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International

In the Works, An EU Data Strategy with Echoes Across the World

- The European Commission released a “European strategy for data... to ensure the human-centric development of Artificial Intelligence” and a white paper on artificial intelligence.

What Are the Major Takeaways?

The strategy lays out “why the EU should act now”. The blueprint hopes to strengthen Europe’s local technology market by creating a “data single market” by 2030 to allow the free flow of data within the EU. To aid a “data-agile economy”, the Commission hopes to implement an “enabling legislative framework for the governance of common European data spaces” by the latter half of the year. By the beginning of 2021, the Commission will make high-value public sector data available free through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) — a pathway for two different applications to speak to each other. Between 2021 and 2027, the Commission will invest in a High Impact Project to jump-start data infrastructure. Several other initiatives are laid out, including a cloud services marketplace.

What’s the Purpose Behind EU Data Strategy?

With American and Chinese companies taking the lead on technological innovation, Europe is keen to up its own competitiveness. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen wrote: “... I believe we need a digital transition which is European by design and nature... As part of this, big commercial digital players must accept their responsibility, including by letting Europeans access the data they collect. Europe’s digital transition is not about the profits of the few but the insights and opportunities of the many. This may also require legislation where appropriate.

Has India Done Anything Similar?

Yes. The Union Cabinet approved the **National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP) in 2012**. As part of the initiative, the government worked with the US government to release **data.gov.in**, a site of government data for public use. The Economic Survey of 2018 envisioned a similar use of non-personal data. Just as the EU’s strategy discusses “data for public good”, the chapter titled “Data ‘Of the People, By the People, For the People’” advocated that the government step in to sectors that private players ignore, marking the first time India’s Economic Survey has isolated “data” as a strategic focus. Other data integration efforts have been announced or implemented by NITI Aayog (the National Data & Analytics Platform), the Smart Cities Mission (India Urban Data Exchange), and the Ministry of Rural Development (DISHA dashboard). In 2018, the National Informatics Centre worked with PwC and other vendors to create a Centre of Excellence for Data Analytics aimed at providing data analysis help to government departments.



What Does the EU Move Mean for Legislation?

Europe has been a frontrunner when it comes to technology regulation. Its **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) released in 2018** was a game-changer across the industry. In the recent strategy, the GDPR is seen as giving the “solid framework for digital trust.” Parliamentarians are discussing India’s current Personal Data Protection (PDP) Bill in a Joint Select Committee. The recent draft of the PDP introduced a clause on non-personal data, mandating entities to hand over such data to the government on command. This was not included in the draft proposed by the Justice B N Sri Krishna Committee in October 2018. Some of the movement around the PDP Bill comes from a desire to strengthen India’s own data economy, similar to the EU’s desire.

What Is the Extinction Rebellion?

- Members of an environmental activist group dug up a part of the lawn of Trinity College Cambridge while sparing an apple tree that descended from the one that inspired Sir Isaac Newton. According to news reports, the digging was to protest the college’s alleged role in the “destruction of nature”, but the protesters “symbolically protected the famous apple tree to highlight the college’s collusion in the destruction of farmland”. **The group calls itself Extinction Rebellion (XR) and claims to follow the principles of non-violent civil disobedience movements.** It was launched in the UK on October 31, 2018, as a response to a report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that implied “we only have 12 years to stop catastrophic climate change and our understanding that we have entered the **6th mass extinction event**,” XR says on its website. Critics have referred to the group’s supporters as “environmental fanatics”. In its FAQ section, the website raises the question whether the group comprises “law breaking anarchists or economic terrorists or eco-fascists”; the answer posted is that the members are “strictly non-violent” and “reluctant law breakers”. Before the Trinity College vandalism, another widely reported instance of law-breaking happened in April 2019. The group held a large demonstration in London over a course of 11 days that led to more than 1,100 arrests. Activists caused damage of an estimated over £6,000 at the Shell headquarters and glued themselves and sat on top of trains on the city’s light railways. **For the UK, the group lists three demands — to “tell the truth”, which means that the government must declare a climate and ecological emergency; that it must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by the year 2025;** that the government must create and be led by a “Citizens’ Assembly” on Climate and Ecological Justice to meet “big, wide-ranging and complex” challenges. Such a Citizen Assembly would bring together ordinary people to discuss, investigate and make recommendations on ways to respond to climate change emergencies. The group says it does not want to rely on “traditional systems” like petitions or writing to MPs and is more likely to “take risks”, which includes getting arrested. It claims its movement is to demand adequate action for the “unprecedented global emergency”, for which “polite lobbying, marching, voting” etc haven’t yielded the desired results from decision-makers. The Guardian reported that a man and two women have been charged with criminal damage after the digging of the Trinity College lawn. Three others have been charged with criminal damage over another protest that took place the following day. All six people have been released on bail to appear at Cambridge magistrates court on March, The Guardian said quoting police.



Terror in Germany

→ The bloody rampage in Hanau town near Frankfurt by a suspected far-right extremist has heightened concerns over recurrent hate crimes in Germany, home to the largest number of immigrants from the recent refugee crisis. The incident, coming just days after 12 men were arrested for plotting attacks on mosques, is a chilling reminder of the threats to peace and stability in a European powerhouse. Authorities have established the gunman's extreme **xenophobic** beliefs using online evidence, where the 43-year-old attacker had advocated the elimination of people across continents. Crucial to investigators is the similarity of the lethal weapon wielded on Wednesday to that used in the 2016 Munich mall shootings. The comparison has brought into focus the role of Germany's intelligence agencies. While the latter have often stressed the growing number of actual and potential incidents they deal with, rights groups have called into question their level of efficiency. The latest violence must awaken those who take the complacent view that the threat from the far-right is concentrated in Germany's eastern regions. The State of Hesse, where the attack took place, was witness last year to the brutal murder of a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) official by a neo-Nazi; Walter Lübcke was targeted for his courageous defence of Chancellor Angela Merkel's liberal refugee policy. In 2017, the mayor of Altena, in North Rhine-Westphalia province, known for admitting a larger share of asylum-seekers, narrowly escaped a knife attack. These are evidently not isolated crimes, as the **Alternative for Germany (AfD)**, the country's largest opposition in the Bundestag, has stepped up its anti-Islam and anti-immigration campaign. But the recent political developments in Thuringia State have exposed divisions within the CDU on the approach to ward off the threat from the far-right. The local unit's move to side with the AfD to keep the left-wing Die Linke party out of power forced the resignation of the party chief and the country's Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. A party that is otherwise a staunch champion of liberal democratic values in the EU can ill-afford to dither on a question of key importance to unity within Germany and across the EU. Moreover, as a principal constituent of the European People's Party in the EU Parliament, the German CDU must wean the group away from hardline forces, especially in Hungary and Poland. These are lessons to be learnt from the Hanau massacre.

Advantage Hardliners (Ramin Jahanbegloo - Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre For Peace, Jindal Global University, Sonipat)

→ The parliamentary elections in Iran come at a critical time for the Islamic regime. Unlike the previous elections where hardliners already in power fought against moderate and pro-reform figures seeking a comeback, this year's elections hold huge importance for the future of the Iranian regime. The events of the past four months, starting with the social turmoil in cities in November 2019 until the shooting down of the Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 on January 8, 2020, not only shifted back the global attention to Iran, but also eroded much of the political legitimacy of the Iranian regime. The brutal response of Tehran's authorities to the unrest in the country after the government announced a 33% increase in fuel prices created distrust of the regime. The regime's popularity faded even more after the government lied for days about what caused Flight 752 to crash and finally admitted downing the plane. As a result, many Iranians are frustrated by the whole nomenclature, either hardliners or moderates, and will probably not participate in the elections.



Disqualification of Moderates

The low turnout would make it impossible for the regime to pretend that it could prevail ideologically against U.S. President Donald Trump's maximum pressure strategy. This comes as a surprise more than 40 days after the assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani at the orders of Mr. Trump in Iraq, which seemed to have helped the regime in Tehran on the domestic front and paused the anti-Iran regional outcry in Iraq and Lebanon. In a poll conducted by the Institute of Social Studies and Research at Tehran University, over 76% of the population across Tehran province said they will not take part in the elections. In addition, of more than 15,000 people who applied to run for parliament, 7,296 were disqualified by the Guardian Council from running. **The 12-member Guardian Council consists of six Shiite clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six lawyers elected by parliament.** It is charged with ensuring that draft laws do not contradict religious laws or Iran's constitution, and overseeing elections and legislation. **On paper, running for parliament is open to all Iranians who are between the ages of 30 and 75 years, but this time many reformist contenders were disqualified in the majority of constituencies due to embezzlement and corruption.** As a result, hardliners are expected to win big. The Iranian government announced this month that it was preparing a new draft law for a referendum that would limit the powers of the Guardian Council of the Constitution. Even if this law is accepted, it will not take effect for these polls. The disqualification of moderate candidates is the biggest cause of discontent for the Iranians. With hardliners in control, the government is set to lead to an even more aggressive foreign policy. Also, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) will see its power more strengthened than before as a result of the elections. With President Hassan Rouhani's camp being weakened, Iran doesn't look likely to produce a détente with the U.S. and EU. Though reformists could try to reunite as some kind of an opposition to a monopoly of power by hardliners, the truth is that they have lost a great deal of legitimacy and credibility in Iran over the years. Young Iranians have been disillusioned with Mr. Rouhani's government and angered by poverty, high unemployment and corruption. As a result, for many of those who will not vote in the elections, one of the main reasons is also that Mr. Rouhani and his reformist Cabinet distanced themselves from the millions who voted for them in the presidential elections on promises of reform and action against corruption. Also, it is true that with the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration and designed to bring Iran to heel, Iranian hardliners, especially members of the IRGC, seem to have become even more assertive and ready to close ranks. Therefore, what the upcoming elections show clearly is that despite decline of legitimacy, the establishment tries to remain united, because as long as it is united, the Islamic Republic will likely continue to survive.

Infinite Crisis

- The Afghan Independent Election Commission's much-delayed announcement that **President Ashraf Ghani is the winner** of the September 28 Presidential election is expected to deepen the political crisis in the war-torn country. That it took almost five months to declare the official results — he secured a narrow victory with 50.64% of votes against his main opponent Abdullah Abdullah's 39.52% — itself points to the seriousness of the crisis. **Mr. Abdullah has called the results fraudulent and vowed to form a parallel government.** If he does so, it would undermine the already feeble Afghan administration whose writ does not stretch beyond the main urban centres. For the Afghan voter, this is a déjà vu moment. **Five years ago, Mr. Ghani was declared winner of the election but Mr. Abdullah refused to**



accept the result. The then U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, brokered a power-sharing agreement, which allowed Mr. Ghani to take over the presidency and made Mr. Abdullah the government Chief Executive. And throughout the five years, they were at odds with each other, while the Taliban steadily expanded across the country's hinterlands and stepped up attacks on its city centres. Unsurprisingly, only less than a fourth of registered voters turned up in September, raising questions about faith in the whole exercise. Worse, the infighting comes at a time when the U.S. is near a Taliban agreement. Initial reports suggest that U.S. President Trump has given the go-ahead to its signing if the insurgents reduce violence for a seven-day test period. The deal would see the U.S.'s Afghan troop pullback, winding down America's longest war and leaving the Taliban and the Afghan government to start direct talks for a final settlement. The problem, however, is that even with an American troops presence, the Afghan government had never been able to take control of the security situation. The U.S. excluded the government from its direct talks with the Taliban as the insurgents do not see the government as Afghanistan's legitimate rulers. U.S. withdrawal would invariably weaken the government, aiding the Taliban even before the talks start. The disputed poll results and chronic political infighting would weaken the administration further. All involved parties in the conflict seem to be missing the big picture. The U.S. just wants to get out of a lost war. Mr. Ghani wants to retain his presidency. Mr. Abdullah may want to make sure there is power sharing with the Opposition. What is lost in these narrow, self-interest-driven moves is the collective quest for defeating the extremists and rebuilding Afghanistan.

Why US Has Shut Out Top Sri Lanka General

- The United States has put travel restrictions on Sri Lanka's Chief of the Army Staff, Lt Gen Shavendra Silva, for alleged war crimes committed during the last days of the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

Sri Lanka General and The US Accusations

Lt Gen Silva commanded the 58th Division of the Sri Lankan army during the final stages of the war. Investigations by the United Nations have implicated the division in alleged serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The appointment of Lt Gen Silva as army chief by the government of former President Maithripala Sirisena in August 2019 was criticised by the US, the UN, and the European Union. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet had said that the elevation of Gen Silva "severely compromises Sri Lanka's commitment to promote justice and accountability in the context of Human Rights Council resolution 30/1", which aims to promote "reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka". The appointment, the UN rights chief said, "undermines reconciliation efforts, particularly in the eyes of victims and survivors who suffered greatly in the war", "sets back security sector reform, and is likely to impact on Sri Lanka's ability to continue contributing to UN peacekeeping efforts". The designation of the general by the US State Department holds him accountable, through command responsibility, for "gross violations of human rights, namely extrajudicial killings, by the 58th division...". Sri Lanka has ignored the UN Human Rights Council resolutions that it signed agreeing to establish a system to hold to account the perpetrators of mass killings. After the end of the war, Lt Gen Silva was appointed Sri Lanka's Deputy Permanent Representative to



the UNHQ with the rank of Ambassador. He served in that position from 2010 to 2015, and was at the time the only serving army officer to hold such a diplomatic post.

International Punishment

After Lt Gen Silva's elevation in August last year, the UN banned Sri Lankan troops from its international peacekeeping missions. More than 650 Sri Lankan soldiers were at the time deployed with UN contingents in Lebanon, Mali, and South Sudan, and 35 officers were serving as staff officers and military observers, including at the UN headquarters in New York. Farhan Haq, deputy spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had said that in light of Silva's appointment, the UN Department of Peace Operations was suspending future Sri Lankan army deployments in all situations barring those in which a suspension would expose UN operations to serious operational risk. In 2015, the UN documented war crimes linked to Silva, including intentional and indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations in Killinochchi, Puthukkudiyiruppu, Putumattalan, Mullivaikkal and other areas. Evidence showed attacks on hospitals, no-fire zones, UN bases, and areas housing women, children, and the elderly. According to the UN, about 45,000 ethnic Tamil civilians may have been killed in the last months of the war; other estimates mention a much bigger number. Amnesty International has said 60,000-100,000 people were victims of forced disappearance. The EU had said that Lt Gen Silva's promotion called into question Sri Lanka's commitment to the UN Human Rights Council to ensure justice and accountability, and that it shared the concerns expressed by Human Rights Commissioner Bachelet, due to the "allegations of grave human rights and humanitarian law violations against him (Silva)".

India's Calibrated Position

The Sri Lankan foreign ministry has said that the concerns raised by foreign entities are "unwarranted and unacceptable". Even as it has pressed the Sri Lankan leadership to move forward on the reconciliation process with the ethnic Tamil minorities, India has not taken an adversarial position on the allegations of human rights violations. Rather, it has chosen the more pragmatic approach of engaging with the Sri Lankans, keeping in mind its own strategic and national interests.

Foreign Affairs

What Did the Harappan People Really Eat?

- The National Museum in New Delhi has decided to keep meat out of the 'Historical Gastronomica' event that it is hosting on its premises until February 25, allegedly after "a couple of MPs" reacted to the menu posted online by the Ministry of Culture. The last-minute diktat has resulted in dishes such as fish in turmeric stew, quail/fowl/country chicken roasted in saal leaf, offal's pot, bati with dry fish, meat fat soup, lamb liver with chickpea, and dried fish and mahua oil chutney being knocked off the table.



Food of Harappans

The event, presented by the Museum along with One Station Million Stories (OSMS), claims to treat visitors to “The Indus dining experience” through a “specially crafted menu that strictly includes ingredients that were identified by archaeologists & researchers from sites of the Indus-Saraswati Civilisation”. However, archaeological evidence from Indus Valley sites (c. 3300 BC to 1300 BC) in present-day India and Pakistan suggests that a purely vegetarian meal will not provide a complete picture of what the Harappan people ate. “To judge from the quantity of bones left behind, animal foods were consumed in abundance: beef, buffalo, mutton, turtles, tortoises, gharials, and river and sea fish,” food historian K T Achaya recorded in his magisterial history of Indian food, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Oxford University Press, 1994). Apart from meat, the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation grew and ate a variety of cereals and pulses. There is archaeological evidence for cultivation of pea (matar), chickpea (chana), pigeon pea (tur/arhar), horse gram (chana dal) and green gram (moong). Several varieties of wheat have been found at Harappan sites, as well as barley of the two-rowed and six-rowed kinds. There is evidence that the Harappans cultivated Italian millet, ragi and amaranth, as well as sorghum and rice. Achaya writes that oilseeds such as sesame, linseed, and mustard were also grown. Food made with many of these ingredients finds a place in the menu curated by OSMS. There are rotis made of millet and saktu (barley meal), and dishes like boiled lentil stew, barley griddle cakes, fermented vine or spinach leaves stuffed with millet, chickpeas and moong, puffed rice tossed and flaxseed tossed with honey, barley bread, brown sesame seed and jaggery laddu, and a drink made of saktu. Condiments use ingredients that have been identified at Indus Valley sites: chickpea and black pepper chutney, cucumber and cumin pickle with sesame oil, mustard greens and sesame oil chutney, and jaggery and cinnamon syrup.

A History of Taste

The menu at ‘Historical Gastronomica’ suggests that the food of the Indus Valley people would be familiar to many Indians today, even as it challenges the idea of an essentially “Indian” culinary culture. Many of our staples today — potatoes, tomatoes, chillies, leavened bread, cheese, apples — came to India from other parts of the world. The people of the Indus Valley, as well as those of ancient and most of medieval India, for example, would not have known what to do with a potato or a tomato. At the same time, much of what was once eaten by our ancestors has been taken off our plates over time, thanks to cultural and economic forces. Among these foods are a number of animals that were once hunted or reared in the subcontinent. To seek to understand what was once eaten on this land may be a worthy quest, but to try and tailor it to suit a modern perspective on history is a task with many pitfalls.

Visa Power

- The government has explained its decision to detain and deport British Labour MP Debbie Abrahams, saying that she had attempted to enter India on an “invalid visa”, as the government had revoked her e-business visa three days prior to her travel. It also seems clear that the decision to revoke the visa was prompted by her frequent criticism of India on the issue of human rights in Jammu and Kashmir, and a proclivity towards echoing Pakistan’s line on the issue. After the government’s amendment to Article 370 in August, Ms. Abrahams, who is the Chairperson of the U.K.’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Kashmir, had stepped



up her campaign, and raised the issue of J&K in the British Parliament as well. The government has not explained, however, how someone it considers so inimical to Indian interests received a one-year business visa in the first place in October 2019, and why it took four months to cancel it. Eventually, its reaction to her arrival in New Delhi, detaining and questioning her before deporting her was nothing short of ham-handed. To be clear, the government is well within its rights to deny entry to anyone that it desires to. However, **if its plan was to avoid public criticism of its actions in J&K or of its democratic values, then its treatment of the MP has only ended up having spotlighted its actions even more.** Parallels will also be made to the response to criticism from the U.S. Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who like Ms. Abrahams has family ties with India, and co-sponsored a House resolution critical of India on J&K. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, in Washington in December, cancelled a meeting with the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee as a snub to Ms. Jayapal, instead of trying to engage her at the meeting. The government is apparently banking on the fact that Ms. Jayapal and Ms. Abrahams are from Opposition parties, and hence it will not face adverse consequences from the Trump administration or the Johnson government. Where governments like those in Turkey and Malaysia have themselves been critical, India's response has been equally sharp: the *démarche* to the Turkish Ambassador this week and travel advisories issued earlier to Indians travelling to Turkey, or the trade restrictions on palm oil imports, most of which are from Malaysia, are notable examples. New Delhi's anger over negative comments by Turkish President Erdoğan or Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on India's "internal affairs" would seem more valid if it was not at the same time organising groups of envoys to visit J&K and encouraging them to express their positive opinions on the situation there. In the same vein, the boycott or deportation of politicians, visa denials to foreign journalists, all appear to be a part of a pattern of whimsical behaviour not suited to a democracy like India that prides in its traditions of openness and debate.

The Missing Piece in India's Defence Jigsaw Puzzle

- Undoubtedly, we are living through a moment of decisive change and turbulence. This geopolitical period is perhaps the most troubled since the final decades of the 20th century. Hence, there exists a vital need to adopt right strategic choices. According to 2018 data, **India occupies the fourth place in military expenditure across the world, behind the U.S., China, and Saudi Arabia.** This does not mean that India has no further need to increase its stock of state-of-the-art weapons. What is needed, nevertheless, is sober reflection and a cost-benefit analysis, to ensure that the amounts expended are in tune with our strategic requirements.

Defence Deals in The Pipeline

This is an opportune moment to undertake such a cost-benefit analysis. The first lot of **Rafale fighter jets** are expected shortly. The final deal on the 200 **Kamov Ka-226** light utility helicopters from Russia is in advanced stages and expected to be signed soon. In October 2018, India and Russia had signed a \$5.4-billion mega deal for the **S-400 Triumph Air Defence System**. Under contemplation today are yet another set of high-value U.S. defence deals, including additional purchases of **P-8I Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft** and **Apache Attack Helicopters**. According to estimates, the total worth of defence equipment purchased from the U.S. alone since 2007 is in the region of \$17-billion. On the eve of U.S President Donald Trump's visit to India, a further spurt in defence purchases is anticipated. Speculation is rife



that India and the U.S. would sign a deal for the **National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System (NASAMS-II)**, intended as part of a multi-layered missile shield to protect Delhi. The U.S. side is also hoping for two more mega defence deals, worth \$3.5-billion to be signed for 24 **MH-60 Romeo Multi Mission Helicopters** for the Navy and an additional six **AH-64E Apache Attack Helicopters** for the Army. Given India's rising global profile, and with two major adversaries on its borders, India needs to be fully prepared. What is lacking in the defence jigsaw puzzle, however, is a well-considered and clearly articulated white paper on India's defence needs, that sets out its strategic concerns, how it is positioning itself to meet these challenges, and the putative costs of meeting the country's defence needs.

Pakistan, China Threats

Several nations undertake such exercises. In India, exercises of this kind are sometimes undertaken, but they suffer from a lack of clarity and are restricted in scope. They contain vague references to the threat posed by China and Pakistan, but there is clearly more to India's defence needs than exercises in military hagiography. What is required is a well formulated defence white paper, putting the different threats and dangers the nation faces in perspective, alongside steps taken to meet these challenges. In the case of Pakistan, the threat motif is, no doubt, obvious. India's political and defence establishment are on record that India can easily defeat Pakistan, even if a "weaker" Pakistan possesses "nuclear teeth". Yet, while this makes for excellent copy, a great deal of effort is called for to explain to the public, the true nature of the threat posed by Pakistan, and why India is so confident of beating back the Pakistani challenge. Meeting the military, strategic and economic challenge from China is an entirely different matter. China is not Pakistan, and while China and Pakistan may have established an axis to keep India in check, explaining the nature of the threat posed by China to India is a complex task that needs to be undertaken with care and caution.

Understanding Beijing

To begin with, there are many experts who express doubts as to whether China intends today to pursue its 19th Century agenda, or revert to its belief in 'Tian Xia'. Undoubtedly under China's President Xi Jinping, China aims to be a great power and an assertive one at that. India's defence planners should, however, carefully assess whether there are degrees of "assertiveness" in China's behavioural patterns. There is little doubt that regarding its claim to areas falling within the 'nine-dash lines' (the first island chain), China is unwilling to make compromises. Whether this applies to other regions of Asia and the Indo-Pacific, calls for an in-depth study. It would be premature for India without undertaking such an analysis, to adhere to a common perception that China is intent on enforcing a Sino-centric world order in which India and other countries would necessarily have to play a secondary role. If after undertaking such an "analysis", it appears that China does not pose a direct threat to India's existence, notwithstanding the fact that India is its main rival in Asia, then India's political, strategic and military planners need to come up with a different set of alternatives. In recent years, unfortunately, much of India's strategic thinking regarding China's aggressive behaviour has been coloured by that of the U.S. and the West, though it is a proven fact that China has not used lethal military force abroad since the 1980s. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does convey an impression that China seeks to put itself at the centre of the world. The speed with which many of the steps to progress the BRI are being taken, again conveys an impression that China is intent on shrinking the physical and psychological



distance between Europe and East Asia. This does not, however, necessarily mean that China is preparing to confront individual countries in Asia, such as India, which do not subscribe to the BRI. A defence white paper would provide a more definitive answer to such issues. A detailed exercise to assess whether China is indeed a threat, rather than a challenge, to India should prove invaluable. It is possible that a detailed study may indicate that China understands that there are limits to its strength and capabilities. Several instances of late, have shown the frailties in China's policies — **Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Xinjiang are instances that indicate that China has its own Achilles heel.** Consequently, China may not be ready, for quite some time at least, to seek a direct confrontation with India. A closer look at Beijing's policies, undertaken as part of a defence white paper, may also indicate that rather than a "conflict-prone" role, China is more intent on an "influence-peddling" one. This is important from India's point of view. Already there is one school of thought that believes that Beijing is better at converting its economic heft into strategic influence, rather than employing force beyond certain prescribed areas. If this view is espoused by a defence white paper then, despite the vexed border dispute between India and China, the two countries could try and arrive at a subliminal understanding about respective spheres of influence. Today, one of India's major concerns is that China is attempting to intrude into its sphere of influence in South Asia, and the first and second concentric circles of India's interest areas, such as Afghanistan and parts of West Asia. The defence white paper might well provide a strategic paradigm, in which India and China agree to peacefully co-exist in many areas, leaving aside conflict zones of critical importance to either, thus ensuring a more durable peace between them. One other outcome that the defence white paper could attempt is: whether China views geo-economics as the primary arena of competition today. China has invested heavily in artificial intelligence, robotics and bio-technology, and perhaps, India needs to recognise that rather than blacklisting Chinese technology Tech firms, (which could prove counter-productive) there exist avenues for cooperation, paving the way for better state-to-state relations.

A Focus on Domestic Politics

A final word. The defence white paper needs to underscore that a country's domestic politics are an important pointer to a stable foreign policy. There could be different schools of thoughts within a nation, but equilibrium needs to be maintained if it is not to adversely impact a nation's foreign policy imperatives. An impression that the country is facing internal strains could encourage an adversary, to exploit our weaknesses. This is a critical point that the defence white paper needs to lay stress on.

Lending A Helping Hand

- A Yoga-Taichi demonstration, in the presence of Mr. Modi and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang at the Temple of Heaven, a world heritage site, showcased the tantalising possibility of a symbiotic revival of two ancient civilisations. By opening a Weibo social media account, the Prime Minister established a direct cyber connect with China's tech-savvy millennials. Bollywood further built on these foundations. Dangal, Secret Superstar, Hindi Medium, and Bajrangi Bhaijaan were super hits, establishing a deep emotional connect with Chinese audiences. TikTok, the short video-sharing app, opened new channels of curiosity about India among young Chinese.



Striking the Right Balance

But India's tepid response to the mounting woes of ordinary Chinese — the target of the novel coronavirus, which has killed over 1,800 people, spread panic, and threatened to derail the economy — has put these impressive soft power gains on notice. Chinese netizens question whether India has struck the right balance in protecting its domestic population from the deadly disease and dousing the flames of a neighbour whose house is on fire. "Chinese people believe that a drop of water given in need shall be returned with a burst of spring, which means if others offer even a little bit of help, one should return the favour with all he or she can," wrote the state-run tabloid Global Times, on India's response. Many contrasts New Delhi's arguably overcautious response — initially banning all export of face masks, suspending e-visas for over a billion Chinese, and sending a delayed message of empathy at the highest level to the distressed Chinese — with the solid and spontaneous support shown by the Japanese for their embattled neighbour.

Japan's Response

Disregarding the trauma of Tokyo's 1937 invasion and its enduring fallout, Chinese Internet users have showered praise on a retailer from Japan, which donated one million masks to the city of Chengdu. The Japanese city of Oita sent 30,000 masks to its sister city, Wuhan. The hashtag #Japan sends a million face masks to aid Wuhan# went viral, with more than 500 million views on Weibo. The Japanese also avoided fire-walling their borders. In their initial response, Japanese authorities barred the entry of only those Chinese citizens whose passports had been issued in Hubei province, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the initial damage, there may still be an opportunity for India to recover some of its soft power erosion. The key would be to follow the precedent of 2003, when George Fernandes, then Defence Minister, travelled to Beijing to express India's full support to the Chinese people, during the SARS outbreak. That visit reminded people of **Dwarkanath S. Kotnis, an Indian surgeon who had died in China**, where he had gone in 1938 as part of a five-member medical team to assist Chinese revolutionaries at the time of the Sino-Japanese war. That team had been cobbled together by Subhas Chandra Bose, on the instructions of Jawaharlal Nehru, to flag anti-colonial internationalism in Asia. Incidentally, before entering ground zero of the Chinese revolution, the Indian medical unit had been moved from Hankou port in Wuhan, where SARS-CoV-2 was first detected.

Battle of Çanakkale/Gallipoli

- India issued a strong demarche to Turkey over President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's comments in Pakistan, in the course of which he criticised India's policy in Jammu and Kashmir, and compared the "struggle" of Kashmiris with that of Turkey during World War I.

WHAT ERDOGAN SAID: Addressing a joint session of Pakistan's Parliament in Islamabad, Erdogan spoke of the "much-envied Turkey-Pakistan brotherhood" which, he said, was "strengthened by history and reinforced by historical events". He referred to "the year 1915, [when, as] ... Turkish soldiers defend[ed] the Dardanelles Strait..., a rally took place [...] 6,000 kilometres" away in Lahore, which was led by Allama Iqbal. Erdogan went on to say that what happened in Turkey during World War I was now happening in Kashmir. "Events that happened a hundred years ago in Çanakkale in Turkey are being repeated in Indian occupied



Kashmir and Turkey will continue to raise its voice against the oppression. Today, the issue of Kashmir is as close to us as it is to you [Pakistanis],” Erdogan said, according to a detailed report in the Pakistani daily Dawn.

THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN: The Battle of Çanakkale, also known as the Gallipoli campaign or the Dardanelles campaign, is considered to be one of the bloodiest of World War I, during which the Ottoman army faced off against the Allied forces, leading to the slaughter of tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides. In March 1915, with the war in Europe stalemated in the trenches, Winston Churchill, then Britain’s First Lord of the Admiralty, devised a plan to take control of the **Dardanelles**, the strategic **strait connecting the Sea of Marmara to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, and thus reach Constantinople (today’s Istanbul) at the mouth of the Bosphorus.**

By taking Constantinople, the Allies hoped to break the Turks, who had recently entered the war on the side of the Germany. The Allies carried out heavy naval bombardment of Turkish forts along the shores of the Dardanelles, and when that failed, followed up with what was the biggest amphibious landing in military history at the time. However, what the British and their allies had hoped would be the turning point in the war ended up as a catastrophe. In the nine months upto January 1916, when the Allies called off the campaign and evacuated, more than 40,000 British soldiers had been killed, along with 8,000 Australians. On the Turkish side, some 60,000 had perished.

LEGACY OF THE BATTLE: The battle resulted in a **demotion for Churchill and the emergence on the Turkish side of the young military hero, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.** But the legacy of Gallipoli goes far beyond its military aspects — the event is today one of the central pillars of the modern Turkish identity. **The campaign is also seen to have seeded Australian and New Zealand national consciousness — April 25, anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, is observed as ANZAC Day, the day of national remembrance for the war dead.**

Pakistan Retained On ‘Grey List’ Of FATF

- The International Co-operation Review Group (ICRG) of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommended that Pakistan be retained on the ‘Grey List’, given its failure to completely implement the 27-point action plan to check terror financing. It has been retained on the ‘grey list’ for another four months, with a stern warning from the global watchdog that met in **Paris** (February 19-21) to complete the **27-point action plan** it has been given by June 2020 or face being put on the ‘black list’. According to the FATF summary report, **Pakistan needs to continue to work on eight specific areas**, including demonstrating it is “identifying and investigating” all terror-financing activities in the country, freezing the funds of all designated terrorists and its prosecutions result in “effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions” against all terror entities. **Pakistan was given a September, 2019 deadline to complete the tasks that included shutting down all access to funding of United Nations Security Council-designated terrorist groups, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed and prosecuting their leadership for any access to finance, as well as tightening laws and banking security norms.** In November last, after Pakistan was judged to have complied with only four points of the plan, the FATF extended the deadline to February, where its statement noted it had been cleared of 14 points. The FATF urged



Pakistan to “swiftly complete” the remainder of the list. “Otherwise, should significant and sustainable progress, especially in prosecuting and penalising terror financing not be made by the next plenary, the FATF will take action, which could include the FATF calling on its members and urging all jurisdiction to advise their financial institutions to give special attention to business relations and transactions with Pakistan,” it said in its strongest warning yet. A high-level team from Pakistan was present at the plenary to defend Pakistan’s record, while delegations of security and diplomatic officials from the 39-member body, which includes India, attended the meeting. **The “black list” refers to countries for who there has been a “call to action” or strict banking and international finance sanctions, a list which at present includes Iran and North Korea. Pakistan is one of the 12 countries on the “grey list” or “other monitored jurisdictions”** that are being reviewed for actions to stop terror financing and money laundering. Pakistan has been lobbying to get off the grey list, citing actions already taken, and reportedly has the backing of Turkey to be removed from the list entirely.

- Speaking in favour of Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia said Islamabad could be taken off the ‘Grey List’ in coming June. Leaders of these two countries have already gone public on their plans to back Pakistan in the FATF. India asserted that the terror funding operations were still on and outfits such as the LeT and the Jaish-e-Mohammed, whose chief Masood Azhar’s location as per Pakistan is “unknown”, were having a free run in Pakistan.

Forging A New India-U.S. Modus Vivendi

- It is easy to be contrarian about U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to India early next week, given his idiosyncrasies, his often-unpredictable, rambunctious ways and the roughshod manner in which he seeks to put America first. And yet, it is clearer than perhaps ever before in recent times, that New Delhi needs the continued support of the U.S. government on almost everything substantial that matters to India in its quest to be a power of substance in the international system. The acceptance of this admittedly parsimonious explanation then accords a new gravitas to the Trump visit. While the elaborate festive arrangements for the American President’s 36 hours in India may seem over the top, they are part of an investment in an ‘unbridled’ (after the failed impeachment and the surge in his approval ratings) Mr. Trump that he could quickly return — even during the trip itself — given his reputation as a sharp deal-maker who often beats the odds.

Preparing for Trump 2.0

Moreover, on present evidence, not limited to the fratricidal war between Democratic presidential hopefuls, the world may have to deal with Mr. Trump for four more years after the end of his present term this year. From a fairer trade regime; to accessing cutting-edge technology; to the fight against terrorism; to stabilising our region, New Delhi stands to benefit from constructive ties on all issues, given a more sensitive United States. India must therefore seek greater understanding and engagement should there be a Trump 2.0. Asymmetrical partnerships, as we know from history, are rarely easy. Partnerships with superpowers are even more difficult; in international politics, as in life, even the best of unequal relationships results in a loss of some dignity and autonomy. It took all of Winston Churchill’s weight, foresight, wisdom, and the frightening imagery of communism invading Europe, to convince the U.S. of the need of a special relationship across the Atlantic, after the Second World War; and even then the British had to accept that London would be just



another city in Europe, and Washington would consult London only when deemed necessary. But as Churchill realised on that fateful day in March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, when he delivered his 'Iron Curtain' speech, the consequences of not arriving at a modus vivendi with the U.S. would be disastrous. Today, the Indo-Pacific has arrived at an 'Iron Curtain' moment in its history. **Without the United States, the region could become willy-nilly part of a new Chinese tributary system; with a fully engaged United States, the region has at least the chance of creating a more organic rules-based order.** In New Delhi's case, the history of, what diplomat Dennis Kux described as, "estrangement" with the United States, during the Cold War, has had consequences for vital national interests that continue to cast their shadow on the present. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), nuclear non-proliferation, the festering of the Pakistan "problem", the Chinese humiliation of 1962, are just a few examples. But much of course has changed today. Anti-Americanism, once the conventional wisdom of the Indian elite, seems outdated. New Delhi has, over the decades, gone on to align itself more closely with Washington. More important, outside the Left, both within India and in the U.S., the consensus across the mainstream of political opinion favours stronger relations between the two countries. This is notwithstanding the recent concerns expressed in Congress about the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and about the internment of political leaders in J&K.

Foreign Policy's Pro-U.S. Tilt

In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in a gesture that seemed uncharacteristic for him, effusively praised President George W. Bush and told him that the people of India "deeply love him". According to the latest Pew Surveys of Global Opinion, support for Mr. Trump in India is high enough to suggest a great deal of public affection for the American President. That itself is a marker of the way India and Indians now see the world. The reason for the change in New Delhi's geostrategic outlook can be summarised quickly. If the 1971 Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union was a response to the continuing U.S. tilt towards Pakistan and the beginnings of a Washington-Beijing entente, at present, it is the prospect of a potentially hegemonic China in the Indo-Pacific region is helping to cement the relationship. Beijing has managed to alienate nearly all its neighbours and allies, except North Korea and Pakistan. It is often tempting also to dismiss the gains made bilaterally during the last three years of the Trump Administration.

In Foreign Affairs, strategic affairs analyst Ashley Tellis writes about the "the surprising success" of the partnership and argues that Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi have "deepened" the defence cooperation. And Jeff Smith of the Heritage Foundation lists the accomplishments India-U.S. ties have made over the years, including "a foundational military agreement that allows for the sharing of encrypted communications and equipment; a change in U.S. export control laws that places India in a privileged category of NATO and non-NATO U.S. allies; a new '2+2' foreign and defence ministers dialogue; an exponential increase in U.S. oil exports to India; the inauguration of the first India-U.S. tri-service military exercise and an expansion of existing military exercises; the signing of an Industrial Security Annex that will allow for greater collaboration among the two countries' private defence industries; the inclusion of India and South Asia in a U.S. Maritime Security Initiative..." But, as Mr. Tellis points out, much work needs to be done for the two countries to fulfil the potential of the relationship, especially in the area of defence. This, together with other key issues including trade, is on the centrepiece of the Trump-Modi agenda for the visit.



Bipartisan Consensus

There is, of course, a chance that we may have a Democratic President next year. In those circumstances, we can only hope that the bipartisan consensus on engaging India — which has continued from Bill Clinton’s second term will prevail. To be sure, however, a new President will seek to put his/her own imprimatur on the relationship. The Democrats will clearly be more proactive on human rights and on issues of inclusion and diversity, which would make a greater demand on South Block and test its capacity and creativity. New Delhi must, of course, continue engaging with its strongest source of support in the United States: the Indian diaspora. Fortunately, there is a near consensus on the need to strengthen this constituency. In any case, there is little doubt that whoever is the next occupant of the White House, a retreat from multilateralism (especially on trade-related issues) and concern about China will continue to be the two main pillars of contemporary American foreign policy. If for only those reasons, Mr Trump’s reason has undeniable significance.

- It is clear that both sides see the joint public rally at **Ahmedabad’s Motera Stadium** as the centrepiece of the visit, where the leaders hope to attract about 1.25 lakh people in the audience. Despite the Foreign Ministry’s statement to the contrary, the narrative will be political. **Mr. Trump will pitch the Motera event as part of his election campaign back home.** By choosing Gujarat as the venue, Mr. Modi too is scoring some political points with his home State.
- In March 2017, soon after taking office following an election campaign focused on “making America great again”, Donald Trump ordered the “first-ever comprehensive review” of the trade deficits of the United States, and “all violations” of trade rules that harmed American workers. India was among the countries that exported more to the **United States than it imported, and the latter was left with a trade deficit of over \$21 billion in 2017-18. While the US’s deficit with India is only a fraction of its deficit with China (over \$340 billion in 2019),** American officials have repeatedly targeted the “unfair” trade practices followed by India. These include the tariffs that India imposes, which the Trump administration feels are too high — and over which the President has personally called New Delhi out on several occasions.

Locating the Main Sticking Points

Negotiations on an India-US trade deal have been ongoing since 2018, but have been slowed by “fundamental” **disagreements over tariffs (taxes or duties on imports), subsidies, intellectual property, data protection, and access for agricultural and dairy produce.** The office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) has underlined India’s measures to restrict companies from sending personal data of its citizens outside the country as a “key” barrier to digital trade. The US wants India to strengthen patent regulations, and to ease the limitations American companies investing in India face.

The ‘Harley Tariffs’

India is a “tariff king” that imposes “tremendously high” import duties, President Donald Trump has complained repeatedly. He has cited the example of **Harley-Davidson**, the US motorcycle maker. Even after India halved the duty on the bike to 50% in 2018, he has said the rate is “still unacceptable”. While it is often assumed that duties on the large-engine motorcycles have put them beyond the reach of most Indian consumers, the fact is that a **plant at Bawal** in Haryana has been assembling the bikes since 2011, and Harley has still not



captured a sizeable chunk of the Indian market. Fewer than 3,700 of the motorcycles were sold in India in 2017, according to an analysis by Alyssa Ayres of the American think tank Council on Foreign Relations, and that too mostly cheaper models that were assembled in the country.

Steel Industry Hit

In 2018, the US imposed additional tariffs of 25% on steel and 10% on aluminum imports from various countries, including India. While India's government claims the impact is "limited", they brought down the US share in India's steel exports to 2.5% in 2018-19 from 3.3% in 2017-18. In March 2018, India challenged the US decision at the World Trade Organization (WTO). India held off on imposing retaliatory tariffs until the US struck again — by removing it from a scheme of preferential access to the American market.

- India's decision to slash maximum retail prices of life-saving cardiac stents and essential knee implants by 65%-80%, put tariffs on information and communication technology products, and demand that exporters of dairy products certify their produce was derived from animals not fed food containing internal organs.
- Removal from the GSP list amidst rising trade tensions prompted India to finally impose retaliatory tariffs on several American imports, including almonds, fresh apples, and phosphoric acid. This was a significant move — and the US approached the WTO against India. India is one of the largest importers of almonds from the US, having imported fresh or dried shelled almonds worth \$615.12 million in 2018-19. Imports from the US of fresh apples stood at \$145.20 million, of phosphoric acid at \$155.48 million, and of diagnostic reagents at nearly \$145 million that year.
- India is working to finalise a proposal to move from caps on prices of medical devices to limiting the margins of those involved in the supply of the products. It is unclear whether this would mean the government might be willing to reconsider its earlier, widely publicised decision to slash, in the public interest, prices of stents and knee implants. The health cess on imported medical devices announced in the Budget for 2020-21 too, may be seen as a negative for the American side, as the US is among the top three exporters of these categories of products to India.

Arrests at Bangla Border Decline, 14.8k In Enclaves Got Citizenship

- The numbers of persons arrested by the Border Security Force (BSF) for trying to enter India illegally through the Bangladesh border, as well as the numbers pushed back along the same border, show a declining trend over a period of five years. Additionally, figures tabled in Parliament by the Home Ministry show, the number of those listed as "deported" has been higher than the number of those arrested in each of these years. The data add up to 9,145 arrested between 2015 and 2019, and 21,348 deported during the same period. The arrests declined from 3,426 in 2015 to 1,351 in 2019, while the number of those deported declined from 5,930 to 2,175 during the same period. For those arrested and deported, the ministry response in Parliament used the term "illegal infiltrators". For those living in the country, it used the term "illegal migrants". It defined illegal migrants as individuals who enter the country without valid travel documents in a clandestine and surreptitious manner. "Therefore, it is not possible to have an accurate estimate of such illegal migrants living in the country," the ministry said. In response to another question, the Home Ministry said India has granted citizenship to 15,012 individuals from Bangladesh between 2015 and 2019. Of



them, 14,864 were living in 23 enclaves of Bangladesh included in Indian territory under the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement, 2015, leading to their being granted citizenship. Not counting the enclave residents, 148 individuals from Bangladesh were granted Indian citizenship during 2015-19, as compared to 2,668 from Pakistan and 665 from Afghanistan. The recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act relaxes eligibility rules for Indian citizenship for certain categories of migrants from these three countries.

Nation

When Can A Judge opt Out of a Case?

- On February 12, Supreme Court judge Justice Mohan M. Shantanagoudar recused himself from hearing a petition filed by Sara Abdullah Pilot, sister of former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, against the government's move to charge him under the Public Safety Act. The case was finally heard by another bench. **Recusal usually takes place when a judge has a conflict of interest or has a prior association with the parties in the case.**

What Are the Rules on Recusals?

There are no written rules on the recusal of judges from hearing cases listed before them in constitutional courts. It is left to the discretion of a judge. **The reasons for recusal are not disclosed in an order of the court.** Some judges orally convey to the lawyers involved in the case their reasons for recusal, many do not. Some explain the reasons in their order. The decision rests on the conscience of the judge. At times, parties involved raise apprehensions about a possible conflict of interest. For example, if the case pertains to a company in which the judge holds stakes, the apprehension would seem reasonable. Similarly, if the judge has, in the past, appeared for one of the parties involved in a case, the call for recusal may seem right. A recusal inevitably leads to delay. The case goes back to the Chief Justice, who has to constitute a fresh Bench.

Should the Reasons Be Put on Record?

In his separate opinion in the National Judicial Appointments Commission judgment in 2015, Justice (now retired) Kurian Joseph, who was a member of the Constitution Bench, highlighted the need for judges to give reasons for recusal as a measure to build transparency. One of his companion judges on the Constitution Bench, Justice (retired) Madan B. Lokur, agreed that specific rules require to be framed on recusal. The two judges were referring to senior advocate Fali Nariman's plea to Justice J.S. Khehar, who was then in line to be the next Chief Justice, to recuse himself. But Justice Khehar refused to recuse himself though he admitted that Mr. Nariman's plea left him in an "awkward predicament". Justice Khehar reasoned that he did not recuse himself for fear of leaving an impression that he was "scared".

What Happened in The Judge Loya And Assam Detention Centres Cases?

In 2018, petitioners in the Judge Loya case sought the recusal of Supreme Court judges, Justices A.M. Khanwilkar and D.Y. Chandrachud, from the Bench as they both hailed from the Bombay High Court. The case banked on the written statements of two judges from that High



Court, both saying that Judge Loya's death was from natural causes. The court refused the request and called it a "wanton attack". Recusal, the court observed, would mean abdication of duty. In May 2019, in the middle of a hearing of a PIL filed by activist Harsh Mander about the plight of inmates in Assam's detention centres, the then-Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi was asked to recuse himself. In a lengthy order, Justice Gogoi said a litigant cannot seek recusal of the judge. "Judicial functions, sometimes, involve performance of unpleasant and difficult tasks, which require asking questions and soliciting answers to arrive at a just and fair decision. If the assertions of bias as stated are to be accepted, it would become impossible for a judge to seek clarifications and answers," the court observed.

Why Did Justice Mishra Argue Against Recusal?

Refusing to recuse himself from the Constitution Bench hearing a question of law on the Indore Development Authority v. Manohar Lal (the issues involved in the case related to a reading of Section 24(2) of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013), Justice Arun Mishra said acquiescing to the wishes of parties to recuse himself would sound the death-knell for judicial independence. **The petitioners had objected to Justice Mishra leading the Constitution Bench which was hearing a question of law challenging his own earlier judgment in the case.** But Justice Mishra said it would be a "grave blunder" on his part to bow out.

How to Treat A Child Witness

- If the seizure of a pair of slippers of an 11-year-old as evidence in an investigation in a sedition case in Bidar, Karnataka, was not ludicrous enough, the imprisonment of a mother of a student in the same case for having contributed to the script of an apparently seditious primary school play, the arrest of the principal for allowing it to be performed in her school, and the interrogation of the children by uniformed police officers in the absence of any child welfare workers, would make a perfect script for an Orwellian nightmare.

Violation of Rights

For those puzzled readers who may be wondering what the pair of slippers might have to do with this surreal theatre, it was the very object referred to in the play, according to media reports, when a child says **"the boy who was selling tea till the other day is asking us for documents. I'll ask him where he was born and where his papers are. If he does not provide them, I will beat him with my slippers"**. Even if some patriots might argue that a child's slippers could indeed be used to wage war on our great nation and the remand report for the two women "found grounds for suspicion that the two influenced the children", the students themselves insisted, even after repeated interrogation, that they wrote the play themselves. On the other hand, one child told HuffPost India, "We were scared. The policemen raised their voice every time they questioned us." Not surprisingly, many students have stopped going to school since then. I imagine most people would think that this story must be fake news not only because it is so utterly absurd but also because our police who cannot find a moment to stop the lawless mayhem on our roads which have made India one of the world's largest traffic-death countries must surely be doing more important things. But the soul-crushing truth is that these events did happen. Leaving aside the numbing irony that a law designed by the British to suppress the freedom of speech of our avowedly non-



violent independence activists should now be used by the police to suppress the freedom of expression of schoolchildren, my anguish is because of the terror that these children must have experienced as a result of this ordeal. Not only did the arrest of the mother, a single parent, leave the child in the care of a neighbour but the arrest of the principal of their school left all the children without their trusted headmistress. Simultaneously, the police, threatening as they must have seemed to the children in their full regalia and having carted away the mother and principal to jail, were trying to get them to squeal incriminating evidence which could be used against these very trusted adults.

- The Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights has pulled up the district police for violations, including repeated questioning of the children. Additionally, a public interest petition has been filed in the Karnataka High Court seeking a departmental inquiry against the policemen who allegedly questioned the children of Shaheen School, aged between 9 and 12, without the consent of their parents or guardians, and also video-recorded them without consent. The PIL referred to a statement by the Shaheen Alumni Association to say that the children were questioned by policemen carrying guns, which created an “intimidating and fearful environment”. The PIL has asked for guidelines to be issued to police regarding interrogation of minors in criminal proceedings in accordance with the Juvenile Justice Act and United Nations resolutions.

What Are the International Conventions on Children in These Situations?

India has been a signatory to the **Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1992**, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989. These guidelines recommend that authorities treat children in a caring and sensitive manner, with interview techniques that “minimise distress or trauma to children”. They recommend specifically that an investigator specially trained in dealing with children be appointed to guide the interview of the child, using a child-sensitive approach. “The investigator shall, to the extent possible, avoid repetition of the interview during the justice process in order to prevent secondary victimisation of the child.” **Secondary victimisation is defined as victimisation that occurs not as a direct result of a criminal act, but through the response of institutions and individuals to the victim.** Child rights activists say that children repeatedly questioned by authorities while in police uniform, without the presence of their parents, can lead to such trauma.

How Do Indian Laws Address the Issue of Child Witnesses?

Under Section 118 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, there is no minimum age for a witness. Children as young as three years old have deposed before trial courts in cases of sexual abuse. Usually during a trial, the court, before recording the testimony of a child witness, determines his or her competency on the basis of their ability to give rational answers. A child is usually asked questions like their name, the school they study in, and the names of their parents to determine their competency. If the child is very young and does not understand the significance of taking an oath to speak the truth — which is administered to each witness before testimony — the judge or the staff explain to the child that he or she should speak the truth, thinking of whichever God they believe in. Trials involving children as witnesses have primarily been in cases of child sexual abuse. Other criminal cases where children are examined as witnesses have included those where a parent is the victim of violence at home, in the sole presence of the child.



Have Courts Dealt with How Child Witnesses Are to Be Treated?

The Delhi High Court has come up with guidelines for recording of evidence of vulnerable witnesses in criminal matters. A vulnerable witness is defined as anyone who has not completed 18 years of age. Focusing primarily on child witnesses giving testimonies that are recorded in court, the Delhi High Court guidelines underline the importance of the criminal justice system needing to respond proactively, sensitively, and in an age-appropriate manner when dealing with children. They allow for a facilitator for a vulnerable witness to be appointed by a court for effective communication between various stakeholders including the police. In 2016, the Delhi High Court said that while children can be pliable, their testimony can be considered after careful scrutiny.

What Are the Laws Pertaining to The Questioning of Children?

JJ Act: The primary legislation in the country pertaining to children is **The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**. The Act does not provide guidelines specifically relating to questioning or interviewing of children as witnesses. The Act's very preamble, however, says that a "child-friendly approach in the adjudication and disposal of matters in the best interest of children" must be adhered to. This means adhering to general guidelines pertaining to the juvenile justice system — for instance, for the police to not be in their uniform while dealing with children. It also requires that interviews of children be done by specialised units of police who are trained to sensitively deal with them. **The Act prescribes that a Special Juvenile Police Unit is to be constituted by the state government in each district and city, headed by a police officer not below the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police, and including two social workers, at least one of whom must be a woman, and both of whom should be experienced in the field of child welfare.** Their work includes coordinating with the police towards sensitive treatment of children. The Act also provides for a Child Welfare Committee in every district to take cognisance of any violations by the authorities in their handling of children.

POCSO Act: Apart from the Juvenile Justice Act, **The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012** has specific guidelines regarding interviewing children as witnesses. While it pertains to child sexual abuse victims, child rights activists say the guidelines are a framework for all children who are being interviewed by the police as witnesses. **The Act states that interviews should be conducted in a safe, neutral, child-friendly environment, including allowing for them to be done at homes.** It says **a child should not be made to recount the incident in question multiple times.** The Act also allows for a support person, who could be trained in counselling, to be present with the child to reduce stress and trauma. In 2018, the Bombay High Court had pulled up the police for repeatedly summoning a three-year-old to the police station for recording his statement in a case of alleged sexual abuse of his classmate; a school trustee was an accused in the case.

Perverse Zeal

- The detention of **Dr. Kafeel Khan** under the **National Security Act (NSA)**, within days of his being granted bail, betrays the perverse zeal with which the Uttar Pradesh government is hounding the suspended government doctor. His arrest, at Mumbai airport, was in connection with an allegedly inflammatory speech he had made on the contentious



Citizenship (Amendment) Act at Aligarh Muslim University in December 2019. The Special Task Force of the U.P. police accused him of promoting enmity through his speech. It was obvious that the flawed approach that treats criticism of government policy as though it is some anti-national activity was at work. Although he was granted bail, he was not immediately released. A few days later, the NSA was invoked against him, ostensibly to prevent him from acting in a manner prejudicial to public order. **The paediatrician from Gorakhpur was sought to be blamed when oxygen shortage in the BRD Medical College Hospital led to nearly 60 children dying in 2017. After he had spent months in jail, an internal inquiry absolved him of the charges of negligence and corruption.** However, the State government said he had not been given a clean chit. A fresh departmental inquiry was ordered against him for “spreading misinformation” about the probe report, and some alleged “anti-government” remarks during his suspension. That the authorities invoked a stringent preventive detention law meant only for booking those whose activities constitute an imminent threat of violence shows that they are not content with prosecuting him. If they were under a bona fide belief that his speech was provocative, they could have filed a charge sheet and let the court decide if it attracted Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). **The resort to preventive detention as soon as a person is granted bail, with the perverse purpose of continuing his imprisonment, is not uncommon in the country, but the practice is condemnable.** It normally indicates mala fide targeting by the administration concerned, and one does not need to look beyond the case of Dr. Kafeel himself to conclude that the latest instance of the resort to the NSA is aimed at inflicting disproportionate punishment on him for expressing political dissent on a supposedly forbidden subject. It is regrettable that the police and the bureaucracy appear to act in wanton disregard for basic rights. The relentless hounding of Dr. Khan is a blot on the country’s democratic credentials. Taking the cue from growing opinion, most recently articulated by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud of the Supreme Court, that protest and criticism directed at government policy do not amount to being anti-national, officials should pause before they are seen as enablers of the excesses of an authoritarian dispensation. To invoke the NSA in cases where sections of the IPC would suffice is to undermine its efficacy as a tool to protect national security.

[Losing A Nation, In Seven Acts \(Satish Deshpande - Teacher of Sociology at Delhi University\)](#)

- Are we losing our country? This is the question that Ece Temelkuran, a Turkish journalist and writer, suggests that we should be asking ourselves. In her recent book, *How to Lose a Country*, she describes how her homeland was stolen from her by what she considers the dictatorship of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Subtitled “The seven steps from democracy to dictatorship”, the book outlines a saptapadi that Indians have become intimately familiar with over the past six years. In fact, Ms. Temelkuran’s main point is that this is now a global trend. The story begins with the creation of a **movement that claims to be of and for the “real people”**, the authentic owners of the nation unjustly marginalised in the past by assorted conspiracies. This is followed by an **assault on rationality and on language**, where new meanings are thrust upon old terms and **argument is replaced by aggressive slogans**. The third step is a **shedding of all shame and decency** on the part of leaders, who then teach their followers to do so as well, all in the name of an authentic indigeneity. After this comes the **dismantling, or co-option, of all the institutions** that are intended to act as checks and balances on executive power, **including the judiciary, the media and the Constitution**. The



fifth step is the **designing of new citizens**, who will be pre-calibrated to the new normalcy that has been speedily established, shrugging off the weight of history. The sixth step is the **reduction of all liberal and secular thinking persons to a stage of irrelevance and despair** where they can only “laugh at the horror” that their country has become. The seventh and last step, of course, is **when the new rulers build their own country, having crushed all possible sources of resistance to their agendas**.

How the Liberals React

Ms. Temelkuran emphasises that the early steps in this journey are marked by confident expectations of the liberal establishment that the disturbances are temporary, and the built-in safeguards in the system will take care of the threats. But this confidence soon gives way to helpless disbelief expressed in incredulous exclamations: “They can’t do this!”, “How did they get away with that!”, and so on. Ms. Temelkuran persuasively argues that, **in the last two decades, this sequence has been repeated in countries as different from each other as Hungary, Brazil, the United States and Turkey (to name a few), and it is currently under way in the United Kingdom**. India finds no mention in Ms. Temelkuran’s book, which is mainly addressing Anglo Americans and Europeans. But the resemblance to our recent history is uncanny. We can argue about the exact sequence, and about the relative importance or distinctiveness of this or that step, but the overall trend is striking in its similarity. Oddly enough, this book is useful precisely because it is saying nothing new, nothing that we do not already know. It is merely holding out a mirror, and there is something helpful about seeing our own experiences reflected back to us as part of a larger phenomenon. This relativizing of what we are accustomed to thinking of as uniquely Indian draws attention to three features of our recent history that we may otherwise neglect. The first is that this journey towards an authoritarian communalism is flagged off by neoliberalism and the values it promotes. This may sound disappointingly formulaic, part of the same tired left-wing rant that most people have stopped hearing long ago. But think about it. Today, large sections of our population are convinced that some minorities ought to be legally deprived of citizenship. Could we have arrived at this point if neoliberalism had not discredited social welfare as an idea? Whatever its faults, welfarism did assume that citizens are connected to each other not only by communitarian but also by civic-national ties. Neoliberalism cut the ties that connected individuals to each other and to the state, thereby undermining our secular-social bonds. Or, to take an opposite example, think about why neoliberalism seems self-evidently opposed to things like reservation. The second feature on which a lot has been said already is the unique role of the media in India. As the world has been repeatedly told, **India has more than 400 news channels that broadcast news 24X7, far more than any other country on earth**. But what is remarkable here is not so much the giant medium, but the invisible, yet incredibly effective, work that has gone into creating an audience that is primed for the message before it even arrives. The stunning swiftness and reach of the new social media are often credited with — or blamed for — the spread of bigotry. This is unfair, for most of that credit belongs to those who tutored the addressees to receive the message without the slightest trace of scepticism. This is no mean achievement in a country where, until yesterday, people prided themselves on their scepticism and wore their cynicism on their sleeves. The same suspicious lot are now eager consumers of the most crudely concocted fake news and alternative facts.



A Fundamental Disconnect

The final feature concerns the composition and positioning of the opinion-making classes, or of intellectuals in the broad sense. There are two related but distinct aspects to this. The first is the degree to which a left-of-centre perspective has monopolised the more formal and institutional parts of the intellectual world. This has meant that, taken as a whole, our intellectual class was never really outside the sphere of state power, but very much an insider. This is in spite of the sharp disagreements and antipathies that may have separated specific persons or groups from particular political parties or leaders. In fact, even during the Emergency, when a large number of politically active persons including some intellectuals was actually imprisoned, there was never a fundamental disconnect between the corridors of power and the opinion makers. Today, we have a clear split — a major section of the media and many bureaucrats, artists, performers and other such public persons are completely identified with the power centre to the extent that they have no autonomous identity left. On the other side of the divide is that segment of the intellectual class that is completely cut off from the power centre and has been made its target. This latter segment is struggling to come to terms with its unprecedented, total and aggressive exclusion from the power centre. The other aspect is the **relative scarcity of right-wing intellectuals. This ought to be a matter of concern for liberals and leftists because it denies those in power the benefits of moderation and refinement in the pursuit of their agendas.** It also ensures that the politics of resentment plays out in extreme ways that damage institutions and cause irreparable harm to the intellectual ecosystem. But the immediate message conveyed by How to Lose a Country is that it is imperative to act at once, before the saat pheras are over, and we are bound over to an authoritarian regime.

Litmus Test for A Judicial Clean-Up Order (Navin Chawla Was India's 16th Chief Election Commissioner)

- Supreme Court judgment, on February 13, 2020, by Justices R.F. Nariman and S. Ravindra Bhat, marks an important and possibly far-reaching step towards reining in the political establishment as far as fielding candidates with criminal antecedents is concerned. This judgment goes well beyond the Court's earlier orders of 2002 and 2003 that made it obligatory for all candidates to provide self-sworn affidavits of criminal cases pending against them in any court of law. By virtue of this order, the Court has also shifted part of the onus on political parties, ruling that they must do much more to publicise the criminal antecedents of candidates that they have selected to contest both parliamentary and State Assembly elections. It would no longer be sufficient to cite "winnability" as the criterion. Citing figures of the alarming increase in the number of such persons selected as candidates across the political spectrum, the order asks parties contesting elections to henceforth explain why persons without criminal blemish could not have been chosen instead. While the judgments of 2002 and 2003 were important, and emanated after a prolonged struggle by the Association for Democratic Reforms, they did not have the desired impact on either the political establishment or indeed on voter choices: **the present Lok Sabha has an all-time high of 43% of its members having one or more criminal cases against them.** As Election Commissioner and subsequently Chief Election Commissioner, and in the years thereafter, I have frequently expressed myself against "muscle" and "money" power, which have become the bane of our political system. Indeed "money" power has moved us in the direction of a plutocracy. Both these two ills need urgent course correction, preferably from within the



Executive itself. It surely cannot augur well for us that criminality within Parliament grew from 24% in 2004 to 30% in 2009, to 34% in 2014 and 43% in 2019. Almost half these cases were/are for alleged heinous offences such as murder, attempt to murder, rape and kidnapping.

Extent of Offence

In turn, political parties and candidates have often voiced their concern that cases tend to be foisted on them by political opponents. When the Election Commission of India (ECI) recommended to the government that legislation was warranted to exclude those candidates against whom charges had been framed by a court of law for heinous offences punishable by imprisonment of five years and more, the Parliamentary Committee that had been set up to examine the proposal unanimously ruled against the ECI recommendation; perhaps the most vociferous voice was that of the late legal luminary, Ram Jethmalani, who was a member of the committee. He pointed out that he had dealt with many such cases arising out of political vendetta. Even when we met after I had retired from the ECI, I was unable to convince him of my point of view. Of course, not all first information reports lodged against political players are criminal in intent. The violation of Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure as a result of civil protest is one such example. The case of a Medha Patkar or other social activists can hardly be considered criminal. Which is why the ECI, for over two long decades, has addressed various Prime Ministers to pass legislation on the ground that charges framed by a court of law for only heinous offences, and cases registered (not on the anvil of elections, but up to one year prior) would amount to a “reasonable restriction” and that such a person be barred from contest. But so far to no avail.

Voter Behaviour

Although the recent judgment has decreed that political parties will give much wider publicity to the criminal antecedents of their candidates, it is possible that this alone may not suffice. Voter behaviour is most often conditioned by their own immediate needs. The distribution of “freebies”, for instance, was often a one-way street, of candidates “offering” money and goodies. Voter behaviour has since begun to change. Voters now often tend to demand money and freebies. With our criminal justice system clogged with cases and lawyers’ fees often far beyond what many can afford, the local “don” standing for elections, who promises delivery of rough and ready justice, is often seen as the messiah on hand. All too often these cases involve bread and butter issues, from land and irrigation dispute resolution, to matters involving family honour. In such cases this “Robin Hood” contestant is actually a preferred choice, which helps to explain that where muscle and money get combined in the rural landscape, they often win by large margins. This was not always the case. In the 1970s and 1980s, the “don” was content to support the local political bigwig with his muscle, crowd-pulling capacity and money, hoping that once elections were over, the elected leader would help the “don” in turn, not least to help wipe out his string of cases. By the 1990s the muscle man decided that this was not good enough. He decided to instead help himself to the fruits of political power by entering the electoral fray. Not all such players were men: witness the life and death of Phoolan Devi who came into political power on the power of a gun, and faded out too in the same manner.



Wait and Watch

So far whatever significant electoral reforms have taken place have emanated from the Supreme Court. For critics of this present order, I would remind them of None of the Above (NOTA) and the July 10, 2013 Order in the Lily Thomas vs Union of India case, wherein a parliamentarian or legislator convicted of an offence that leads to a sentence of two years and more will be debarred from contesting an election for six years after his or her prison term ends. It is therefore prudent to await the next important Assembly elections on the anvil — in Bihar and West Bengal. No doubt the political parties will once again bat for the “winnability” factor in their selections. It remains to be seen how the recent judgment will affect the choices of the political establishment and whether it will have the desired effect in eliminating or significantly purging criminality from future legislatures.

In Political Micro-Targeting, The Vulnerable Indian Voter

→ Two years ago, there was a massive outcry against the hiring, by Indian political parties, of **Cambridge Analytica**, a data mining and analytics firm. The episode highlighted the need for regulating social media platforms by way of a comprehensive data protection law which takes issues such as political micro-targeting seriously. With the recently introduced draft of the data protection law, the **Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019**, the debate has again resurfaced. In the Internet age, any data protection law must be alive to the potential impact of social media companies in shaping public opinion. The current draft empowers the Central government to notify social media intermediaries as significant **data fiduciaries** if their user base crosses a certain threshold and whose actions are likely to have an impact on electoral democracy. This provision merits serious discussion to ensure that digital tools are used for enhancing democracy through citizen engagement, and not for harvesting personal data for voter targeting.

World of Political Advertising

In today's world, online presence, which ensures greater outreach, is a key source of competitive advantage. This realisation gave rise to strategic efforts by political parties to tap into the fragmented political discourse by catering to the individual. Earlier, the idea was to capture mass issues. But in the present day and age, the focus of the campaign is the individual. Political parties are increasingly employing data-driven approaches to target individual voters using tailor-made messages. Such profiling has raised huge concerns of data privacy for individuals and has become a burning issue for political debate. Therefore, the concerns related to regulation of the digital world are being debated in all jurisdictions which have experienced the impact of this technological advancement. **Although, each jurisdiction may have distinct factors influencing the final shape of the Internet governance model, the reasons for the initial debate are common to all, i.e. to arrest any negative externalities emerging out of the Internet.** Therefore, any forward-thinking regulatory framework needs to have both supervisory mechanisms in place as well as effective law enforcement tools in its quiver. This situation is not particularly characteristic of Indian politics. The United States and European countries are equally affected by the impact of this unregulated practice of **micro-targeting**. This practice has raised some serious concerns with regard to the kind of data that is being collected, the manner in which voters are being profiled, how transparent the process of profiling and targeting is, what the nature of functioning of organisations engaged in this business is, and how neutral globally present



intermediaries such as Google and Facebook are. Recently, regulators in the U.S. and Brazil have held Cambridge Analytica guilty of employing illegal practices while harvesting personal data of millions of Facebook users. Over the years, political advisory and advertising firms have devised sophisticated tools to gather voter data and made proper campaign products out of it. The politicians of today's age leave no stone unturned while canvassing for votes. **The reason why this issue becomes important is that the passive users are just not aware of what they are being subjected to.**

Unregulated Zone

The informational autonomy of the voter is under serious threat because the entire business of collecting personal data continues to remain unregulated and is also proprietary in nature. It is extremely difficult to trace the methods used by such firms to scrutinise the personal life and intimate details of the individual. This threat becomes imminent in light of the rising number of political firms which are making most use of the right to freedom of speech and expression. The status of this right is near absolute with regard to political speech in most countries such as the U.S. It is but obvious that this can be misused by political entities. Profiling the potential voter has become a thriving industry. Therefore, there are extremely well-crafted techniques when it comes to electoral campaigning. There is serious harm to the country's democratic nature resulting on account of loss of informational autonomy. The liberating and anti-establishment potential of the Internet are considered as a promise for the health of a liberal democracy. At the same time, it can have serious ramifications if this potential is used by demagogues to spread fake news and propaganda. Although the digital revolution is being celebrated everywhere, the regulatory efforts regarding different spheres of its influence have only been reactionary. While innovators have continued to develop more advanced technologies, the regulators have never been able to catch up with it. There are infinite contours of this information age; hence, the scope of a data protection framework also needs to be sensitive towards the magnitude of a variety of data usage. The electoral process in India is becoming increasingly advanced in terms of use of data. **It is highly likely that within a few years, Indian political parties may start using the same tactics as used by their U.S. counterparts in targeting individual voters.** It remains to be seen as to how the privacy law responds to the implications of political micro-targeting.

[By Agreeing To Partition, Congress Kept India United \(Mohammed Ayooob - University Distinguished Professor Emeritus Of International Relations, Michigan State University\)](#)

- It has become a fashion these days to blame the Congress for Partition. Certain sections of the right, who in fact became the prime beneficiaries of Partition, are the leading proponents of this thesis. Had Partition not taken place, the demographic exigencies of undivided India, with a Muslim population of 25%-30%; and five, and possibly six, Muslim majority provinces, among them Bengal and Punjab would have rendered the parties espousing Hindutva permanently irrelevant. But this is a topic for another time. If the Congress leadership, especially Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, had not accepted the division of the country, it could well have led to the dismemberment of India as we know it today. The reasons are as follows. What was on offer as an alternative to Partition was the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946. This plan not only envisaged a loose federal structure with a very weak



centre, it could be called a 'crypto-Pakistan plus'. It not only grouped provinces on the basis of religious majorities, it left the issue of the princely states' future as a matter of discussion between the princes and the weak centre that it envisioned. The central authority would have then had a very weak hand to play against the wily princely rulers, both Hindu and Muslim, who would have joined hands with each other and with the Muslim League in defence of their common interest to further weaken the centre.

Cabinet Mission Plan

Moreover, documentary evidence, especially the resolution of the Muslim League Council in June 1946 that accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan, proves that the Muslim League's acceptance was premised on the belief that the Plan was a stepping stone towards the ultimate formation of Pakistan, which to quote the resolution was its "unalterable objective". The League inferred this from the Cabinet Mission Plan's provision that said that "any Province by majority vote of its Legislative Assembly could call for a reconsideration of the terms of the Constitution after an initial period of ten years and at ten-yearly intervals thereafter." Hence the Plan did not rule out the dissolution of the Union if provinces made a demand. Furthermore, the working of the interim government formed in September 1946 made it clear that the Muslim League was bent on thwarting its smooth functioning. It was the feeling that the **interim government** was like a chariot being pulled in two different directions that convinced Patel that Partition was the only way to save India from becoming a totally dysfunctional state. In his own famous words, "**In order to keep India united it must be divided.**" It was Patel who convinced Nehru that Partition was better than an eternally fragmented India. Nehru, whose opposition to Partition was based on his unstinted commitment to secularism, which refused to encounter the idea of India being divided on communal lines, finally realised that his vision of a modern and strong Indian state could not be achieved with the Muslim League, in power in Bengal and Punjab, thwarting it at every step. **With Patel and Nehru convinced of the necessity for Partition, the rest of the Congress Working Committee, except Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who voted against it, and Maulana Azad, who abstained, accepted the plan.** Historical evidence based on impartial scholarship demonstrates that had the Congress Party not accepted the Partition plan, India today would have been a weak state and a divided polity barely able to keep itself together and constantly teetering on the brink of collapse. The Congress did a favour to the country by accepting its division in order to save it from collapse or dismemberment. This is a historically verifiable fact that cannot be refuted by partisan propaganda.

[The Significance of The Term 'Secular' \(Rajeev Bharagava - Professor, Centre for The Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi\)](#)

- ➔ What value is added by the term 'secular' to liberal democracies, i.e. states that safeguard liberties of individuals and political freedoms of citizens? For some scholars, virtually nothing. Why? Because, while secularism is against discrimination only on the basis of religion, a 'liberal democracy' is against all forms of discrimination. The term 'liberal democracy' subsumes 'secularism'. Why bother with 'secularism' then? Why not commit ourselves to the priorities of a liberal democracy instead? This is a fashionable view in Europe. Even some Indian scholars argue for the sufficiency of Articles 14-16 and 19 of the Constitution.



Discrimination and Recognition

This view is inadequate, if not wrong. The word 'secular' is important. Those who claim the sufficiency of 'liberal democracy' must think again. True, their claim has had some validity in Europe, but it is losing relevance there too. But in places like India, it is a virtual non-starter. Why? Let us first get a handle on Europe's specificity. Secular states did not emerge in Western Europe in the immediate aftermath of the religious wars. These wars were stopped by the establishment not of a secular but a confessional state in which people were forced to embrace the religion of the king. Those who did not comply faced death or expulsion. Every European society from then on became religiously homogenous — England became Anglican; Scandinavia, Lutheran; France, Catholic. Over time some dissenting groups were tolerated, but not without paying a price for their dissent. For example, although they were permitted to have their own church, it had to be hidden away in bylanes. Even the rich were forced to build chapels within the premises of their homes. Dissenters lived under the threat of persecution and daily harassment. The tolerant states of early modern Europe were a far cry from modern European liberal democratic states. **Once other religions were eliminated or tamed, a struggle began against a politically meddling and socially oppressive church. The demand to separate church and state (which later came to be called political secularism) was supported by those who favoured free markets, private property and personal liberties.** The moment this separation was sufficiently achieved, it began to be taken for granted, and slowly receded into the background. In this sense, 'secularism' lost its political and social salience in these religiously homogenous societies. The fight for a liberal state seemed sufficient. Centuries later, when the general ethos in Western Europe witnessed the further decline of Christianity, the term 'secular' found itself linked to a humanist world view for which **religion, whatever its private benefits, was potentially a public problem.** While becoming increasingly less salient, **it was etched in the bitter collective memory of these societies as the source of discord from which they had mercifully escaped.** A religion, already on the defensive, faced greater devaluation and marginalisation. No one wanted religion-grounded recognition. With this, the idea of separation of state and religion lost its normative value further. These liberal states, where religion was no longer significant, granted formal equality to all citizens and called themselves liberal democratic. But what if Europeans had to institute a liberty-loving, equality-caring state as soon as religious wars erupted? What if there was not much of a time lag between religious wars and the growth of a serious commitment to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity? Had this been so, demands for ending the religious persecution of dissenters and preventing religious homogenisation would have been immediate. How else could a state live up to the ideals of liberty and equality? Moreover, the dynamics of a multi-religious society is such that religion would not have lost salience. Then, instead of getting rid of religious dissenters and minorities, a general consensus might have been sought to prevent their domination by the majority religious community. Had multiple religious identities been part of the social climate, a commitment to equality would have compelled European states to give impartial public recognition to all religions. Such states would be secular precisely in the sense that Indians conceived it — something with which to fight not just religious fanaticism and intra-religious oppression but also the domination of one religion by another. They would have been forced to call themselves not just liberal (subsuming within it secular in the European sense) but also 'secular' in the sense defended by Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar where it designates impartial public recognition to all religions. My point then is that the **greater the salience of religion and depth of diversity in society, the larger the prospect of intra- and inter-religious**



domination, and the more pressing the need for a state — given its commitment to liberty, equality and impartial recognition — to call itself 'secular'. Also, if religion-related bigotry and denial of recognition is present persistently, then it is hard to forget or ignore it. People potentially affected by them need to be repeatedly told that the state is there for them. The function of the term 'secular' is to do precisely that, to reassure anyone threatened by religious or religion-based exclusion, discrimination or misrecognition that the state is committed to preventing all this. To drop the word 'secular' then undermines confidence in the impartial character of the state.

Why Use A Specific Term?

The point can be made differently. Why lump together all forms of discrimination and oppression under the same general term? If the term 'secular' focuses on one specific kind of domination, why not to use it? Isn't de-cluttering our world and helping us focus on particular features an important function of all concepts? Why not call a flower 'red' when you have a distinguishing word for it? What point would be served by simply calling it coloured? To be sure, in some contexts, this might be sufficient. For example, if our purpose is to differentiate it from all white flowers the use of the term 'coloured' is adequate but not if one coloured flower is to be distinguished from another. Likewise, 'secular' helps focus on institutionalised religious domination, to demarcate it from other kinds of domination based on class, gender, ethnicity, etc. 'Secularism' implores us to resist it. In religiously homogenous societies, particularly where the importance of religion has weakened, liberal democratic states tend to be relatively indifferent to the term 'secular'. However, in religiously strong and diverse societies such as India, 'secular' is indispensable. It cannot disappear from public and constitutional discourse. Is it surprising then that after a few years of exile, it has recently resurfaced in India? Here we cannot follow European habits but must embrace both liberal democracy and a form of secularism that fights religion-based misrecognition. Indeed, even Europe is changing. After the migration of workers from former colonies, Europe's new religious diversity has brought religion-based recognition to the fore. Therefore, in Europe too demands for an impartial secular state (in the Indian sense) will become louder.

ART of Life

→ Sometimes, the leash follows the dog, but given the importance of control, the sequence can seem insignificant. It only matters that there remains a good hold over the circumstances. No matter then, that the Assisted Reproductive Techniques (ART) Bill, which was cleared by the Union Cabinet this week, came after the Surrogacy Bill that it should have preceded. Together, the ART Bill; the Surrogacy Bill; the amendment to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act; and the older Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act present a bouquet of legislation that will have a positive impact on the reproductive rights and choices of women in India. The ART Bill to regulate clinics offering fertility treatments has been long in the works, and was first presented publicly way back in 2008. ART measures help couples unable to conceive naturally to bear children with the aid of state-of-the-art technology to achieve pregnancy, leading to safe delivery. India has a rich history of employing ART, though the initial years went officially undocumented at that time. In the late 1970s, only months after the birth of *Louise Brown*, the first 'test tube baby', Kolkata-based doctor Subhas Mukherjee announced the birth of the world's second test tube baby.



Subsequently, the industry saw phenomenal growth, as infertility rates went up. A market projection (by Fortune Business Insights) said the size of the ART market is expected to reach \$45 billion by 2026. **Among Asian countries, India's ART market is pegged at third position.** A lack of regulation and the consequent laxity in operations drove a lot of traffic from other nations to India. This, in turn, along with the relatively low costs, led to the mushrooming of ART clinics across the country. Undoubtedly, this also led to a plethora of legal, social and ethical issues. It is at this juncture that the ART Bill has seen a fitting revival, egged on by legislators who facilitated the passage of the Surrogacy Bill in the Rajya Sabha. It seeks to regulate and monitor ART procedures, and mandates the establishment of a **National Board and State Boards to lay down rules for implementation**, and also honours a long-pending demand — creation of a **national registry, and registration authority**. While the rules will handle the bells and whistles, the Bill already sets a comprehensive framework to operate on. Most significantly, the Bill recommends punishment, **even jail time, for violations** of the provisions. Since it does impinge on surrogacy too, the government must now work on ensuring synchrony in both Bills. Having come this far to ensure the reproductive rights of women, the state now has the thriving ART industry on a leash, and the Bill is its best chance to eliminate exploitation in the field.

M.P. Govt. Rescinds Sterilisation Target Order for Health Officials

- The **Madhya Pradesh government** rescinded an order warning male multi-purpose health workers (MPHWs) of **no pay and compulsory retirement if they failed to mobilise at least one man for sterilisation in 2019-2020**. The government also removed the National Health Mission's (NHM) State Director Chhavi Bhardwaj for issuing the controversial order. According to the National Family Health Survey - 4 (2015-2016), just 0.5% of men opted for the procedure in the State. The directive had further stated that the workers must ensure that at least 5 to 10 males sought sterilisation at camps in the districts. While 1.35 lakh women underwent sterilisation in eight months in the State until December, just 1,254 men opted for the surgery, despite being offered a higher standard incentive, according to the NHM.

Karbis Against ST Status for Hill Bodos

- An Assam-based insurgent group of Karbis, which signed a ceasefire agreement with the Centre, has demanded that the Bodos in the hill areas not be given the Scheduled Tribe status as it will affect the "identity of the Karbis". The Home Ministry, the Assam government and Bodo groups signed the pact on January 27 to redraw and rename the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), spread over Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri districts. **Under the agreement, the Bodos in the hills will be given the Scheduled Hill Tribe status and villages dominated by the Bodos outside the BTAD will be included and those with non-Bodos excluded after the areas are redrawn.** The Bodos, an ethnic group in Assam, had been demanding a separate State since 1972, and are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (Plain). After the conclusion of the latest Bodo pact, the Karbi Longri and North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF), a militant group that signed a ceasefire pact with the Centre in 2009, has said a "political settlement" should be reached soon. "The identity of Karbis will come under threat if Bodos who live in the hill areas [along with Karbis] are also given a Scheduled Hill Tribe status," KLNLFF general secretary Thong Terong Kabi said. The group's primary demand was a separate State.



Bhuj Menstruation Check

- **Krushnaswarup Dasji**, a religious leader associated with the **Swaminarayan Temple**, which runs the **Bhuj** college where over 60 girls were forced to prove they were not menstruating, said **menstruating women who cook for their husbands will be reborn as dogs, and men consuming such food will be reborn as bullocks**. Notably, Swami Krushnaswarup Dasji, who made these remarks, is associated with Swaminarayan Temple which runs a college in Bhuj whose principal and female staff had allegedly forced more than 60 girls to remove their undergarments to check if they were menstruating for **“breaking a hostel rule that girls having their periods are not supposed to take meal with other inmates”**. The swami belongs to “Nar-Narayan Devgadi” of Swami Narayan Sect. Krushnaswarup Dasji can also be heard asking men to learn cooking. “Women do not realise that period of menstruation is like doing ‘tapasya’ (penance). Men should learn cooking...It will help you,” he said. The time and place of the video clip cannot be known. Such videos of sermons are available on the temple’s dedicated YouTube channel. As per the website of the Swaminarayan Temple, Krushnaswarup Dasji was initiated in the order in the year 1995.
- **A college in Bhuj town of Gujarat’s Kutch district has suspended its principal, hostel rector and peon after police registered a FIR against them for allegedly forcing over 60 girls to remove their undergarments to check if they were menstruating**. Principal Rita Raninga, girls’ hostel rector Ramilaben and college peon Naina were suspended after the FIR was registered against them, Shree Sahajanand Girls Institute (SSGI) trustee Pravin Pindoria said. The accused have been booked under Sections 384 (extortion), 355 (assault with intent to dishonour a person) and 506 (criminal intimidation) of the Indian Penal Code. No one has been arrested so far. A seven-member team of the National Commission for Women met the girl inmates of the hostel who were allegedly forced by the authorities to remove their undergarments to check if they were menstruating. Over 60 students were taken to the washroom by a woman staffer and made to remove their undergarments to check if they were menstruating. After a probe, Darshana Dholakia, in charge vice chancellor of the university to which the college is affiliated, had earlier said the girls were checked because the hostel has a rule that girls having their periods are not supposed to eat meals with other inmates. The hostel authorities decided to check them after they came to know that certain girls had broken the rule. The police earlier said a Special Investigation Team with women officials has been formed to investigate the case.

It’s Time to Empower Mayors

- The spectacular victory of the Aam Aadmi Party in the Delhi Assembly election is seen as a reiteration of voters’ confidence in the leadership of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, even though several factors together contributed to the poll outcome. This development may again give rise to the demand for a ‘strong mayor’ helming urban local bodies (ULBs), as the role of the Delhi Chief Minister is treated on a par with the role of a mayor of a municipal corporation. With electoral politics in India becoming increasingly personality-centric, the idea of an empowered mayor may find many takers.

Indirect Elections

In the last six months, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu decided to have indirect elections of ULB chiefs. In Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, the Congress won in a majority of ULBs after effecting the change. In fact, according to one estimate, the system of

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



direct election of mayors is in vogue only in two States — Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. The larger issue at hand is the quality of urban governance. It is unrealistic to expect a high quality of governance as long as political parties have a complete grip over the way civic bodies function. It is time policymakers and political leaders began to seriously contemplate party-less elections to ULBs. This idea is not new. It has been debated at the All India Mayors conference. But due to the unwillingness of parties to examine the concept, the idea has not taken off. Already, in a majority of the States, the election for the posts of presidents and councillors of gram panchayats is done on non-party lines. At least in respect of rural local bodies (RLBs), there is some justification for the presence of political parties as, otherwise, caste alone might determine votes. But in ULBs, the caste factor remains subdued, especially during elections. Besides, there is no sound rationale for holding polls for ULBs on party lines as these bodies neither legislate nor frame policies. Also, **there is no scope for any political ideology to play a role in the affairs of ULBs. The main task of the bodies is to handle problems concerning sanitation, water supply and solid waste management.** Even in the area of water supply and sewerage, the role of the municipal corporations of Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad has got reduced as there are entities exclusively for this purpose. Delhi too has a Jal Board, headed by the Chief Minister. Protagonists of the party system may point out that there has been a tradition of political leaders heading ULBs. They may also argue that the participation of political personalities in elections to ULBs cannot be prevented. But the reality is that the calibre of the political leadership is in short supply and the issues concerning ULBs have undergone a sea change over time. **According to the 2011 Census, there are about 8,000 towns in India. There are at least 50 cities or urban agglomerations with more than a million people, says the 15th Finance Commission.** These cities face challenges of pollution, ground water depletion and sanitation. There are also inter-State disparities in the level of urbanisation and in the urban poverty ratio. ULBs don't have finances, a problem ignored by the elected representatives.

Parties Have Nothing to Fear

There is also political justification for why elections to the ULBs should take place on non-party lines. Under the present scheme, **Chief Ministers do not want strong ULB chiefs to emerge, especially if the person happens to be from his or her party. This explains why parties prefer indirect elections. On the contrary, if the polls are held on non-party lines with direct elections for chiefs of ULBs, a new crop of leaders will emerge outside the political class.** Well-educated and well-qualified youngsters will be encouraged to take part in the election process. More importantly, municipal elections are bound to become cheaper as there will be no need for competitive spending by nominees of rival parties. Even if some successful mayors emerge in the process and want to take on established parties in the Assembly or Lok Sabha polls, this will be a herculean task for them, so parties have nothing to fear. In fact, parties stand to gain, as MLAs may not be vilified for all the wrongdoings of local bodies. Questions will be raised about the credentials of candidates for the post of mayor. State Election Commissions can prescribe qualifications for mayors, over and above the existing ones, to address them. The issue of cohesion between mayors and councils will also be raised. This remains a major problem but committed individuals, if elected, can easily thrash out this issue. ULBs can have meaningful empowerment only if the concept of non-party elections is adopted. This is a prerequisite for the implementation of the 'strong mayor' model.



30 Squats for A Free Platform Ticket at This Railway Station

→ **Thirty squats** in front of a machine can now get passengers at the Anand Vihar railway station here a free platform ticket. They can also avoid long queues. In a first-of-its-kind scheme aimed at promoting the **'Fit India' campaign**, the Railways has set up a **'Fit India Squat Kiosk'** near the entry point of the station. The machine will generate a free platform ticket after a passenger performs 30 squats. The Railways has also opened a **'Dawa Dost'** store at the station, which will offer generic medicines for passengers at up to 80% discount, according to an official release. **"Dawa Dost' aims to make it easier for Indians to take care of their health and help them make substantial savings on their health bills by providing high-quality affordable medicines.** The firm has 10 stores in Rajasthan and Delhi, and plans to expand rapidly," the release said. Additionally, a pulse health machine which can measure health and wellness parameters, such as body composition and blood pressure, has also been placed at the station. It will, in minutes, generate a detailed report on indications of a potential lifestyle disease, with personalised recommendations for improving one's health and wellness. "The most advanced body massage chairs, which have 3D massage rollers with longer massage track line giving the maximum massage coverage, are also available in the concourse area of the station," the statement said. The Railways said there would be an **'Eat Right Station'** with certification mandated by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). To be implemented with Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), the project aims to help passengers make healthy food choices. The station is the first 'Eat Right Station' in Northern Railway.

Turning Ships into Museums (Sthanu R. Nair - Associate Professor of Economics, Indian Institute of Management-Kozhikode)

→ In the Union Budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a set of initiatives to enhance India's potential as a tourism and cultural destination. Among the proposals, the decision to set up a **maritime museum at Lothal in Gujarat** was especially noteworthy. However, when it comes to augmenting the country's maritime tourism potential by preserving retired naval vessels as museums, India's record has been weak. Here, two decisions taken last year have implications for the idea of a maritime museum. First, the Tamil Nadu government in July decided to drop the project to preserve the decommissioned submarine INS Vagli as a museum. Second, it was decided that the INS Viraat would be scrapped. Not long ago, in 2014, India's first aircraft carrier, the INS Vikrant, had met with a similar fate.

Creating Employment

It makes tremendous economic sense to preserve decommissioned naval vessels, rather than scrapping them. In general, museums make an important contribution to the economy in many ways, for instance, by promoting tourism, creating jobs, contributing to government revenues and aiding the development of local communities. A 2018 study titled 'Museums as Economic Engines' revealed that in the U.S., museums contribute \$50 billion every year to the Gross Domestic Product, provide jobs to 7,26,200 people and generate \$12 billion per year in tax revenue. Every \$100 of output generated in the museum sector generates an additional \$220 of output in other areas of the U.S. economy. Another study titled 'The Economic Impact of Museums in England' estimated that the direct economic impact of the museum sector in England was £2.64 billion in income, £1.45 billion in output and 38,165 in jobs. A major challenge facing India is the need to generate adequate employment

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opportunities for the abundant youth population. Estimates show that in terms of **employment elasticity**, defined as the **percentage change in employment for a one percentage point change in economic growth, services is an employment-intensive sector**. Therefore, the focus should be on promoting services industries where employment potential is high. Tourism and allied industries fit into this requirement as they have proved to be top job-generating sectors across the world. Excellent museums often turn out to be a fine tourist attraction that draws in visitors, both local and overseas. They also act as places of historical value, preserving a country's heritage for future generations and offering knowledge to the public about the nation's history and culture. Military and maritime museums bring some added benefits — they can be used to honour military heroes, make the general public aware of the hardships faced by defence personnel and, also, inspire the younger generation to join the armed forces.

India has been preserving only one naval vessel, the INS Kursura, as a submarine museum in Visakhapatnam. A significant, and genuine, concern about naval vessel museums is the cost involved in their maintenance. They require both public and private funding and need to generate sufficient revenue. Private sector involvement in building cultural institutions has worked very well in advanced nations. There is no reason why, in today's India, this should not be possible. Either through a nudge or a directive, the government can ensure that corporates allot a portion of their Corporate Social Responsibility spending towards conservation of heritage and culture. That said, a mere display of retired naval vessels will not attract the desired number of visitors. For this, warship museums need to offer a range of services and entertainment options. They need to include virtual flight zones with simulators; and allow events and shows to be hosted on them. Many Indian cities have limited entertainment options. Naval-vessel museums would provide an alternative mode of entertainment. Support from the private sector is necessary to realise the business potential of such museums and impart professionalism in their management. In this context, it is important to recall how the active participation of the private sector revolutionised football and kabaddi. It is high time we made proper use of the private sector to preserve our retired naval vessels.

May The Force Be Strengthened (K.V. Madhusudhana Retired As IG Of Training And North-eastern Sector Of The CRPF In 2012)

- In the wake of Independence, a contentious administrative issue was over the retention of **CRP (Crown Representative Police)**. As the Constitution designated 'law and order' as a State subject, the relevance of having a Central police force was questioned by everyone, except Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who argued vehemently and boldly in favour of it. From having just two battalions as the CRP, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has now expanded to being a three-and-a-half lakh-strong force consisting of specialist wings like the Rapid Action Force, the COBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), and the Special Duty Group. **It is the largest paramilitary force in the world** and no other security force of the country has seen expansion at such a rapid rate. Providing integrated security to a diverse country of continental size is not an easy task. Resolving certain conflicts requires immediate solutions for which regular armed forces cannot be deployed. Hence, we require paramilitary forces, and the CRPF is the most sought-after one because of its flexibility and versatility. The force has earned its place as the 'peacekeeper of the nation'. April 9 is observed as 'Valour Day' by the CRPF because it was



on this day in 1965 that an ordinary battalion of the CRPF repulsed an attack by a Pakistani brigade. Similarly, October 21 is observed as 'Commemoration Day' by all police forces, as a mark of respect to the CRPF soldiers who, in their fight against the Chinese Army in 1959, at Hot Springs, Leh, made the supreme sacrifice. However, this glowing track record pales into insignificance when we consider the mass casualties the Force has had to suffer. In April 2010, at least 75 of its soldiers were killed by Maoists, numbering about 300, in Dantewada early morning when they were returning after a night-long patrol. And last year, the Pulwama attack happened.

Women in Army

→ The Supreme Court has delivered a sharp rebuke to the government by asking it to adhere to its own stated policy, articulated on February 25, 2019, on granting permanent commission to women in the Short Service Commission (SSC). **Though women are absorbed into the SSC, they are now denied permanent commission in most branches of the Indian Army.** More importantly, in furthering the principle of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Constitution, the Court has at the same time come down heavily on the stereotypes of women and their physiological features that were consistently put across in the government's submissions to deny equal opportunity to women who fulfil the same criteria their male counterparts do. As long as society holds strong beliefs about gender roles there will not be change of mindsets, the top court observed. Indeed, the Court has torn into a number of contradictions inherent in the government's arguments that gravely weaken its case and expose inherent prejudices. **For instance, it was submitted that deployment of women officers was not advisable in conflict zones where there was "minimal facility for habitat and hygiene". Yet, the government admitted to the Court that 30% of the total number of women officers are in fact deputed to conflict areas.** In directing the government to grant permanent commission to those women who opt for it, in 10 branches of the SSC, and by ordering the government to level the playing field, the Court has forced acknowledgement of the sterling role women have played and continue to play, shoulder to shoulder, with their male counterparts, for the security of the nation. It has also made recommendations to correct the anomalies including in the matter of pensions due to women. It is a telling state of affairs that though Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on August 15, 2018 that permanent commission would be granted to serving women officers of the armed forces, it needed the Supreme Court to prod the government into doing it. The efforts of the litigants, who have waged an uphill battle since 2003, fighting their way up from the Delhi High Court, which ruled in their favour 10 years ago — and the government wilfully ignoring it — all the way up to the Supreme Court, deserve applause. That this discrimination should happen even while the **Indian Army experiences a shortfall of officers by about 10,000 in the ranks is all the more galling. It is not as if there is surfeit of women officers: a mere 1,653 out of 40,825. Given the inherent flaws in the structure, implementation and change are not likely to happen soon, even given the Court's deadline of three months.**

Why the Govt Wants to Locate Dara Shikoh Tomb, And Why It's Not Easy

→ The Ministry of Culture recently set up a seven-member panel of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to locate the grave of the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh (1615-59). He is believed to be buried somewhere in the Humayun's Tomb complex in Delhi, **one of around 140 graves of the Mughal clan.** Headed by T J Alone, Director-Monument at ASI, the panel has senior



archaeologists R S Bisht, Sayeed Jamal Hassan, K N Dikshit, B R Mani, K K Muhammed, Satish Chandra, and B M Pandey as members. It has been given three months.

Dara Shikoh's Legacy

The eldest son of Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh was killed after losing the war of succession against his brother Aurangzeb. Dara Shikoh is described as a "liberal Muslim" who tried to find commonalities between Hindu and Islamic traditions. He translated into Persian the Bhagavad Gita as well as 52 Upanishads. One of the archaeologists on the panel, Muhammed, described Dara Shikoh as "one of the greatest free thinkers of that time". "Dara Shikoh realised the greatness of the Upanishads and translated them, which were earlier known only to a few upper caste Hindus. Translations from that Persian translation have inspired a lot of free thinkers of today, even inspiring the likes of former United States President Barack Obama."

Dara Shikoh & Aurangzeb

Some historians argue that if Dara Shikoh had ascended the Mughal throne instead of Aurangzeb, it could have saved thousands of lives lost in religious clashes. "Dara Shukoh was the total antithesis of Aurangzeb, in that he was deeply syncretic, warm-hearted and generous — but at the same time, he was also an indifferent administrator and ineffectual in the field of battle," Avik Chanda writes in Dara Shukoh, The Man Who Would Be King. Of late, there have been renewed attempts to compare Dara Shikoh's legacy against that of Aurangzeb. At a recent conclave in Delhi, speakers included RSS functionaries called Dara Shikoh "a real Hindustani". A research chair was set up in Dara Shikoh's name at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) last year. Prof Sunil Kumar, professor of medieval history at the University of Delhi, said: "Whenever you use the past for modern political purposes, you will always twist it because the past doesn't serve modernity very well. You end up manipulating it for your present intentions. If he was the monarch and not Aurangzeb, would India have been any different? These assumptions are coming from a misplaced understanding of Mughal history... He is made to be a good Muslim but why the search for his grave?"

The Remains of Dara Shikoh

According to the Shahjahannama, after Aurangzeb defeated Dara Shikoh, he brought the latter to Delhi in chains. His head was cut off and sent to Agra Fort, while his torso was buried in the Humayun's Tomb complex. Muhammed said: "No one knows where exactly Dara Shikoh was buried. All we know is that it's a small grave in the Humayun's Tomb complex. Most people point to a specific small grave there. Italian traveller Niccolao Manucci gave a graphic description of the day in Travels of Manucci, as he was there as a witness to the whole thing. That is the basis of the thesis." Panel member Mani said: "One of the graves in the compound is traditionally said to be that of Dara Shikoh. It's located on a platform on the western side of the Humayun's Tomb complex. We have been hearing about this from people living in the area for generations, as well as from senior ASI officials, but again, there is no proper evidence." Prof Shireen Moosvi of AMU said, "Until 1857, all in the family were buried in the complex... According to historian Jadunath Sarkar, 'All authorities European as well as Persian point that he was indeed buried finally in Humayun's Tomb'."



The Way Forward

The ASI's biggest problem is that most graves in the complex have no names. Panel member Hassan, a former ASI Director, said, "The **Shahjahannama compiled by Muhammad Saleh Kamboh...** has dedicated at least two pages to the last days of Dara Shikoh, on how he was brutally murdered and buried somewhere in the complex." But most on the panel are uncertain about how conclusive evidence can be found. Prof Moosvi fears the search may be never-ending: "No one has mentioned the place of the grave. No graves there are marked or inscribed. No way to identify."

A Warm January 2020

- Globally, the average temperature over land and ocean surfaces made **January 2020 the hottest January on record**, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) whose dataset dates back to 1880. In India, January 2020 was the second warmest since 1919 in terms of average minimum temperatures, according to India Meteorological Department (IMD) data dating back to 1901.

India Trends

Against a January normal of 20.59°C, minimum temperatures for January 2020 averaged approximately 21.92°C, a deviation of 1.33°C. The only warmer January on record was January 1919 at about 22.13°C, an anomaly of 1.54°C. The only other years when January was warmer than normal were 1901 (+1.23°C), 1906 (+1.1°C) and 1938 (+1.05°C).

Bucking the nationwide January trend, the overall winter in North India was harsh, with some areas in Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand experiencing record cold conditions leading to extreme snowfall. In Delhi, cold-day conditions broke records during December, including a 17-day cold spell when the maximum plunged up to 4°C. Punjab and Rajasthan, too, had severe cold conditions in December and January.

Global Trends

The January 2020 globally averaged temperature departure from average over land and ocean surfaces was the highest in the 141-year NOAA record, at 1.14°C above the 20th - century average of 12°C. This surpassed the 2016 record by only 0.02°C. Across all months, only March 2016, February 2016 and December 2015 had a greater temperature departure.

January 2016 and 2020 were the only Januaries with a global temperature departure from average above 1°C. The four warmest Januaries have occurred since 2016; the 10 warmest Januaries have all occurred since 2002.

The January 2020 temperature departure was the highest monthly temperature departure without an El Niño present in the tropical Pacific Ocean.

WWS Proposal Fails to Find Favour

- The **Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS)**, though home to more than half the number of tigers present in Kerala, **may not be notified as a tiger reserve as the proposal lacks public support.** The attempts of the Kerala Forest Department to push forward the proposal for notifying the sanctuary as the third tiger reserve in the State came a cropper at the recently held State Wildlife Advisory Board. Citing the public resistance against the earlier attempts, the board rejected the proposal. The 'Status of Tigers in India' report released last year had estimated

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the tiger population of Wayanad as between 75 and 80 individuals. **Periyar Tiger Reserve**, the first one in Kerala, has an estimated population of 30 to 35 big cats, whereas **Parambikulam**, the second reserve, has a population of 20 to 25 tigers. Piloting the Wayanad proposal, the department officials pointed out that more than half of the tiger population in the State was found in Wayanad. **There were five tiger reserves in the neighbouring States that share boundaries with Wayanad**, they said. **The arguments of the officials that the notification would ensure financial aid from the Centre and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), better conservation and management of the tiger population and help generate more employment opportunities failed to impress the State authorities.** Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who chaired the meeting, flagged the issue of human-wildlife conflicts in the district. Referring to the public protests that were staged in Wayanad earlier against the proposal, Mr. Vijayan expressed concern over the possible impact of the proposal. Any such proposal should be implemented only after holding wide public consultations, he said. Cattle lifting by the ailing tigers and their straying into human habitations had often triggered widespread public protests in the district. The department had to backtrack from its earlier attempts to notify the reserve following stiff public resistance. There were speculations that the notification would bring in stringent restrictions on development activities in the district, though the department tried to counter the campaign.

Birds Hit

- Over a fifth of India's bird diversity, ranging from the Short-toed Snake Eagle to the Sirkeer Malkoha, has suffered strong long-term declines over a 25-year period, while more recent annual trends point to a drastic 80% loss among several common birds, a new scientific report jointly released by 10 organisations said on Monday. **The State of India's Birds 2020 (SoIB)** assessment raises the alarm that several spectacular birds, many of them endemic to the sub-continent, face a growing threat from loss of habitat due to human activity, widespread presence of toxins, including pesticides; hunting and trapping for the pet trade. Diminishing population sizes of many birds because of one factor brings them closer to extinction because of the accelerated effects of others, the report warned. For every bird species that was found to be increasing in numbers over the long term, 11 have suffered losses, some catastrophically. Of 101 species categorised as being of High Conservation Concern — 59 based on range and abundance and the rest included from high-risk birds on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List — endemics such as the Rufous-fronted Prinia, Nilgiri Thrush, Nilgiri Pipit and Indian vulture were confirmed as suffering current decline, and all except 13 had a restricted or highly restricted range, indicating greater vulnerability to man-made threats. **Among widely known species, the common sparrow, long seen as declining in urban spaces, has a stable population overall, although the data from major cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai confirm the view that they have become rare in cities and urban areas.** Among the possible reasons for this is a **decrease in insect populations** as well as **nesting places**, but **there is no conclusive evidence in the scientific literature on radiation from mobile phone towers playing a part.** The SoIB was produced using a **base of 867 species**, and analysed with the help of data uploaded by **birdwatchers to the online platform, eBird.** **Adequate data on how birds fared over a period of over 25 years (long-term trend) are available only for 261 species.** Current annual trends are calculated over a five-year period. Looking at the health of avifauna based on scientific groupings such as raptors (birds of prey), habitat, diet, migratory status and endemism (exclusively found in an area), the analysis concludes that



raptors overall are in decline, with 'open country' species such as the Pallid and Montagu Harriers, White-bellied Sea Eagle and Red-necked Falcon suffering the most. The severe long-term decline of vultures, recorded and analysed for years now, is underscored by the report. Migratory shorebirds, along with gulls and terns, seem to have declined the most among water birds, the report states, consistent with population trends among Arctic-breeding shorebirds based on independent assessments. Forward-looking actions suggested by the report include an update to the Red List of endangered species published by IUCN using the SoIB, collaborative research by scientists and citizens and urgent emphasis on habitats of species of high concern, notably grasslands, scrublands, wetlands and the Western Ghats. Suhel Quader, a member of the SoIB team, noted that the report was a first step and an assessment of trends rather than causes.

Research Into 'Indigenous Cows' (SUTRA PIC)

- The government has unveiled a programme to research on 'indigenous' cows. To be funded by multiple scientific ministries, the initiative, SUTRA PIC, is led by the Department of Science and Technology (DST). It has the Department of Biotechnology, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Ministry for AYUSH (Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, Homoeopathy) among others and the Indian Council of Medical Research as partners.

Five Themes

SUTRA PIC or Scientific Utilisation Through Research Augmentation-Prime Products from Indigenous Cows, has five themes: Uniqueness of Indigenous Cows, Prime-products from Indigenous Cows for Medicine and Health, Prime-products from Indigenous Cows for Agricultural Applications, Prime-products from Indigenous Cows for Food and Nutrition, Prime-products from indigenous cows-based utility items, according to a concept note on the DST website. Researchers from academic organisations as well as "capable voluntary organisations (NGOs) active in India with proven record of accomplishment in executing S&T-based R&D projects," were invited to apply for funding. "The proposals under this theme should aim to perform scientific research on complete characterisation of milk and milk products derived from Indian indigenous cows; scientific research on nutritional and therapeutic properties of curd and ghee prepared from indigenous breeds of cows by traditional methods; development of standards for traditionally processed dairy products of Indian-origin cow," says the 22-page note explaining the objectives of the programme.

Budgetary Outlay?

Two of the seniors most officials of some of the ministries involved said they were not aware of the specifics of the programme and claimed ignorance of the budgetary outlay. "I haven't seen the file on this programme because only research programmes, say over ₹1 crore, need to be formally cleared by me," Ashutosh Sharma, DST Secretary, told The Hindu. In 2017, SEED (Science for Equity, Empowerment and Development) constituted a National Steering Committee (NSC) for 'Scientific Validation and Research on Panchgavya (SVAROP)'. Panchagavya is an Ayurvedic panacea and is a mixture of five (pancha) products of the cow (gavya) — milk, curd, ghee, dung and urine. Its proponents believe it can cure, or treat a wide range of ailments.



→ At least 400 scientists have petitioned the Department of Science & Technology (DST) to withdraw a proposal that solicits research into indigenous cows. Their key concerns were that the research programme appeared to endorse the belief that indigenous cows had “special” and “unique” qualities and that this opened the possibility of **money being “wasted to investigate imaginary qualities derived from religious scriptures”**. **The programme did not encourage fair comparison with other breeds of cows around the world or other bovine species within India, and that the proposal was “drafted unscientifically from start to finish”**. Finally, given that scientific funding for several research programmes was wanting and researchers were not getting their fellowships on time, it was “infuriating” that the DST was ready to fund such a “dubious scheme”, the petitioners note. The proposal ought to be withdrawn and restated to encourage open inquiry and encumbering investigators to also “cross check” if effects were seen in indigenous breeds alone or were also visible in “other cow breeds, bovine species or other mammals”, the petition said. Dr. Sharma told The Hindu that he had not received the petition but was aware of “news reports” that had reported scientists’ concerns. He said that all research proposals by scientists under the programme would be vetted by qualified scientists and each one of them accepted — or rejected — on merit. “Concerns on apparent bias or widening the ambit to include more bovines could be passed on to the scientist committee evaluating the proposals. However, this is a programme that could unearth new information and new ideas and was certainly worth pursuing,” he said.

Karnataka Kambala Jockey's Searching Bolt with Buffaloes

→ A feverish sprint with a pair of buffaloes in tow has catapulted **Srinivas Gowda** from tiny Ashwathpura in coastal Karnataka to national fame. On February 1, Mr. Gowda, competing in a kambala event — a traditional race in which the jockey runs along with the buffaloes he is shepherding — covered **142.5 m in 13.62 seconds** at the Aikala-Bava kambala near Moodbidri. Converting this into 100m sprint, sports buffs said the kambala runner had clocked 9.55 seconds, just a wee bit ahead of Jamaican Usain Bolt’s world record of 9.58 seconds! The news spread as fast as Mr. Gowda’s pulse-pounding run, and it soon went viral on Twitter. Mahindra Group chairman Anand Mahindra suggested that Union Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Sports Kiren Rijiju could provide training facilities for the runner. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) stepped in and said a suitable course would be devised for Mr. Gowda. The 28-year-old has been a kambala jockey for more than a decade and trained at the Kambala Academy in Moodbidri in 2011. Founder and convener of the Academy K. Gunapala Kadamba told The Hindu that though his run was electrifying, Mr. Gowda’s feat cannot be compared to an Olympic record as these are diverse events held in varied conditions. While Olympic sprints are judged over seconds, kambala is yet to evolve such a practice. Mr. Kadamba said while the finishing-time at the kambala was accurately calculated through laser beams and electronic timers, similar technology is yet to be evolved at the starting-point. He, however, added that international organisations are welcome to test the endurance and speed of kambala runners. Mr. Gowda is the jockey for three pairs of buffaloes that run in different categories. Creating the ‘record’ is a significant achievement as he would have run at least 22 times with three pairs of buffaloes through the course of the entire event, exhibiting sustained endurance. A construction worker off season, Mr. Gowda said he starts training the buffaloes four weeks before the kambala season. Without any formal physical training, he has exhibited supreme endurance. Sources said jockeys like Mr. Gowda are paid ₹1 lakh-₹2 lakh by owners for a season to train the buffaloes, besides



sharing cash prizes they win in kambalas. For now, before SAI steps in with its offer of formal training, Mr. Gowda's name is up there in the bright lights with the iconic Bolt, at least in the online space.

Business & Economics

In U.S. Trade Action, An Indian Counter-Strategy

- On February 10, the U.S. removed more than a dozen countries, including India, from its list of countries that are classified as "developing" for trade purposes. These countries will now be classified instead as "developed" economies, thus stripping them of various trade benefits.

The office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) maintains a list of countries that it classifies as "developing", "developed", and "least-developed". Countries that are classified as "developing" are allowed to export certain goods to the U.S. without being hit by punitive tariffs that are usually imposed on goods from "developed" countries. The "developing country" status owes its origin to the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, which authorised the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) to help poor countries develop faster. These benefits were extended further under the World Trade Organization wherein rich countries agreed to grant trade benefits to countries that classified themselves as poor. It is worth noting that about two-thirds of countries that are members of the WTO classify themselves as "developing" countries and avail benefits.

- While the economic progress that India and China have achieved over the last few decades is seen by some as reason enough to get rid of their special status, others point to the various development indicators in which India and China still lag behind the rich world.
- The United States officially designated developing and least-developed countries for the purposes of implementing the countervailing measures provided by the **Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (ASCM)** of the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to the ASCM, developing countries are allowed to grant higher levels of subsidies as compared to the developed countries before **countervailing duties (CVD)** can be imposed. The agreement stipulates that any countervailing duty investigation for a developing country must be terminated if the subsidies granted are found to be de minimis, which is defined as less than 2% of the value of imports of the product being investigated. For a developed country the de minimis is 1% of the import value of the investigated product. The United States' annual exercise of designating developing, and least developed countries has assumed importance for India this year: it has been dropped from the list of developing countries. In other words, in its future countervailing duty investigations, the U.S. would treat India as a developed country.

India As Target

Under the WTO rules, any country can "self-designate" itself as a developing country. In fact, the *WTO does not lay down any specific criteria for making a distinction between a developed and a developing country member, unlike in the World Bank where per capita incomes are used to classify countries*. But despite this clearly laid down criteria in the WTO rules for making a distinction between developing and developed countries, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) employed an arbitrary methodology that took into consideration



“economic, trade, and other factors, including the level of economic development of a country (based on a review of the country’s per capita GNI) and a country’s share of world trade” to exclude India from list of designated developing countries. This is the second instance in less than a year, when the U.S. has refused to extend to India the benefits enjoyed by developing countries under the multilateral trade rules. On May 31, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump had announced that India would be taken off the list of beneficiary-developing countries under its scheme of Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The GSP is a special window provided by the U.S. and several other developed countries, through which they import identified products from developing countries at concessional rates of duties. Importantly, *GSP confers non-reciprocal benefits, implying that the developed countries cannot expect reciprocal market access from the beneficiary developing countries. Yet, the U.S. denied GSP benefits to India arguing that India was unwilling to offer better market access to its products.* Excluding India from the lists of developing countries for the purposes of using countervailing measures or denying benefits of GSP are but two of the more recent initiatives that the U.S. has taken to challenge India’s status as a developing country in the WTO. Over the past years, the U.S. has been arguing that the emerging economies, especially Brazil, China and India, have performed much better than those in the developed world and therefore they should no longer enjoy the slew of benefits that they have as developing country members of the organisation.

The Impact

Potentially very large impact will be for India. It would then lose the ability to use the special and differential treatment (S&DT) to which every developing country member of the WTO has a right. In short, *S&DT lessens the burden of adjustment that developing countries have to make while acceding to the various agreements under the WTO.* Besides, when the WTO finalises an agreement in a specific area, *developing countries are allowed longer implementation periods.* This measure helps developing countries to introduce a new agreement in phases and are thus required to deploy resources beyond their capacities. *S&DT has been particularly beneficial for India in two critical areas: one, implementation of the disciplines on agricultural subsidies and, two, opening up the markets for both agricultural and non-agricultural products.* The WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) provides an elaborate discipline on subsidies. Subsidies are classified in three categories; but two of these are virtually outside the discipline since the WTO does not limit spending on these categories of subsidies. The discipline exists in case of price support measures (minimum support price) and input subsidies which is the more common form of subsidies for most developing countries, including in India. *For developing countries, spending on price support measures and input subsidies taken together cannot exceed 10% of the total value of agricultural production. In contrast, developed countries are allowed to spend only 5% of their value of agricultural production.*

Shifting to DBT

India is a major user of price support measures and input subsidies, and given the constraints imposed by the AoA, the government has spoken about its intention to move into the system of direct benefit transfer (DBT) for supporting farmers. *A shift to DBT is attractive for India since there are no limits on spending, unlike in case of price support measures and input subsidies.* Further, faced with on-going farm distress, the government has had to rework its



subsidies' programme in order to extend greater benefits, especially to small and marginal farmers. However, implementation of DBT in agriculture has several insurmountable problems. **Targeting potential beneficiaries of DBT seems difficult at this juncture for a number of reasons, including inadequate records of ownership of agricultural land on the one hand, and the presence of agricultural labour and tenants on the other.** This implies that in the foreseeable future, India would continue to depend on price support measures and input subsidies. Given this scenario, the government needs the policy space to provide adequate levels of subsidies to a crisis-ridden agricultural sector, and therefore it is imperative that continues to enjoy the benefits as a developing country member of the WTO.

Issue of Tariffs

The issue of market access, or the use of import tariffs, is one of the important trade policy instruments. It has some key provisions on S&DT, which the developing countries can benefit from. The most important among these is the undertaking from the developed countries that they would not demand reciprocal tariff cuts. Over the past two years, the government of India has been extensively using import tariffs for protecting Indian businesses from import competition. **With increasing use of tariffs, almost across the board, India's average tariffs have increased from about 13% in 2017-18 to above 17% at present.** The 2020-21 Budget has enhanced the level of protection of the domestic players in several key sectors, thus pushing the average tariffs even higher. Developed country members of the WTO have generally maintained very low levels of tariffs, and, therefore, India's interests of maintaining a reasonable level of tariff protection would be well served through its continued access to S&DT, by remaining as a developing country member of the WTO.

In Budget Itself, Signals That A Major India-US Dairy Deal Is Unlikely

- ➔ US President Donald Trump's statement virtually ruling out the signing of any major bilateral trade deal with India during his upcoming visit is partly reflected in the latest Union Budget's tariff proposals relating to the dairy sector. There has been a lot of speculation about India offering to open up its dairy and poultry market, including by extending duty concessions, to US imports. The picture on the ground so far, though, has been quite the opposite. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget for 2020-21, if anything, has **hiked import duties on all dairy products.**

Dairy: Hike in Duties

The basic customs duty on butter, ghee, butter oil, whey and cheese were raised from **30% to 40%**. Further, **the Budget did away with the concessional duty of 15% applicable on imports of up to 10,000 tonnes of skimmed milk powder during any financial year.** That concession, under the so-called tariff rate quota regime, was withdrawn and all imports (whether up to or beyond 10,000 tonnes) were **subjected to a uniform duty of 60%**. **The Budget basically increased the import duties on all dairy products to their maximum permissible "bound" rates under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.** One interpretation of this move was it would enable India to offer tariff concessions or reduction in customs duties (relative to the generally applicable rates) under free trade agreements (FTA) with individual countries/blocs. For instance, ice-cream attracts a general basic customs duty of 30%. But ice-cream is already now importable into India at zero duty from the 10-member ASEAN



(Association of South East Asian Nation) countries and at 5% duty from South Korea under a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Both the India-ASEAN FTA in goods and the India-South Korea CEPA were signed in 2009 during the tenure of the UPA government. The NDA government was initially seen as favourable to India joining the Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP), a bigger FTA bloc involving the 10 ASEAN countries and South Korea plus China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. That deal would have required India to grant concessional import duty access to dairy products, especially from New Zealand and Australia. But the government, in November, announced that it was opting out of the RCEP. If President Trump's statements - that "we are not treated very well by India" and "I don't know if it'll be done before the election (presidential election on November 3)" — are any indication, there is little chance of any big trade deal materialising during his February 24-25 visit.

Poultry: New Restrictions

Dairy apart, poultry was another sector where India reportedly was open to allowing greater access to US imports. **Poultry meat imports into the country, at present, attract 100% duty. India had, in 2007, additionally imposed restrictions on US poultry product imports, citing concerns over avian influenza. However, in October 2014, the WTO's dispute settlement board ruled that the ban was discriminatory and unscientific, as the US had not recorded any outbreak of the highly pathogenic avian flu virus since 2004.** In July 2016, the US sought WTO authorisation seeking to slap a \$450 million retaliatory annual fine on India for not complying with the dispute panel's order. The matter was subsequently referred to arbitration. Meanwhile, in mid-2018, India allowed a small consignment of frozen chicken leg pieces from the US to land by air. That lone and last consignment was subjected to 100% import duty. Just as in the case of dairy products, efforts to get that import duty reduced have met with stiff opposition from the Indian poultry industry. The latter's contention has been that the American consumer preference is for chicken breast and there is practically no market for legs in the US. The bulk of chicken legs are, then frozen for exporting to other countries. The danger of these being "dumped" is higher in markets such as India, where legs, rather than breasts, are the most popular cut of chicken.

Why Have LPG Prices Seen A Sharp Rise?

- On February 12, LPG prices, which are revised on a monthly basis, went up again. The rate for unsubsidised, 14.2 kg cylinders has risen by a steep ₹144.50 in Delhi, at ₹858.50. In January 2020, a non-subsidised LPG cylinder cost ₹714 in Delhi. In three other metros too, LPG prices jumped — Kolkata: ₹896 (increase by ₹149); Mumbai: ₹829.50 (increase by ₹145); and Chennai: ₹881 (increase by ₹147). The recent price hike has been the sharpest since January 2014.

What Influences LPG Prices in India?

Domestic prices of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) are based on a formula — the **import parity price (IPP)**, which is **based on international LPG prices**. Saudi Aramco's LPG price acts as the benchmark for the IPP and includes the free-on-board price, ocean freight, customs duties, port dues and the like. This dollar-denominated figure is converted into rupees before local costs — such as local freight, bottling charges, marketing costs, margins for oil marketing



firms and dealer commissions and the Goods and Services Tax — are added. This helps the government arrive at the retail selling price for LPG. The government resets the LPG price every month, the decision being influenced by international prices and how the rupee has behaved against the dollar in the immediately preceding weeks.

How Have International Prices Behaved Recently?

For most of December, the Brent crude price had been on an uptrend, and had breached the \$68 level late that month. It peaked at \$68.91 in early January, but with the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease hogging headlines in recent weeks, fears of a global slowdown have pushed oil prices down through January, save for a few spikes. Saudi Aramco had raised its propane prices to \$565 per metric tonne in January, up sharply from \$440 a metric tonne set for December. Aramco propane prices offer a benchmark for pricing the West Asia LPG sales to Asian markets. The dollar-rupee dance has since been within the range of ₹71-₹72 to the dollar, having briefly breached the ₹72 mark in early January.

Who Will the Price Rise Affect?

The price increase will affect retail consumers who have given up the subsidy. The government has said that for those who avail subsidy, the increase would be mostly absorbed by the rise in subsidy. **The Centre said the price of an unsubsidised cylinder would increase from ₹714 to ₹858.50 in Delhi, for example, and that the subsidy offered would go up from ₹153.86 to ₹291.48.** Of the 27.76 crore retail consumers, 26.12 crore consumers avail LPG subsidy. Likewise, for Ujjawala consumers, the subsidy would go up from ₹174.86 to ₹312.48 per cylinder.

Does This Help the Government Move to An Open Pricing Regime?

Prior to the latest round of the price increase, the government had raised LPG cylinder prices by ₹62, starting from August 2019. Compare this with the increase of ₹82 that had taken place over five years to mid-2019, indicating a penchant for increasingly lesser subsidy. In the latest round, though, the Centre has sought to absorb much of the increase for those availing subsidies. It looks like the most recent increase has been beyond its control and it is hence raising the subsidy levels to protect consumers, given that the economy is reeling from lack of consumer spending.

What Are the Implications for The Broader Economy?

At a time when consumer demand, in general, for goods and services in the country has slumped, more cash in the hands of the retail consumer may have helped spur demand. It is ironic that the government has had to raise LPG prices now. This sucks away even more disposable income from those consumers who pay market rates for LPG. As a result, **household budgets are bound to go up, especially for those not availing the subsidy.** The increase in LPG price could spur headline inflation even further. As it is, the consumer price index inflation has seen a rise over the past few months. For January, it had accelerated to 7.59%, compared with 7.35% in December 2019. The January inflation metric was the highest since May 2014, when the figure was at 8.33%.



India's 'Imported' Food Inflation

→ Is food inflation in India influenced by global price movements? On the face of it, that seems to be the case.

While the recent rise in domestic food prices has been blamed largely on “local” factors — poor rainfall during the first half (June-July) of the monsoon season and too much of it thereafter till about mid-November, leading to both reduced/delayed kharif sowings and damage to the standing crop at maturity/harvesting stage — some of it is also “imported”. According to the Department of Consumer Affairs, retail prices of packed palm and soyabean oil in Delhi rose from ₹79 and ₹100 per kg on January 31, 2019 to ₹108 and ₹122 respectively on January 31, 2020. This increase of 22%-37% was almost matched by the 34.37% rise in the FAO’s global vegetable oil price index between January 2019 and January 2020. Since **India imports two-thirds of its edible oil requirement**, higher international prices would have been automatically transmitted to the domestic market. On the other hand, the increase in the retail prices of onion in Delhi from ₹22 per kg on January 31, 2019 to ₹50 on January 31, 2020, was purely due to the failure of the domestic kharif crop. While global prices can be transmitted to the domestic market too through exports — traders would sell abroad if realisations are better relative to the local market — the government has foreclosed that possibility by banning/restricting onion shipments since September 2019.

What Can Happen Now?

Now, when both international and domestic food prices are showing signs of renewed hardening, the question is: How sustainable is this trend? There are at least **three bearish factors** currently at play. The first is, of course, the novel **coronavirus** epidemic that has reduced Chinese buying of everything from palm oil and soyabean to milk powder and meat. Palm oil prices in Malaysia have plunged from 2,922 ringgit (\$719) to 2,725 ringgit (\$658) over the last one month. The second is **crude oil**. Brent crude prices had touched \$70 per barrel after the January 3 United States airstrike that killed Iran’s top military commander, but have dropped since, closing at \$57.67/barrel on Tuesday. The third is the prospect of a **bumper rabi** (winter-spring) crop in India. **The kharif harvest turned out to be not so good because of excess and unseasonal rain. That same rain, though, has helped boost rabi acreage by 9.5% compared to last year.** The arrival of this crop in the mandis from March should cool down prices, especially of vegetables and pulses, which showed the highest year-on-year retail inflation of 50.19% and 16.71% in January. Against these bearish factors are the relatively “**bullish**” factors. Global palm oil ending stocks this year are projected to be the lowest since 2009-10, while sugar is also expected to move significantly into deficit. Supply tightness is being seen both globally and in India, even in milk. Like Malaysian palm oil prices, which rose from an average of 2,037 ringgit to 3,014 ringgit between January 2019 and January 2020, skimmed milk powder rates at New Zealand’s global dairy trade auctions had also moved up from \$2,201 to \$3,036 per tonne during this period — before the novel coronavirus struck. **It would be interesting to see what happens once the virus has run its course. If Brent crude too, were to rally again — making it attractive for sugarcane and corn to be diverted for ethanol production and also palm oil towards bio-diesel — there could be uncertainty ahead.**



Food grain Production Set to Touch A Record High

- Production of several crops, including rice and major pulses, was lower than targeted in the kharif or the monsoon season. However, the abundance of late monsoon rains resulted in cumulative rainfall that was 10% higher than the long-period average for the season. This helped farmers rake in rabi or winter harvests that were larger-than-expected in almost all crops. Thus, the estimate for total food grain output of 291.95 million tonnes is more than six million tonnes higher than the 285.21 million tonnes produced in 2018-19, according to the Agriculture Ministry's second advance estimates released on Tuesday.

Higher Rice Output

The Agriculture Ministry expects rice production to reach 117.47 million tonnes, slightly higher than the 116.48 million tonnes produced in the previous year. Wheat, which is only grown in the rabi season, will see a major surge in production at 106.2 million tonnes in the current year, from the 103.6 million tonnes in 2018-19. Despite the government's drive to encourage millets and nutri-cereals, production failed to match targets this year, with the estimate pegged at 45.24 million tonnes. Pulses production was also estimated to come in lower-than targeted 23 million tonnes, although it was still higher than the previous year's harvest. Most pulses are dry land crops, grown on land without irrigation and the delay in monsoons in many areas hit kharif harvests although rabi production improved. It was a similar story with oil seeds. Production was estimated at almost 342 million tonnes, higher than last year but still lower than the target for this year. Sugarcane is the only major crop where this year's estimated production of 3,538 million tonnes was significantly lower than last year's output of 4,054 million tonnes.

How Crop Insurance Changes

- The Centre decided to restrict its premium subsidy in its flagship crop insurance schemes to 30% for unirrigated areas and 25% for irrigated areas (from the existing unlimited), and to make enrolment of farmers in the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) and Restructured Weather Based Crop Insurance Scheme (RWBCIS) voluntary from the 2020 Kharif season.

What Were the Schemes?

At present, under PMFBY and RWBCIS, farmers pay a premium of 2% of the sum insured for all food grains and oilseeds crops of Kharif; 1.5% for all foodgrains and oilseeds crops of Rabi; and 5% for all horticultural crops. The difference between actuarial premium rate and the rate of insurance premium payable by farmers, which is called the Rate of Normal Premium Subsidy, is shared equally between the Centre and the states. However, states and Union Territories are free to extend additional subsidy over and above the normal subsidy from their budgets. Until now, there was no upper limit for the central subsidy. The Cabinet decided to cap the Centre's premium subsidy under these schemes for premium rates up to 30% for unirrigated areas/crops and 25% for irrigated areas/crops.

Why Changes with This Move, And Why Has the Government Taken It?

One interpretation of this decision is that the burden of premium subsidy will go up for the states. For example, in the old regime, if a farmer's Kharif crop was insured for ₹1,00,000 and



the rate of actuarial premium was 40%, then the premium paid by the farmer was 2% (₹ 2,000), and the remaining premium was shared by the Centre and the state equally (19% or ₹19,000). In the new regime, for the same sum insured (₹1,00,000) and the same rate of premium (40%), the Centre will give subsidy for premium rates up to 30%. This means that from the Kharif 2020 season, the Centre will have to pay premium at the rate of 14% (out of 30%, the farmer's share is 2%, and the Centre's and state's 14% each) instead of the 19% it paid (out of 40%) in the last Kharif season; the state has to bear the entire burden of the premium subsidy in cases where the rate of premium goes beyond the threshold of 30%. **A second interpretation is that the Centre may stop supporting insurance of certain crops in certain areas where the rate of premium is more than 30%.** This interpretation emanates from Paragraph 'L' of the press note issued by the government on February 19, which states: "Besides above, Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare in consultation with other stakeholders/agencies will prepare/develop State specific, alternative risk mitigation programme for crops/areas having high rate of premium." **While the average premium rate under PMFBY and RWBCIS at the national level was 12.32% for 2018-19, for some crops in certain districts, the rate of premium has been higher than 30% in recent years.** For instance, the rate of premium for Kharif groundnut has reached 49% in Rajkot of Gujarat, and the rate for Rabi paddy crop Ramnathapuram (Tamil Nadu) has reached 42%. During 2018-19, an amount of ₹29,105 crore was collected as gross premium under PMFBY and RWBCIS, which included farmers' share of ₹4,918 crore, the Centre's share of ₹12,034 crore, and the states' share of ₹12,152 crore. After the new changes come into effect, the share of the states is expected to go up in those states in which such crops are cultivated. Sources said that by capping the subsidy for premium rates up to 30%, the Centre wants to disincentivise certain crops in such areas where growing these crops involve high risks in terms of crop insurance premiums.

How Many Farmers Are Covered Under These Two Schemes?

During 2018-19, about 5.64 crore farmers are enrolled with PMFBY for an insured sum of ₹2,35,277 crore, and 30% of the gross cropped is insured. When the government approved PMFBY four years ago, it was described as "a path-breaking scheme for farmers' welfare" under which there was no upper limit on government subsidy. "Even if balance premium is 90%, it will be borne by the Government," said a statement released on January 13, 2016. For 2020-21, the government has allocated ₹15,695 crore for PMFBY. **While PMFBY is based on yield, RWBCIS is based on proxies and farmers are provided insurance protection against adverse weather conditions such as excess rainfall, wind and temperature.** The number of insured farmers under RWBCIS is relatively low.

How Well-Placed Are States to Raise Their Share of Premium Subsidy?

The states are already defaulting on their share, and the Centre's new cap will put an additional financial burden on them. Madhya Pradesh has not paid its share of premium even for Kharif 2018, which comes to ₹1,500 crore. As a result, farmers have not got their claims. In fact, most states have delayed the payment of their share of premium. Sources said that in some states, the expenditure on premium of PMFBY is more than 50% of their budget for agriculture.



What Can Be the Fallout of Making the Schemes Voluntary?

That move will lead to a rise in the rates of premium, as the area covered under insurance and the number of enrolled farmers are expected to come down significantly. As of now the schemes are compulsory for all loanee farmers and optional for other farmers. Non-loanee farmers under the crop insurance schemes are much fewer than loanee farmers. If the latter opt out of the schemes, the number of insured farmers will drastically come down. Sources say that in such a scenario, the rate of premium of certain crops in some areas may go beyond 30%.

Which Are the Other Changes In Crop Insurance Schemes?

The government has given flexibility to states/UTs to implement PMFBY and RWBCIS, and given them the option to select any number of additional risk covers/features like prevented sowing, localised calamity, mid-season adversity, and post-harvest losses. Earlier, these risk covers were mandatory. Sources said this change will have two main impacts. First, it may bring down the rates of overall premium as the state governments now will not be required to invite bids factoring these risks. Second, it will make these schemes less attractive for farmers. However, states/UTs can offer specific single peril risk/insurance covers like hailstorm etc under PMFBY.

Why Is RBI Aligning Accounting Yr With Fiscal Yr?

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is aligning its July-June accounting year with the government's April-March fiscal year in order to ensure more effective management of the country's finances.

How Did the RBI's July-June Accounting Year Come to Be?

When it commenced operations on April 1, 1935, with Sir Osborne Smith as its first Governor, the RBI followed a January-December accounting year. On March 11, 1940, however, the bank changed its accounting year to July-June. Now, after nearly eight decades, the RBI is making another switch: the next accounting year will be a nine-month period from July 2020 to March 31, 2021 and thereafter, all financial years will start from April, as it happens with the central and state governments.

Why Are RBI's Accounts Important?

The RBI's balance sheet plays a critical role in the functioning of the country's economy — largely reflecting the activities carried out in pursuance of its currency issue function, as well as monetary policy and reserve management objectives. The RBI is the country's monetary authority, regulator, and supervisor of the financial system, manager of foreign exchange, issuer of currency, regulator and supervisor of payment and settlement systems, banker to the central and the state governments, and also banker to banks.

But Why Is the System Being Changed?

The Bimal Jalan Committee on Economic Capital Framework (ECF) of the RBI had proposed a more transparent presentation of the RBI's annual accounts, and a change in its accounting year to April-March from the financial year 2020-21. It said the RBI would be able to provide better estimates of projected surplus transfers to the government for the financial year for



budgeting purposes. It is also expected to result in better management of transfer of dividend or surplus to the government. Moreover, as governments, companies, and other institutions follow the April-March year, it will help with effective management of accounting. In May 2018, when Urjit Patel was Governor, the RBI appointed its first ever Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Sudha Balakrishnan.

What Will Be Impact of The Change?

The change in the fiscal year could reduce the need for interim dividend being paid by the RBI, and such payments may then be restricted to extraordinary circumstances. It will obviate any timing considerations that may enter into the selection of open market operations or Market Stabilization Scheme as monetary policy tools. It will also bring greater cohesiveness in monetary policy projections and reports published by the RBI, which mostly use the fiscal year as the base.

A Royal Mess

→ It cannot possibly get messier than this. The telecom industry is in turmoil unable to pay up its dues as per the Supreme Court verdict on adjusted gross revenues delivered in October last; the Court is aghast that its order is not being complied with; and then there is the government torn between revenue considerations, the need to uphold sanctity of contracts, and ensuring that one of the players does not go under in the process of honouring the verdict. Faced with the wrath of the Court, Bharti Airtel paid ₹10,000 crore on Monday with the promise of paying the rest before mid-March when the court will hear the case next. Vodafone Idea, the one hit the most by the judgment, on Monday sought more time to pay up but the Court was in no mood to humour the company and refused to hear the plea. The company eventually paid ₹2,500 crore by the evening. The two companies, as indeed the others in the industry, have only themselves to blame for the predicament that they find themselves in now. **They could have paid up their annual dues over the years — which were not material in relation to their respective turnovers — under protest even as they litigated the case in the top court. That would have obviated the need to pay interest and penalties now which are higher than the actual dues. At the very least, they ought to have provided for the liability in their balance sheets as a contingency, which they failed to do.** While they have to pay the price for this now, what can be done to ensure that the blow is not fatal? If Vodafone shuts shop, not only will the industry be reduced to a duopoly, with all the attendant consequences for customers but it will also lead to loss of about 15,000 direct **jobs** and several thousand more indirect ones. Worse, the **cascading effect** will be felt across the economy as **lenders** face the consequences of the company going bankrupt — non-performing assets will rise. Telecom equipment suppliers may also go down as their dues will not be paid. And what happens to the 212 million Vodafone subscribers? It is doubtful whether the other two players can absorb them all. The industry is critical to the government's plans for a digital economy not to mention its revenues, including from the upcoming 5G spectrum auctions. The government has to, therefore, examine what it can do to save the situation without disrespecting the Court's verdict. Legislation to offer a staggered payment schedule that ensures that the net present value of future payments is equal to the dues is one option experts are suggesting. There could be other options that can be considered in conjunction with the industry, including reducing the adjusted gross revenue-based licence fees and spectrum usage charges. Whatever route it chooses to



soften the blow, the government will have to get the Court on its side at the next hearing on March 17. The need of the hour is pragmatism laced with prudence on all sides to clean up this royal mess.

Liquidation Remains High in NCLT Cases

- More than half of the cases admitted to the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) are been liquidated as recovery through resolution continues to elude creditors, latest data released by the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) showed. A total of 3,312 cases were admitted in the insolvency courts till the end of the third quarter of the financial year, of which 561 were during the Oct-Dec period. This was the second highest number of cases admitted in a quarter after the July-September period of the current financial year when 565 cases were admitted. Out of a total of 1,351 closed cases, 780 or **58% were closed through liquidation** and only 190 cases or **14% were resolved with an average haircut of 57% on admitted claims**. For the third quarter, haircuts for cases resolved were high, around 88%. "A high number of liquidated cases and duration of resolution remain primary concerns," the note said. The number of cases admitted in the NCLT has been increasing, with 561 cases admitted during the October-December period. Out of the total number of cases admitted, **50% were filed by financial creditors**. "This reflects the increasing pivotal role played by this body in resolution of stressed assets **despite the introduction of a new circular from RBI in June 2019 which removed the clause that made it mandatory for cases to be admitted to IBC**," Kotak Securities said. Of the 182 cases which were closed in the third quarter, 30 cases were resolved while 134 cases faced liquidation. The note also pointed out that the **average duration of resolution was over 350 days** for all resolved cases till December, **while more than 30% of cases have crossed 270 days**.

Life & Science

ISRO Making Preparations to Launch GISAT-1 In March

- Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is preparing to launch GISAT-1, a new earth observation satellite, in the first week of March. **GISAT-1 — Geo Imaging Satellite** — will be the first of two planned Indian EO spacecraft to be placed in a **geostationary orbit** of around 36,000 km. It will apparently be in a fixed spot looking over the Indian continent at all times. **All Indian EOs have been placed so far in a 600-odd-km orbits and circle the earth pole to pole**. GISAT-1 will be launched from Sriharikota satellite launch centre. "With this satellite, which has high-resolution cameras, we can keep a constant watch on our borders, monitor any changes in the geographical condition of the country, etc.,". **ISRO is expected to develop its own space station within a decade**. To achieve this gigantic target, preparations are already under way at ISRO. He said ISRO has planned to first send two unmanned spacecraft within a couple of years, and later a crewed mission in the third phase.

Eyes on The Sun, How ISRO Is Preparing for Its Next Giant Leap in Space

- Earlier this month, 47 new papers were published in a special supplement of The Astrophysical Journal, analysing data from the first three flybys of the **Parker Solar Probe**, NASA's historic mission to the Sun. The probe, launched on August 12, 2018, completed its

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



fourth close approach — called perihelion — on January 29, whizzing past at about 3.93 lakh km/h, at a distance of **only 18.6 million km** from the Sun's surface.

So Why Is All of This Exciting for India?

Alongside another mission to the Moon, being planned for next year, and the first human space flight scheduled for 2022, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is also preparing to send its first scientific expedition to study the Sun. Named **Aditya-L1**, the mission, expected to be launched early next year, will observe the Sun from a close distance, and try to obtain information about its atmosphere and magnetic field. ISRO categorises **Aditya L1 as a 400 kg-class satellite**, that will be launched using the **Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV)** in XL configuration. The space-based observatory will have **seven payloads** (instruments) on board to study the **Sun's corona, solar emissions, solar winds and flares, and Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs)**, and will carry out round-the-clock imaging of the Sun. The mission will be undertaken in collaboration between various labs of ISRO, along with institutions like the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA), Bengaluru, Inter University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Pune, and Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research (IISER), Kolkata. **Aditya L1 will be ISRO's second space-based astronomy mission after AstroSat, which was launched in September 2015.** What makes a solar mission challenging is the **distance of the Sun from Earth (about 149 million km on average, compared to the only 3.84 lakh km to the Moon)** and, more importantly, the super-hot temperatures and radiations in the solar atmosphere. All participating institutions are currently in the final stages of developing their respective payloads. Some payloads have been built, and are in the testing phase with each component being checked and calibrated. Some payloads are at the stage of integration of individual components.

But Why Is Studying the Sun Important?

Every planet, including Earth and the exoplanets beyond the Solar System, evolves — and this evolution is governed by its parent star. The solar weather and environment, which is determined by the processes taking place inside and around the sun, affects the weather of the entire system. Variations in this weather can change the orbits of satellites or shorten their lives, interfere with or damage onboard electronics, and cause power blackouts and other disturbances on Earth. Knowledge of solar events is key to understanding space weather. To learn about and track Earth-directed storms, and to predict their impact, continuous solar observations are needed. Every storm that emerges from the Sun and heads towards Earth passes through L1, and a satellite placed in the halo orbit around L1 of the Sun-Earth system has the major advantage of continuously viewing the Sun without any occultation/eclipses, ISRO says on its website. **L1 refers to Lagrangian/Lagrange Point 1, one of five points in the orbital plane of the Earth-Sun system. Lagrange Points, named after Italian-French mathematician Joseph-Louis Lagrange, are positions in space where the gravitational forces of a two-body system (like the Sun and the Earth) produce enhanced regions of attraction and repulsion. These can be used by spacecraft to reduce fuel consumption needed to remain in position.** The L1 point is home to the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory Satellite (SOHO), an international collaboration project of NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA). **The L1 point is about 1.5 million km from Earth, or about one-hundredth of the way to the Sun.** Aditya L1 will perform continuous observations looking directly at the Sun. NASA's Parker Solar Probe has already gone far closer — but it



will be looking away from the Sun. The earlier Helios 2 solar probe, a joint venture between NASA and space agency of erstwhile West Germany, went within 43 million km of the Sun's surface in 1976.

What Kind of Heat Will Aditya L1 Face?

The Parker Solar Probe's January 29 flyby was the closest the spacecraft has gone to the Sun in its planned seven-year journey so far. Computer modelling estimates show that the temperature on the Sun-facing side of the probe's heat shield, the Thermal Protection System, reached 612 degrees Celsius, even as the spacecraft and instruments behind the shield remained at about 30°C, NASA said. During the spacecraft's three closest perihelia in 2024-25, the TPS will see temperatures around 1370°C. **Aditya L1 will stay much farther away, and the heat is not expected to be a major concern for the instruments on board.** But there are other challenges. Many of the instruments and their components for this mission are being manufactured for the first time in the country, presenting as much of a challenge as an opportunity for India's scientific, engineering, and space communities. One such component is the highly polished mirrors which would be mounted on the space-based telescope. **Due to the risks involved, payloads in earlier ISRO missions have largely remained stationary in space; however, Aditya L1 will have some moving components, scientists said.** For example, the spacecraft's design allows for multiple operations of the front window of the telescope — which means the window can be opened or shut as required.

Why This Antarctic Trip Matters?

- On January 11, the South African oceanographic research vessel SA Agulhas set off from Port Louise in Mauritius, on a two-month Indian Scientific Expedition to the Southern Ocean 2020. As of Friday, the vessel was at **Prydz Bay, in the coastal waters of "Bharati"**, India's third station in Antarctica. On board the vessel are 34 scientific staff from India, apart from technical hands, seamen and a chef who are all from South Africa. This is the 11th expedition of an Indian mission to the Southern Ocean, or Antarctic Ocean. The first mission took place between January and March 2004.

Lessons on Environment

The 18-institution team, led by Dr Anoop Mahajan from the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, are collecting air and water samples from around 60 stations along the cruise track. These will give valuable information on the state of the ocean and atmosphere in this remote environment and will help to understand its impacts on the climate, according to a statement from the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCOPR) in Goa, which works under the Ministry of Earth Sciences. **A key objective of the mission is to quantify changes that are occurring and the impact of these changes on large-scale weather phenomenon, like the Indian monsoon, through tele-connection,** the researchers said.

Project by Project

Mahajan and his team have been able to share details of their journey through Twitter, thanks to satellite communication.

There are six core projects:



- ❖ Study hydrodynamics and biogeochemistry of the Indian Ocean sector of the Southern Ocean; involves sampling sea water at different depths. This will help understand the formation of Antarctic bottom water.
- ❖ Observations of trace gases in the atmosphere, such as halogens and dimethyl sulphur from the ocean to the atmosphere. Will help improve parameterisations that are used in global models.
- ❖ Study of organisms called coccolithophores that have existed in the oceans for several million years; their concentrations in sediments will create a picture of past climate.
- ❖ Investigate atmospheric aerosols and their optical and radiative properties. Continuous measurements will quantify impact on Earth's climate.
- ❖ Study the Southern Ocean's impact on Indian monsoons. Look for signs in sediment core taken from the bottom of the ocean.
- ❖ Dynamics of the food web in the Southern Ocean; important for safeguarding catch and planning sustainable fishing.

Urban Heat Islands in India

- A recent study from IIT Kharagpur called "Anthropogenic forcing exacerbating the urban heat islands in India" noted that the relatively warmer temperature in urban areas, compared to suburbs, may contain potential health hazards due to heat waves apart from pollution. "For the first time, we have found evidence of mean daytime temperature of surface urban heat island (UHI Intensity) going up to 2 degrees C for most cities, as analysed from satellite temperature measurements in monsoon and post monsoon periods." Other researchers from elsewhere have also noticed similar rise in daytime temperatures in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai.

Understanding Urban Heat Island Effect

We know of urban water lakes (as in Bhopal, Hyderabad, Bengaluru or Srinagar) which add pleasure and coolness, but an urban heat island? An urban heat island (abbreviated as UHI) is where the temperature in a densely populated city is as much as 2 degrees higher than suburban or rural areas. Why? This happens because of the materials used for pavements, roads and roofs, such as concrete, asphalt (tar) and bricks, which are opaque, do not transmit light, but have higher heat capacity and thermal conductivity than rural areas, which have more open space, trees and grass. Trees and plants are characterised by their 'evapotranspiration'— a combination of words wherein evaporation involves the movement of water to the surrounding air, and transpiration refers to the movement of water within a plant and the subsequent lot of water through the stomata (pores found on the leaf surface) in its leaves. Grass, plants and trees in the suburbs and rural areas do this. The lack of such evapotranspiration in the city leads to the city experiencing higher temperature than its surroundings. UHIs also decrease air quality in the cities, thanks to pollution generated by industrial and automobile exhaust, higher extent of particulate matter and greater amounts of dust than in rural areas. Due to this higher temperature in urban areas, the UHI increases the colonisation of species that like warm temperatures, such as lizards and geckos. Insects such as ants are more abundant here than in rural areas; these are referred to as ectotherms. In addition, cities tend to experience heat waves which affect human and animal health, leading to heat cramps, sleep deprivation and increased mortality rates. UHIs also impact nearby water bodies, as warmer water (thanks to the pavements, rooftops and so on) is



transferred from the city to drains in sewers, and released into nearby lakes and creeks, thus impairing their water quality. It is painful to realize that Bengaluru, once known for its salubrious climate, now has UHIs, even in places like Koramandala and Jayanagar. The rapid expansion of buildings, industrial parks and associated high-rise apartments in suburbs, such as Electronic City and Whitefield, has made the city insalubrious. Some of its praiseworthy lakes are dirty and diseased. Hyderabad in 1977 didn't need air conditioning or even ceiling fans at night. Now, we have UHIs, again due to reckless expansion of industrial parks, factories and associated buildings in what was once a vast suburb, which has now become the third city called Cyberabad. These have not only led to formation of UHI but also the associated pollution due to a drastic reduction in the Air Quality Index (AQI), thanks to the exhausts from industries and automobiles. The 'safe' AQI is thought to be between 61-90 units (when particles from the air enter the human and animal bodies causing discomfort and illness), but in places like Delhi it has gone to very poor-to-dangerous levels of about 323. Fortunately, it is still on the safe side in Hyderabad and Bengaluru, but it is time to take steps to keep it low.

Control of UHIs and Mitigation

Industrialisation and economic development are vital to the country, but the control of UHIs and their fallouts are equally vital. Towards this, several methods are being, and can be, tried. One of them is to use greener rooftops, using light-coloured concrete (using limestone aggregates along with asphalt (or tar) making the road surface greyish or even pinkish (as some places in the US have done); these are 50% better than black, since they absorb less heat and reflect more sunlight. Likewise, we should paint rooftops green, and install solar panels there amidst a green background. The other is to plant as many trees and plants as possible. It is interesting to realise how beneficial trees are to us. The organisation Treepeople lists as many as 22 benefits from trees and plants. Relevant to the present context are: they combat climate change; clean the surrounding air by absorbing pollutant gases (NXO_y, O₃, NH₃, SO₂, and others) and trapping particulates on their leaves and bark; cool the city and the streets; conserve energy (cutting air-conditioning costs by 50%); save water and help prevent water pollution; help prevent soil erosion; protect people and children from UV light; offer economic opportunities; bring diverse group of people together; encourage civic pride by giving neighbourhoods a new identity; mask concrete walls, thus muffling sounds from streets and highways, and eye-soothing canopy of green; and the more a business district has trees, more business follows. So, plant as many trees and plants as you can around and between your buildings, schools, houses and apartment complexes. But, 'token' planting will not do, nurturing them year after year is vital!

New Species of Urban Lizard Found

- Guwahati, the largest city in the Northeast, has yielded a new species of lizard – the urban bent-toed gecko. The new species of lizard, zoologically named *Cyrtodactylus urbanus*, is markedly different in molecular structure, blotch and colour from the *Cyrtodactylus guwahatiensis*, or the Guwahati bent-toed gecko, that was discovered two years ago. *Cyrtodactylus khasiensis* found primarily in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Photographs I had taken of the urban bent-toed from the Basistha area of Guwahati in 2011, when compared with other species, made global experts realise it was a different species," Mr. Purkayastha told The Hindu.



Chicken-Killing Monkeys in Assam Trigger Rethink on Leopards

- Some parts of rural eastern Assam are becoming more lenient towards the leopard. One of the reasons is “unmanageable” troops of monkeys that even kill chicken for food. About six years ago, people of Negheriting in Golaghat district had blocked an arterial National Highway to force the authorities into taking steps to check the population of rhesus macaques that raid their grain stores and kitchens. Negheriting is about 80 km east of Kaziranga National Park. “We went into the issue and found the **monkeys were desperate enough to target hen coops and rip the chickens apart to eat the grain the fowl store in the sac-like crop before digesting,**” said Mubina Akhtar of NGO Kaziranga Wildlife Society. A deeper study revealed the macaque “**population explosion**” was correlated to the **dwindling population of leopards as well as the transformation in the landscape.** This was because of small tea gardens and commercial crops replacing the sugarcane fields and traditional kathonis — small jungle-like backyard patches of fruit trees— where leopards thrived. “Both macaques and leopards are highly adaptive and live close to humans. The kathonis in particular sustained monkeys in the past, not requiring them to raid homes, while leopards preyed on the monkeys,” Ms. Akhtar said. Wildlife officials said about 15 years ago, there were about 12,000 leopards in Assam, they said. The figure is likely to be less than 5,000 now. Qamar Qureshi of the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India said it would be difficult to ascertain if monkeys killing chicken was a new phenomenon. “Macaques such as the rhesus, Assamese and bonnet are omnivorous, not strictly vegetarian like some other monkeys. But they might not kill chickens for their flesh,” Mr. Qureshi added. “Six-seven leopards used to be killed in Noragaon in Golaghat. People now let the leopards be or have them captured and released in the wild,” Ms. Akhtar said.

What is Adrian Helmet?

- During World War I, the first combat helmet was issued to the French Army. Called the **Adrian helmet**, and introduced in 1915, it is often described as the first modern steel helmet. It was designed to protect French troops in trenches from head wounds from falling shrapnel. Now, new research has found it performs better than modern military helmets in protecting the head from shock waves created by overhead blasts. In protection from ballistics and blunt impacts, modern military helmets have advanced. **But in terms of protecting the brain from shock waves from nearby blasts, the modern helmets are no better than WWI helmets,** biomedical engineers of Duke University have found. And the Adrian helmet, in particular, actually performed better than modern designs in protecting from overhead blasts, the researchers reported last week in the journal PLOS ONE.

How Quitting Smoking Can Reverse Cancer Risk

- Smoking can cause mutation in cells, leading to cancer. So, if a smoker quits, how far does his or her health recover? A study published in the journal Nature says quitting can help reverse the potential risk; it can replenish cells that can actually resemble those of a person who has never smoked.



How Smoking Causes Cancer

A human body is structured to bear damage, but only for some time. A cigarette has 60 carcinogens that can damage or mutate DNA in the human body, and can cause 1,000 to 10,000 mutations per cell. "Smoking causes mutations pretty steadily over time, gradually building up. The more you smoke the more mutations you have,". The constant damage to the cells lining the airway and lungs can lead to cancers in the lungs, oesophagus, larynx and pharynx. Lung cancer is the most common, and 80-90% deaths due to it are attributed to tobacco, the study found. Chemicals in cigarette can also enter the bloodstream and affect multiple organs. It can also cause cancer in the liver, pancreas, stomach, kidney and blood, but these are rare. Smoking also causes *emphysema*, damage of air sacs in lungs, which is irreversible.

Driver mutation, in simple terms, is like a biochemical causing cell to mutate and lead to cancer. In current smokers, 25% cells were found carrying driver mutations. No such driver mutations were found in children, and in adult non-smokers only 4-14% cells had driver mutations due to various other factors. The key finding was that gradually the cell mutation burden in ex-smokers becomes similar to that of non-smokers. Janes said: "Ex-smokers have many cells with lots of mutations that non-smokers don't have, but importantly a large fraction of the cells (up to 40%) don't have mutations — meaning healthy cells are gradually replacing the mutated or damaged cells."

The Wider Implications

"By stopping smoking in middle age or earlier, smokers avoid most of the risk of tobacco-associated lung cancer. This benefit begins to emerge almost immediately and accrues steadily with time," the study observes. "But it is not an overnight change,". "Once a person quits, the cumulative risk of cancer keeps decreasing," said Vaidya, who treats a number of oral cancers. Within 24-48 hours of quitting smoking, the cells start repairing themselves, although the healing is slower if organs are damaged. The key message from the research is that stopping smoking, at any age, is important and rapidly reduces risk of getting lung cancer. **Emphysema if caused, however, is irreversible.**

How Small Regulatory Molecules Are Generated in Plants

- ➔ Researchers from National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru, and SASTRA University, Thanjavur, have discovered how small molecules called microRNAs are made in plants. This finding makes it much easier for studying processes in plants. **MicroRNAs are small molecules, about 21 nucleotides long, and help in controlling the levels of proteins in the cell.** The research was published in the journal Nucleic Acids Research. All aspects of growth and development of plants, whether it is initiation of flowering or control and distribution of hormones in response to external stress, are regulated at various levels in the cell. Such regulation is always mediated by proteins – the work horses of the cells. At one level, regulation of the processes is about controlling the amount of specific proteins being made in the cells. This is achieved by the microRNAs. **In order to decrease the level of a particular protein in specific cells, the microRNAs destroy the messenger RNA molecules that help with the production of that specific protein in the cell. The microRNA molecules do this by cutting down that particular messenger RNA thereby destroying it.** This process is called the **silencing of the messenger RNA**. The microRNA that achieve this silencing are evolutionarily conserved – that is, they are found in all flowering plants, whether they are mosses or roses.



Similarly, the best way to study the effect of a gene in the DNA is to silence or “knockout” the gene. Knocking out a gene does not mean removing the entire gene. In knocking out processes, that RNA that induce the gene to produce proteins are destroyed or their levels are reduced by the microRNA as described earlier.

MicroRNA Structure

In this new research, the team has found that microRNAs have a high occurrence of the bases G and C and this helps their formation and abundance in the cells. Further, there is a position-specific bias for these bases in the microRNAs. This is recognised by a specific RNA-binding protein. The present way to silence genes is by introducing artificial microRNA which binds to the messenger RNA of interest and prevents the production of protein. This is done in a deliberate process of trial and error.

Researchers Decode How Malaria Parasite Multiplies

- With over 4,00,000 deaths in 2018, according to the WHO, malaria still remains one of the biggest killer infections globally, concentrated mainly in Africa and India. The disease is caused by the parasite *Plasmodium* and transmitted by the *Anopheles* mosquito. To understand in detail how this parasite multiplies within a mosquito, an international team of researchers spent years studying different proteins in the parasite. Their study published in Cell Reports has found two important proteins essential for proliferation. These finding can help develop new drugs and thus pave way for malaria eradication. The team found that two large protein complexes (condensins) called SMC2 and SMC4 played essential roles in the parasite proliferation. One of the co-authors Prof. Rita Tewari in an email to The Hindu says: “It means that these molecules are required for every stage of parasite multiplication, and even in the cyst-like structure in the mosquito (oocyst) where the infective stage of the parasite develops. It is at this stage that it is injected into humans through mosquito bite.” She is from the School of Life Sciences at the University of Nottingham. The team showed that when genes behind these proteins were deleted, the number of oocysts in the mosquito gut significantly reduced and were smaller in size compared to the normal ones.

Adaptable Parasite

Prof. Tewari adds in a release: “This malaria parasite is very adaptable. Even if you kill it in the human bloodstream, some of these sex cells taken in by the mosquito during a bite can develop and multiply further in the mosquito. Over time, it [the parasite] has adapted to survive and multiply using different modes, which is why it is difficult to control the disease.” The malaria parasite has different models of multiplication in different stages of its life cycle, and it is essential to track down all the important proteins behind it for developing a new effective drug.

Prices of Key Pharma Ingredients May Rise If Virus Impact Prolongs

- The prices of key pharmaceutical ingredients could rise if the COVID-19 situation in China does not improve soon, a top company official said. China accounted for 67.56% of total imports of bulk drugs and drug intermediates at \$2,405.42 million to India in 2018-19.



'No Price-Rise Concerns'

The Department of Pharmaceuticals (DoP) has already constituted a high-level panel to assess the impact of the outbreak of the deadly virus in China on the supply of APIs in India. According to official sources, Indian drugmakers have informed the high-level committee that they presently have stocks for the next two to three months. There has been no supply from the neighbouring country for the last 20-25 days, mainly due to Chinese New Year holidays, sources said. **The prices of medicines are monitored by the government, and apart from the essential medicines whose prices are fixed by the government, companies are allowed to hike prices of the remaining drugs by only up to 10% in a year. India has a high dependence on fermentation-based APIs / intermediates namely antibiotics and vitamins.**

Secrecy Hurts

→ From quick sequencing of the whole genome of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that causes COVID-19 — after alerting WHO in December 2019 about a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown cause — to quickly developing viral diagnostic tests, China has done much to address the epidemic. Also, the many facilities that became temporary hospitals in the face of growing cases is testimony to China's ability to pull off the unimaginable in containing the epidemic. Whether the decision to shut down huge cities to halt the viral spread may have actually helped is debatable, but it is important to note that China has done a lot after the initial delay in reporting the disease. However, China, given its capabilities, could have contained the spread with very little effort and resources had it been transparent and acted on time. Apparently, China did not apply the lessons it learnt from the SARS outbreak despite strident global criticism. **Downplaying and being secretive about public health issues, particularly novel virus outbreaks, as it found out during SARS, and then now, can be very counterproductive.** This is in contrast to the way Kerala handled the Nipah virus outbreaks in 2018-19. Transparency and timely action helped the State contain the outbreaks within days, with few cases, deaths in 2018. There is an eerie similarity between China's SARS outbreak response in 2002-03 and the current epidemic. If, during SARS, it initially withheld information and delayed by three months reporting it to WHO, in the case of COVID-19 it systematically downplayed its scale for nearly six weeks after pneumonia cases of unknown cause were first seen on December 8, 2019. Shockingly, even as it reported the case cluster to WHO on December 31, and the wet market, thought to be the outbreak hotspot, was closed on January 1, people were kept in the dark. In fact, eight doctors who sounded an early alarm were detained for "spreading rumours". Ironically, even as about 900 patients presented with symptoms each day by late December, as a daily reported, official numbers stayed the same. In fact, after initially reporting 44 cases to WHO, the numbers were reduced to 41 on January 11 and continued to remain the same till January 16, when the city and province's annual political congress ended. Even on January 16, WHO was informed of only "limited" human spread, thus putting more people at infection risk. The cases reported began rising slowly since January 17 to reach 121 on January 19 when a community dinner was held in Wuhan. It took a Chinese epidemiologist's revelation the next day about the outbreak's severity for Wuhan to start acting decisively. The lesson is that in the event of an outbreak, secrecy is a killer and transparency the saviour.



To Avoid Panic, WHO Will Not Use SARS In New Virus' Official Name

- Three days after the novel coronavirus got an official name, the World Health Organization has clearly indicated that it will not use the official name in all its public communication while referring to the virus. On February 11, the WHO announced COVID-19 as the name for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. The "CO" in COVID stands corona, while "VI" is for virus and "D" for disease. The number 19 stands for the year 2019 when the outbreak was first identified. The same day, in a preprint posted in the bioRxiv repository, the Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses announced the official name for the virus — "Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2" or "SARS-CoV-2".

Official Classification

The Study Group had assessed the novelty of the virus to arrive at the name. The Coronavirus Study Group is responsible for developing the official classification of viruses and taxonomic naming of the Coronaviridae family to which the novel coronavirus belongs. A news item published in the journal Science mentions that WHO is "not happy" with the name given to the virus and hence is not planning to adopt it. It will instead call the pathogen "virus responsible for COVID-19" or the "COVID-19 virus", a WHO spokesperson told Science. The WHO has clarified that neither of the two names that it plans to use to refer to the novel coronavirus are "intended as replacements for the official name of the virus" that the Study Group has chosen. The reason why the WHO is not happy with the name and its refusal to use it while referring to the virus stems from the fact that the official name given to the virus has SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) mentioned in it. The SARS coronavirus, which was identified in 2003, first infected humans in the Guangdong province of southern China in 2002. The SARS epidemic spread to 29 countries and resulted in 8,096 cases and 774 deaths before it was contained in July 2003. So, from a "risk communications perspective, using the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia, which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003", the spokesperson told Science.

The Study Group adopts a "scientific approach" while naming a new coronavirus. Based on whole genome sequence shared by China and other countries, scientists have confirmed that the novel virus belongs to the same species as the one that caused the SARS epidemic, which is called SARS-related coronavirus. "The virus may be novel to the rest of the world, but it isn't really to taxonomists. So, it's not getting its own name. Instead, the committee appended a '2' for viruses isolated from patients in Wuhan and elsewhere," the chair of the Study Group John Ziebuhr of Justus Liebig University Giessen told Science. According to the journal, the paper was sent to bioRxiv repository on February 7, four days before it was posted on the repository. The authors had also sent the paper to a scientific journal for publication. After the outbreak, the WHO had requested all scientific journals to first share with it any paper that they receive before publishing.

Convalescent Plasma Therapy Tested on Critically Ill COVID-19 Patients

- In the absence of any preventive vaccine or specific antivirals for treating COVID-19 patients infected with the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, a pharmaceutical company in China has turned to plasma taken from people who have recovered from the infection to treat critically ill patients.



Convalescent Plasma

Convalescent plasma has been listed as a therapeutic method by China's National Health Commission. People who have recovered from COVID-19 disease would have antibodies against the virus. **Infusing the antibodies to critically ill patients is expected to improve the chances of survival.** The plasma that is transfused contains the antibodies. The company had collected plasma from some recovered patients to prepare therapeutic products including convalescent plasma and immune globulin. Plasma taken from recovered patients in Wuhan since January 20 has been given to more than a dozen patients. Initially, three critically ill patients in a hospital in Wuhan received plasma treatment on February 8. An additional 10 patients have received the treatment since then. According to Xinhua, patients who received plasma therapy showed an improvement in clinical symptoms 12-24 hours after being given the therapy. Improvement in clinical symptoms includes key indicators such as blood oxygen saturation and significant reduction in inflammatory indicators. This is not the first time that plasma from recovered patients has been used to treat people infected with certain viruses for which drugs are not available. **When Ebola struck Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia in 2014, the World Health Organization prioritised the evaluation of treatment with convalescent plasma derived from patients who have recovered from the disease.**

Earlier Trials

There was hardly any benefit seen in 84 patients treated with convalescent plasma in a trial carried out in Ebola patients in Guinea between mid-February and early August 2015. The results were published in The New England Journal of Medicine.

Time-Tested Method

"Treatment with convalescent plasma is a classical, time-tested method. It has been used against measles, chickenpox, and rabies. In the case of rabies, it acts as passive immunisation after dog bite and before disease develops," says virologist Dr. Jacob John.

Timing is Crucial

"Best time to give convalescent plasma containing antibodies is before disease develops. In the case of COVID-19, by the time pneumonia is diagnosed it is too late. That is the reason why therapy using convalescent plasma is not popular for other viral diseases," Dr. John adds. According to him, as the disease develops, the body has already begun developing antibodies against the virus. Infusing convalescent plasma is essentially like topping with more antibodies hoping that increased amount of antibodies will dampen the disease progression. "Antibodies in the plasma bind to the virus and prevent them from entering the cells. But by the time it is given, many cells have already been infected. Hence, convalescent plasma therapy is not very effective," says Dr. John.

Can Dams to Control Rising Sea Levels Work?

- A paper that has been accepted for publication in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society has proposed an extraordinary measure to protect 25 million people and important economic regions of 15 Northern European countries from rising seas as a result of climate change: a mammoth **Northern European Enclosure Dam (NEED)** enclosing all of the North Sea. "The concept of constructing NEED showcases the extent of protection efforts that are



required if mitigation efforts fail to limit sea level rise,” the authors of the paper, Sjoerd Groeskamp of the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, and Joakim Kjellsson of the Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research in Kiel, Germany, have written.

THE PROPOSAL: The scientists have proposed the construction of two dams of a combined length of 637 km — the first between northern Scotland and western Norway, measuring 476 km and with an average depth of 121 m and maximum depth of 321 m; the second between France and southwestern England, of length 161 km, and average depth of 85 m and maximum depth of 102 m. According to Groeskamp and Kjellsson, separating the North and Baltic Seas from the Atlantic Ocean may be the “most viable option” to protect Northern Europe against unstoppable sea level rise (SLR). They have also identified other regions in the world where such mega-enclosures could potentially be considered, including the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Irish Sea, and the Red Sea.

THE RATIONALE: While NEED may appear to be “overwhelming” and “unrealistic”, it could be “potentially favourable” financially and in scale when compared with alternative solutions to fight SLR, the paper argues. The researchers classify the solutions to SLR into three categories of taking no action, protection, and managed retreat — and submit that NEED is in the second category. While managed retreat, which includes options such as managed migrations, may be less expensive than protection (NEED), it involves intangible costs such as national and international political instability, psychological difficulties, and loss of culture and heritage for migrants. NEED, the paper says, will have the least direct impact on people’s daily lives, can be built at a “reasonable cost”, and has the largest potential to be implemented with the required urgency to be effective.

THE VIABILITY: Using the costs of building the 33.9-km Saemangeum Seawall in South Korea and the Maasvlakte 2 extension of the Rotterdam harbour in the Netherlands as examples, the researchers have estimated the total costs associated with NEED at between €250 billion and €550 billion. If construction is spread over a 20-year period, this will work out to an annual expense of around 0.07%-0.16% of the GDP of the 15 Northern European countries that will be involved. Construction costs would be higher for the UK, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, amounting to roughly 0.15%-0.32% of their GDP annually for 20 years because of their vulnerability, awareness of SLR, or both. The construction will “heavily impact” marine and terrestrial ecosystems inside and outside the enclosure, will have social and cultural implications, and affect tourism and fisheries, the paper says.

What Are the Concerns On FB’s Encryption Plan?

- ➔ After Facebook announced **end-to-end encryption for Facebook Messenger and Instagram**, a coalition of child protection organisations and experts from all over the world, anchored by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, U.K., sent an open letter to CEO Mark Zuckerberg, expressing “significant concerns” about the company’s proposals. They were worried that this decision would reduce child safety online, because such a move will not allow the due process of monitoring for content that is not safe for children, including online grooming or uploading of child pornographic content.



What Is End-To-End Encryption? Why Is There Opposition to It?

It is a system of locking messages wherein only those who are communicating can view them. Encryption kicks in the minute the message is sent, and only unravels for the intended recipient. No third party can decrypt the message, including platform administrators and law enforcement agencies. It can only be shared through screenshots. The advantage with this kind of encryption is that it ensures online privacy. Last year, Mr. Zuckerberg revealed his intention to rejig the architecture to integrate three platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram. He also announced his intention to write in default end-to-end encryption. Child safety activists are aghast as they believe that as far as child safety goes, this could well be a misstep. The U.K.-based John Carr, who has anchored the campaign against such encryption, is a leading authority on the use of the Internet by children and young people. He has summed up the primary opposition, on his blog, thus: "We are creating what are, for practical purposes, impregnable or unreachable spaces. These confer impunity on any and all manner of wrongdoing. Paedophiles and persons who wish to exchange child sex abuse material are permanently shielded, as are terrorists and an infinite variety of scam artists." Mr. Carr outlines data from a series of Freedom of Information requests made to the police in England and Wales involving "online grooming behaviour directed at a child, or the distribution of child sex abuse material on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp." From a total of 9,259 instances, over a year (2017-2018), police reported that 22% were on Instagram, 19% were on Facebook or Facebook Messenger, and 3% from WhatsApp. Since all three belong to one company that wants to encrypt everything, the petition takes on an urgent tone. Mr. Carr also clarifies: "We are not talking about Facebook's main platform. Nothing will change there. So, yes, if an illegal image goes up, they will find it and delete it in minutes, maybe seconds... But this is all about their Messaging services. So that's Facebook Messenger and Instagram Direct — where they are proposing to make themselves blind." In 2018, Facebook made 16.8 million reports to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), leading to 2,500 arrests and 3,000 children being safeguarded in the U.K alone. As per reports on online child sexual abuse imagery (CSAI) collated between 2008 and 2017 by the NCMEC, India tops the list of 10 nations where CSAI originated. A total of 38,80,235 cases were reported from India, the report said, but added that distortions might occur if virtual private networks (VPNs) or proxy servers were used. The Rajya Sabha ad-hoc committee that went into the issue of pornography on social media and its effect on children has called specifically to permit breaking of end-to-end encryption to trace distributors of child pornography. It has also suggested that Prime Minister Narendra Modi take the lead in building a global alliance to combat child pornography on social media.

What Are the Key Demands?

The signatories, including three Indian organisations (Tulir, Arpan and Equations), have urged that Facebook put the brakes on end-to-end encryption until it is able to satisfactorily demonstrate that there will be no reduction in children's safety. In fact, Mr. Zuckerberg has himself recorded such concerns in a blogpost: "When billions of people use a service to connect, some of them are going to misuse it for truly terrible things like child exploitation, terrorism, and extortion. But we face an inherent trade-off because we will never find all of the potential harm we do today when our security systems can see the messages themselves."



What's the Future?

The process of securing end-to-end encryption is not easy. Meanwhile, the coalition has also pledged its support to work with Facebook to embed safety mechanisms. Ultimately, the true test will be to pick that mode of encryption that will ensure privacy but address concerns of online safety too.



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