. **Researchers who last week reported the discovery of a new virus conceded that the discovery wasn't a big deal, given that** “the rise of metagenomic sequencing has resulted in an explosion of virus discovery, with new viruses being announced every day”. **Appropriately, therefore, the researchers have named their discovery “Yada Yada virus” (YYV). YYV takes its name from ‘The Yada Yada’, an episode of the television sitcom Seinfeld, which aired on the American network NBC on April 24, 1997. Yada Yada is an alphavirus, a group of viruses that the researchers described as “small, single-stranded positive-sense RNA viruses (that) include species important to human and animal health, such as Chikungunya virus and Eastern equine encephalitis virus... (and which) are transmitted primarily by mosquitoes and (are) pathogenic in their vertebrate hosts”. Unlike some other alphaviruses, Yada Yada does not pose a threat to human beings. The virus was detected in mosquitoes trapped as part of the Victorian Arbovirus Disease Control Programme in Encephalitis Virus Surveillance traps set up overnight in three locations in Victoria, Australia, for seven weeks in late 2016, the researchers reported.**

## How New Tech Is Raising the Bar for Lab-Grown and Vegetarian Meats

- At CES 2020 tech showcase in Las Vegas earlier this month, Impossible Foods, the California-based alternative meat producer, unveiled the “Impossible Pork”, a plant-based pork substitute that is kosher and halal, and which claims to have the taste, texture, and mouthfeel of the real thing. Also unveiled was the Impossible Sausage, a plant-based and pre-seasoned alternative to actual sausages. In 2016, Impossible Foods launched its flagship Impossible Burger, a plant-based replacement that “smells, handles, cooks and tastes like ground beef from cows”. Soon afterward, Impossible Burger was available at major fast food chains, in some restaurants in the United States, Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore, and in a few American grocery stores.

### Who Else Is Manufacturing Alternative Meats?

Start-ups around the world are presenting technological solutions to **replace traditional meat, seafood, milk (and dairy products), and eggs**. Beyond Meat, also based in California, has created beef-substitute burgers, beef, and beef crumble, as well as a “Beyond Sausage” meant to replace pork sausages. The company supplied McDonald's' first plant-based burger, PLT (Plant Lettuce Tomato), which was rolled out in select Canadian outlets in September last year. Beyond Meat is also partnering with other fast food chains such as Dunkin', Del Taco, Subway, KFC, and Carl's Jr. Barcelona-based Nova meat, and the Israeli food tech startup Redefine Meat are making 3D-printed, plant-based meat. Some lab-grown



meat start-ups are creating meat from chicken, pig, and cow cells — Memphis Meats, based in California, created the first cell-based meatball in 2016; the Dutch company Meatable has developed a commercially viable process of **using stem cells to make cheaper, fast-growing meat** in its labs. In India, Udaipur-based startup Good Dot is making **“vegetarian meat”** using plants. The Institute of Chemical Technology, Mumbai has partnered with non-profit The Good Food Institute India to set up a centre to research and develop cell-based meat. Perhaps the biggest indicator of alternative meats having moved beyond being just a fad, is that even food industry giants such as Tyson, Perdue, Nestlé, and Smithfield have jumped in. Nestlé launched its meatless Awesome Burger in September last year.

### What Is the Science of Alternative Meat?

**Plant-based alternative “mock meats” made of soya, jackfruit, mushrooms etc., have been around for a while; what is different now is the extent and sophistication of the technological intervention to create “meat” that is remarkably similar to the real thing in taste and texture. Reviews for Impossible Pork are unanimous that it is as good as real pork. Many plant-based meats companies achieve this by combining plant proteins derived from rice, beans etc. with fats from coconut or sunflower oil, cocoa butter, etc. Some, like Good Dot, use derivatives from yeast to get the meaty flavour.** The European Union-funded Smart Protein project is using spent yeast and other by-products of the manufacture of pasta, bread, and beer. Impossible Foods says it has created vegan heme (or haem), the iron-containing molecule that is found in all living organisms and is believed to be what makes meat taste meaty. Impossible Foods says that its products “get their heme from the protein soy leghaemoglobin, which is naturally found in soy roots”, but which it produces through “genetic engineering and fermentation”. This, the company says, makes Impossible meats taste like actual meat, and also causes them to “bleed”.

### How Big Is the Alternative Meat Market?

Barclays said in a report last August that alternative meats are still only 1% (\$14 billion) of the \$1.4 trillion global meat industry; they are, however, expected to grow to 10% over the next decade. With rising availability and consumer demand in the US and Europe, investors are backing what is seen as the next big thing in food tech. When Beyond Meat went public in May last year, it soared 163% over its IPO price, becoming the best-performing first-day IPO since 2000. In the same month, Impossible Foods raised \$300 million in its Series E round; in all, it has raised \$687.5 million in various rounds of funding since 2011. Earlier this month, cell-cultured meat startup New Age Meat raised \$2.7 million in seed funding, and Gathered Foods, the makers of plant-based seafood Good Catch, raised \$32 million in Series B funding. Beyond Meat shares gained over 27% in the week ended January 10 — its best performance since July last year. Industry stakeholders will be hoping the promise does not fizzle out like the dotcom bubble of the late 90s.

### But Why Eat Alternative Meats?

Environmental sustainability is the most compelling reason. **Industrial livestock farming is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and is a huge drain on land and water resources.** Plant-based and lab-grown meats on the same scale will have a much smaller carbon footprint. Health is another: aside from **high cholesterol, antibiotic resistance is a concern**, since animals on factory farms are given massive doses of antibiotics to stave off





diseases. However, **heavily processed alternative meats may not be as healthy as is often claimed**. A single serving (113 g) of the Impossible Burger 2.0 has 370 mg sodium, more than four times the 75 mg/100 g on average in traditional lean, ground beef patty. The third reason is moral. **Arguments for vegetarian or veganism as a way to reduce cruelty to animals may find more takers if alternative meats that closely mimic the taste and texture of real meat is easily available**. Then there is **food security**. An example is playing out currently in China, where the culling of millions of pigs in the wake of the African swine flu epidemic has led to a severe shortage of pork. In the world's biggest producer and consumer of pork, prices in December 2019 were double that of December 2018, and are bound to cast a shadow over the Spring Festival/New Year celebrations that will begin on Friday. At the launch of the Impossible Pork, company CEO Pat Brown said the next step would be expansion into Asia, with a particular focus on China.

### What is Xenobot?

- Scientists in the United States have created the **world's first "living machines" — tiny robots built from the cells of the African clawed frog**, that can move around on their own. They have named the millimetre-wide robots "xenobots" — after the species of **aquatic frog found across sub-Saharan Africa from Nigeria and Sudan to South Africa, Xenopus laevis**. "Scientists have repurposed living cells scraped from frog embryos and assembled them into entirely new life-forms," the University of Vermont said in a press release last week. The xenobots "can move toward a target, perhaps pick up a payload (like a medicine that needs to be carried to a specific place inside a patient) — and heal themselves after being cut", it said. Joshua Bongard, a computer scientist and robotics expert at the university who co-led the new research said the "novel living machines" were "neither a traditional robot nor a known species of animal", but "**a new class of artifact: a living, programmable organism**". The new creatures were designed on a supercomputer at the university, and then assembled and tested by biologists at Tufts University. New useful application can be imagined "Like searching out nasty compounds or radioactive contamination, gathering microplastic in the oceans, travelling in arteries to scrape out plaque,". The results of the new research were published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. ('A scalable pipeline for designing reconfigurable organisms'). While humans have been manipulating organisms for their benefit since at least the dawn of agriculture, and genetic editing has created a few artificial organisms in recent years, the latest research is a breakthrough because it designs, for the first time ever, "completely biological machines from the ground up", the researchers wrote in their paper.

### Meet 'Virtual Human' NEON

- Among the most-discussed new concepts at the annual Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas this year was NEON. The first project of Samsung's Star Labs, **NEONs are being called the world's first artificial humans. They look and behave like real humans, and could one day develop memories and emotions — though from behind a 4K display**. It won't be wrong to call them life-size human avatars, or maybe a human interface for whatever you want to do with technology. Star Labs is headed by India-born scientist Pranav Mistry who underlines that what was showcased at CES was the product of just four months' work. Mistry, who is president and CEO of Star Labs, was earlier behind a lot of products released by Samsung, including the Galaxy Gear smartwatches. **Star Labs is Samsung Technology &**



**Advanced Research Labs** (not to be confused with the fictional labs of DC Comics), an independent project funded by the Korean tech giant.

### So, what are NEONs?

The company says NEONs are computationally created virtual humans — the word derives from **NEO (new) + humaN**. For now, the virtual humans can show emotions when manually controlled by their creators. But the idea is for NEONs to become intelligent enough to be fully autonomous, showing emotions, learning skills, creating memories, and being intelligent on their own. Star Labs thinks they can be “friends, collaborators, and companions”, but all that is a few years away. At CES, the idea was to showcase the concept to the world.

### How are NEONs Different from Virtual Assistants?

**Virtual Assistants now learn from all the data they are plugged into. NEONs will be limited to what they know and learn. Their leaning could potentially be limited to the person they are catering to, and maybe her friends — but not the entire Internet.** They will not be an interface for you to request a song, rather they will be a friend to speak to and share experiences with, says Star Labs. Unlike deep fakes, Star Labs says, CORE R3 does not manipulate any scene, videos, or sequence, and instead creates unique behaviours and interactions in real time. “CORE R3 creates new realities,” it says.

### What About Personal Data With NEON?

**Mistry does not want his NEONs to have collective memory, or to share data among themselves. So, what is known to one NEON cannot be useful for another.** “My network is a small network that can live independently,” Mistry said, underlining the difference between his plan and what has been seen so far among other Internet-based companies. Also, Star Labs says “no one except you and your NEON can ever have access to your interactions”, and that private data will never be shared without your permission.

### So, What Next For NEON?

Star Labs is talking of launching a beta later this year, and claims it is flooded with queries from potential partners. You could find NEONs trying to chat you up on airport screens or bank lobbies soon. Mistry says he does not envision a physical for his NEONs, and anyway that technology is not in the realm of the possible in his lifetime.

## TB Diagnostic Test Developed in India Has High Accuracy

- In a Rapid Communication published on January 14, the World Health Organization (WHO) had mentioned that the **India-made Truenat MTB, a molecular diagnostic test to diagnose pulmonary and extrapulmonary TB and rifampicin-resistant TB, has high diagnostic accuracy.** Truenat MTB will be used as an initial test to diagnose TB thus replacing sputum smear microscopy. Truenat is developed by the Goa-based Molbio Diagnostics. The company was provided with technical assistance and resources by the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND) to help commercialise Truenat. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) had assessed and validated the diagnostic tool. “Truenat will be cheaper per test than Xpert. The equipment and cartridges cost more in the case of Xpert,” says Balaram Bhargava,

**Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur**



Director-General of ICMR. “Truenat is robust and most suited for Indian conditions.” Besides others, a multi-centric, prospective field evaluation study was carried out in four countries — India, Ethiopia, Peru, Papua-New Guinea — involving 744 participants, with final results on bacteriological culture.

### Higher Sensitivity

While sputum microscopy has only about 50% sensitivity, Truenat has been found to have higher sensitivity and specificity. According to WHO, the overall sensitivity of the Truenat MTB assay is 83% and specificity is 99%. In the case of Truenat MTBPlus, which uses two targets to diagnose TB bacteria, the sensitivity increases to 89% and the specificity is 98%. In comparison, Xpert, which is also a molecular diagnostic test and has been widely used across the world, the sensitivity is 85% and specificity is 98%. In cases where the sample is found to be positive for TB, tests can be done to know if the TB bacteria are already resistant to rifampicin, a drug used as part of first-line TB treatment. **Truenat MTB-RIF test for knowing rifampicin resistance has 93% sensitivity and 95% specificity.** According to the WHO, the accuracy to diagnose TB using Truenat and Truenat MTB Plus is comparable with Xpert and Xpert Ultra. Likewise, the accuracy to detect rifampicin resistance using Truenat MTB-RIF is comparable with Xpert and Xpert Ultra.

### Beats Smear Microscopy

“Compared with smear microscopy, there was 30% more number of positive cases diagnosed after Truenat was implemented in the 230-odd units,” says Manoj V. Murhekar, Director of NIE.

### Battery Operated

“Instead of smear microscopy, Truenat can be used as an initial and point-of-care tool for diagnosing TB,” says Dr. Murhekar. “Since not much expertise is needed to carry out the test, it can be used in peripheral units such as public and community health centres.” While Xpert needs reliable electricity supply and air-conditioning, **Truenat is battery operated and portable and so can be used in remote places.** Truenat takes about 25 minutes to extract the DNA and another 35 minutes for TB diagnosis. Testing for rifampicin resistance takes an hour and is done only if the sample tests positive for TB. In the case of Xpert, it takes two hours to complete the TB diagnosis and test for rifampicin resistance. **Compared with a one ml of sputum sample required in the case of Xpert, only 0.5 ml sputum sample is needed for Truenat.** In the case of TB positive samples, the actual bacterial load in 1 ml of sputum sample is given, while Xpert provides only a qualitative result.

### Low Cost

The main cost advantage while using Truenat will be in the manner the tests are carried out. **Only when samples test positive for TB will the test for rifampicin resistance be carried out in the case of Truenat.** This is unlike Xpert where both TB diagnosis and rifampicin resistance test are done at one go. Hence the use of reagents may be reduced, and this will help make the testing cheaper when Truenat is used. Also, a peripheral-level TB test using Truenat will reduce the delay in diagnosis and when combined with improved treatment initiation rates



will fare better compared with district-level Xpert testing. After all, early diagnosis and treatment initiation will help reduce TB transmission and incidence.

## Coronavirus Alert

- A top Chinese scientist has confirmed that the mysterious coronavirus (a type of virus named after its spiky, solar corona-like appearance under an electron microscope) that had by Tuesday killed at least six individuals and infected another 291 in China, **can spread between human beings**. Chinese authorities had earlier said the virus was transmitted only from animals to humans. The statement has increased pressure on Beijing to contain what could become a public health crisis in the peak travel season (Chinese people are projected to make some 3 billion trips during the Spring Festival /Lunar New Year holidays beginning on Friday), and there is heightened concern in countries as far away as in Europe and America. **A 45-year-old Indian is among those infected in Shenzhen, Guangdong, and travellers from China are being screened at major Indian airports**. A committee of the World Health Organisation (WHO) is meeting on Wednesday “to ascertain whether the outbreak constitutes a public health emergency of international concern and what recommendations should be made to manage it”.

### Why Is It Called the Wuhan Virus?

The first cases emerged in Wuhan in central **China's Hubei province**. (PM Narendra Modi met China's President Xi Jinping for their first Informal Summit in Wuhan in April 2018.) On December 31 last year, authorities confirmed that a large number of patients with unexplained pneumonia were admitted in hospitals in the city. **The Huanan Seafood Market, which also sold live poultry and meats, was shut down after being identified as the likely source of the pathogen**, which was identified early in January as a new coronavirus. Wuhan remains the epicentre of the outbreak, with China's National Health Commission reporting 270 cases for Hubei as a whole as of Tuesday morning. Guangdong seen 14 cases — and on Monday, Zhong said two patients in the province seemed to have caught the virus from relatives who had travelled to Wuhan.

### What Are The Symptoms Of Coronavirus Infection?

According to the WHO, common signs include **fever, cough, and shortness of breath**. Serious infections can lead to **pneumonia, kidney failure, and death**. Although human-to-human transmission has now been confirmed, the WHO says animals are the outbreak's likely primary source. It is not known yet which animals are responsible. To prevent the spread of all respiratory infections, **the WHO in general asks people to cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and to frequently wash their hands**. Direct contact with farm or wild animals should be avoided — **similar outbreaks in the past, like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) emerged from markets where people were in contact with live animals**.

### Why Is There Concern Around the World?

People see a similarity with the SARS outbreak that infected over 8,000 people and killed around 775 in more than 35 countries worldwide in 2002-03. **SARS too, was caused by a mystery coronavirus, and started in China**. The source of the virus remained unknown for 15 years, until Chinese scientists in 2017 traced it back to a colony of horseshoe bats living in





remote cave in Yunnan province. The virus was carried by civet cats which are sold in markets in China. Fears that SARS could reappear linger, and memories of China misleading the rest of the world on the extent and seriousness of the outbreak have not gone away — even though there has been greater transparency this time, and President Xi has ordered that the outbreak “must be taken seriously” and dealt with every measure possible. Zhong, who was China’s leading SARS expert during the 2002-03 outbreak, is again in charge of the government’s response.

- In a bid to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus that emerged in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province in early December last year, China took a drastic and unprecedented step this week to shut down the city, thus preventing its 11 million inhabitants from leaving. All modes of transport have been suspended to prevent residents from exiting the city. Authorities also planned to suspend public transport services in Huanggang, a city of seven million; shut rail stations in Ezhou; and impose travel restrictions in Chibi. These moves come in the wake of an increasing number of people getting infected and even dying. As on January 23, the number of infected people in China stood at 571 and deaths at 17. Wuhan, the hotspot of the disease outbreak, has reported nearly 80% of all cases and all the 17 deaths. Further, the virus has spread to 24 provinces within the country and outside as well — cases have been reported in Thailand and Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, U.S., Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, and Singapore. That the virus has already acquired the ability to spread from one person to another has been confirmed by the World Health Organization. Apart from people in close contact with affected individuals, 16 health-care workers have been infected. The WHO now sees possible evidence of sustained transmission — the ability of the virus to spread beyond just clusters of patients. The WHO Director-General took note of China’s decision and said that the travel ban is a reflection of the significant measures taken by China to minimise the spread of the virus. Even the chair of the committee said the travel ban is an “important information and will certainly be useful for the reflection of the members of the committee”. These observations run counter to the stand the WHO has always taken even when it announces public health emergency. While declaring the Ebola virus disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a public health emergency last year, the WHO had stated unequivocally that it is “essential to avoid the punitive economic consequences of travel and trade restrictions on affected communities”. That said, even if it limits the spread outside these cities, shutdowns cannot prevent human-to-human transmission within the cities. Shutting down entire cities go beyond the normal practice of quarantining infected people and might backfire.
- On December 31, 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause in Wuhan City in Hubei province. A few patients in Wuhan had been suffering from respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia since early December. Besides providing care, Chinese public health officials began carrying out environmental assessments at the wholesale market and trying to identify the microbe causing the outbreak.

### How Was the Virus Identified as A Coronavirus?

On January 9, 2020, WHO issued a statement saying Chinese researchers have made “preliminary determination” of the virus as a novel coronavirus in a person with pneumonia. They were able to determine the virus by sequencing the genome using an isolate taken from an infected patient. WHO tweeted: “Preliminary identification of a novel virus in a short



period of time is a notable achievement and demonstrates China's increased capacity to manage new outbreaks?" Public health experts are yet to identify the source of the new virus.

### What Are Coronaviruses?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses with some causing less severe common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). While the SARS coronavirus is thought to be an animal virus from an as-yet-uncertain animal reservoir, perhaps bats, that spread to other animals (civet cats) and first infected humans in the Guangdong province of southern China in 2002, the **MERS coronavirus was passed on from dromedary camels to humans in Saudi Arabia in 2012.**

### Has China Shared the Genome Sequence Data?

On January 11, China shared the whole genome sequence data with WHO and submitted them to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID) platform to allow researchers across the world to access the data. Sharing the data with GISAID will help other countries to quickly identify the virus, provide care, and also develop specific diagnostic kits, drugs and even vaccines. Since January 11, five more genome sequences have been submitted to GISAID.

### Eastern Ghats: Land Use Policies, Climate Change Hit Endemic Plant Habitats

- The broken hill-ranges of the Eastern Ghats, spread across Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, are home to unique ecosystems. Though it has over 450 endemic plant species, the region remains one of the most exploited and degraded ecosystems of India. With intensifying agricultural practices, urbanisation and pressures from mining and deforestation, the precious habitat of endemic and rare, endangered and threatened (RET) species could be reduced, even leading to species loss, notes a new study. The results published in Environmental Monitoring and Assessment show that by 2050 the total human population in the Eastern Ghats region is expected to reach 2.6 million, raising pressure from anthropogenic activities. There will be a demand for land for food, road and other activities leading to encroachments and threat to the habitats of endemic and RET species. "Ecotourism with regulatory guidelines is a positive way to educate and promote conservation. The highly threatening human activities in the Eastern Ghats area are mining, urbanisation/settlements, dam construction, firewood collection and agricultural expansion,". The endemic species were found to be distributed in the core areas of the forests - Kalahandi, Mahendragiri, Nallamalai-Seshachalam, Kolli and Kalrayan hill forests. On the other hand, the rare, endangered and threatened species were distributed not only in the core areas but also in the periphery of the forests, thus taking a greater hit from anthropogenic disturbances. The mean temperature and rainfall were all crucial for the plant species and simulations showed that the temperature is likely to increase by 1.8 degree Celsius by 2050 to 1.98 degree Celsius by 2070. The rainfall is also projected to increase by 113 millimetres by 2050 and 160 millimetres by 2070.

### Climate Change Effect

The team adds that the regional or local climate change (warming) has led to frequent prolonged non-rainy days, increased number of days with maximum and minimum



temperatures resulting in loss of soil moisture and soil degradation. These factors have also contributed to the occurrence of frequent forest fires, eliminating regeneration of the less-frequent endemic species in the forest. **Studies from across the globe have shown that the tropics are losing more plant biodiversity than other regions, stressing the need for urgent conservation strategies.** The team adds that more studies and setting up species inventories to identify and record species can help on conservation efforts.



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