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International

A Post-Pandemic World Order (Arjun Subramaniam - Strategic Analyst and Military Historian)

- As the world starts recovering from the debilitating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, nations will draw on all their reserves to ensure that their place in the global pecking order is largely maintained. Among many factors, dogma, ideology and notions of power merit serious attention as non-quantifiable national characteristics that could either impede or accelerate the recovery process.

Ideological and Civilizational Beliefs

Dogma has traditionally been linked to religious beliefs. Since World War II, however, it has incorporated several strains of ideological and enduring civilizational beliefs. Take the case of China, for example, which is attempting to upstage, or at least match, the U.S. as the principal global hegemon. Realising that mere ideology was not enough to propel it to that position, Mao Zedong's successors have drawn on two civilizational markers from Chinese history that have troubled the Chinese people for centuries: the 'Middle Kingdom' syndrome and 'the Century of Humiliation'. While the first marker builds on the glory of the Ming Dynasty (late 14th century to mid-17th century) and the centrality of the Han people in a world order that saw China as the most prosperous nation in the world, it also reminds the Chinese people of the dangers that lurk around its periphery. Chinese leaders often draw attention to the Mongol rule (late 13th century to mid-14th century) and over two centuries of misrule by the Manchus and the Qing Dynasty (mid-17th century to early 20th century) as examples of this. The second marker draws on the stripping of China of its honour and resources by multiple colonial powers during the 'Century of Humiliation' from the mid-19th century to the time of the emergence of the People's Republic of China in 1949. These markers from Chinese history have gradually become dogma and seen as a blot on Chinese history that need resolution. **Realising in the 1980s that Maoist ideology no longer appealed to the Chinese people, Deng reintroduced Confucianism as a much-needed intellectual and ethical prop to China's push for 'great power' status.** Sun Tzu re-emerged as China's answer to Clausewitz and for a few decades it appeared that these would soften traditional Chinese dogma. It also raised hopes that China would largely play by the existing rules and bide its time. Xi Jinping, however, has been a leader in a hurry. In the process, he has perpetuated the deepened hurt of the Chinese people to an extent that it has become embedded dogma. **He has abandoned Confucianism and the ethical pursuit of power, and fallen back on hard-core communist ideology.** Hard power and muscular nationalism coupled with a neo-colonial and mercantilist attitude towards vulnerable nations seems to be the new strategy to compete with the U.S. While this strategy seemed to be working at a time when the U.S. appeared to be looking inwards and showing signs of strategic fatigue, President Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative demonstrated an overreach that had the potential to backfire as it created a sense of fear of, rather than respect for, China. Then came the pandemic and it is worth pondering over whether holding on to historical dogma, ideology and notions of power will hold the same potential in the accumulation of power, or whether nations which are willing to live in the moment and be sensitive to the global environment will fare better. China will be worse off should it prefer the former course. Its continued aggressive posture along the Line of Actual Control only confirms this rigid position. The U.S.'s recovery



will be impeded by embedded notions of power which have resulted in a strategic oversight and fatigue of sorts. The pandemic has tested the U.S. state's capacity, capability and competency. However, the U.S.'s economic resilience, restless people, institutional robustness and intellectual reserves will help it pull through.

Demonstration of Flexibility

India is neither afflicted by unreasonable expectations of power, ideological dogma, or haunted by accentuated perceptions of historical hurt. Despite its own centuries of conquest and exploitation by invaders and colonial powers, it has demonstrated resilience, learnt to let go and embraced the good that emerged from the centuries of darkness. That is a demonstration of flexibility, which is good in troubled times such as these. Yes, it does have societal fissures and serious issues of compliance, but those can be mended with national resilience and improved public discipline and good leadership. If India weathers the entire pandemic cycle as it has coped with the initial storm, it should be better placed than the two leading powers to recover. It will be a fascinating global strategic landscape to observe as a post-COVID-19 world order emerges, and for sure, India could play an important role in its possible transformation.

Israel Swears in Unity Government

- Israel's Parliament swore in its new **unity government** led by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his former rival Benny Gantz, ending the longest political crisis in the nation's history. Lawmakers in the **120-person parliament, the Knesset**, formally approved the three-year coalition government with 73 voting for and 49 against. One member was absent for the vote. Addressing the Knesset before the vote, Mr. Netanyahu vowed to push on with **controversial plans to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank**. "It's time to apply the Israeli law and write another glorious chapter in the history of Zionism," Mr. Netanyahu said on the issue of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. **Such a move is seen likely to cause international uproar and inflame tensions in the West Bank, home to nearly three million Palestinians and some 400,000 Israelis living in settlements considered illegal under international law**. Netanyahu told the chamber that annexation "won't distance us from peace, it will bring us closer". Israel's unity government starts work amid the coronavirus pandemic and after a political crisis that saw **three inconclusive elections** and left the country in political limbo for more than 500 days. **The coalition government was agreed last month between veteran right-wing leader Netanyahu and the centrist Gantz, a former army chief.**

The Irish Are Repaying A 173-Yr-Old 'Debt' To Native Americans During Covid-19;

Here's Why

- According to a study conducted by various US government agencies in 2009 following the H1N1 flu outbreak, reports suggested that death rates were higher among Native Americans in the country. This was in part due to high rates of poverty and high-risk health conditions like diabetes, heart diseases and asthma that were prevalent among Native American communities. Almost a decade later, Native American communities have found themselves hit hard by the onslaught of coronavirus infections due to the very reasons that made them more susceptible to H1N1, in addition to various other social-cultural factors. The Indian Health Service, a division within the US Department of Health and Human Services, that focuses on medical and public health services in federally-recognised Native American communities, has been consistently underfunded and communities continue to not have access to adequate healthcare. These challenges have exacerbated due to COVID-19 for the



communities. However, in the first week of May, help arrived from an unexpected source – Ireland.

Why Did Ireland Help Native Americans In Fighting COVID-19?

A **crowd-funding campaign** on **GoFundMe** that had been set up to help Native Americans during the COVID-19 outbreak was unexpectedly flooded with donations in early May, from people in Ireland and those with Irish surnames. **In the comments section of the GoFundMe campaign that collected approximately \$3.9 million in two weeks since it was set up, people said they were making donations in commemoration of the aid that Native Americans had provided to Ireland during the Great Famine that occurred between 1845 to 1849. The famine altered Ireland's cultural, demographic and political landscape. Large sums of money were donated to Ireland, from people around the world, from places like Calcutta to Native American tribes in the United States.** In 1847, Native American Choctaws had donated approximately \$150, that would be equivalent to approximately \$5,000 today. **The Native Americans had themselves experienced starvation some 16 years prior, after they had been forcefully displaced by settlers from their native lands, an occurrence that came to be known as the Trail of Tears.** The humanitarian gesture of the Native Americans towards Ireland's people was hence rooted in an understanding of pain and suffering to which they had also been subjected. About 173 years later, comments on the GoFundMe page appeared to indicate that Ireland's people were repaying the generosity of the Native Americans. "Ireland remembers", said one donor on the GoFundMe page.

Why Have Native Americans Been Hit Hard By COVID-19?

Native Americans in Navajo Nation, spread across the states of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico in the United States, have been particularly hard due to COVID-19. According to data provided by the Navajo Department of Health (NDOH) and Navajo Epidemiology Centre (NEC), approximately 4,071 people have been infected in Navajo Nation, with 142 deaths. These numbers do not reflect the number of infections in border towns. In addition to the high rates of poverty and high-risk pre-existing health conditions of diabetes, heart diseases and asthma that many suffer from in Native Americans communities, they also have little access to adequate healthcare. **Many households do not have access to running water, making sanitation a challenge.** Due to socio-cultural factors, **many generations in Native American families live together in cramped quarters, making isolation and social distancing difficult if not impossible during the times of COVID-19.** With the US among the countries with the highest numbers of COVID-19, infections and a government and healthcare system struggling to contain the outbreak, vulnerable communities in the country will face harsher circumstances in an already challenging environment.

How Are Donations Helping Native Americans?

The Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund that has been collecting the GoFundMe donations said they were tackling the issues that the communities were facing at the grassroots level. Using funds, face masks were being stitched to distribute among families, emergency personnel and healthcare workers. The lockdown in the US means many families have been unable to access everyday essentials, including food and water. Unemployment as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown has also meant that many have lost their jobs, making it even more difficult for low-income families in these communities. According to a press release by the relief fund, donations are also being used to help families that need assistance with everyday necessities. Due to the lack of infrastructure, price gouging and hoarding, activists on social media said people in Navajo Nation and the Hopi Reservation, were also finding it difficult to access adequate food supplies. The Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund



is among the few community-led initiatives providing a wide range of assistance to Native Americans who have been needing it the most since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Notes on A Digital Currency Plan, Made in China (Partha Ray - Professor of Economics at The Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. Santanu Paul - Co-Founder and CEO Of Talentsprint, An EdTech Company)

→ While the world is grappling with the fallout of COVID-19 and speculating on how far China can be blamed for the pandemic, a silent digital revolution is taking place in China. This expansion of the pilot marks the initiation of China's central bank digital currency (CBDC). Christened **Digital Currency Electronic Payment (DCEP)**, available via a mobile wallet app, pegged 1:1 with fiat currency, and designed to replace M0 (comprising currency issued by the PBoC less the amount held by banking institutions), this is the first such serious initiative in the whole world. Historically, monetary authorities everywhere have been sceptical of cryptocurrencies. **Wild fluctuations in the value of cryptocurrencies, the implied challenge to the monopoly of central banks in issuing fiat currencies, the looming possibility of software bugs, the tainted shadow of the dark web have all been responsible for the unwelcome reception.** In contrast, authorities were far more intrigued by CBDCs. In fact, the Basel-based Bank for International Settlement (BIS) has been conducting surveys on this issue for some time. The recent survey of 2019 revealed that while in general, central banks have been proceeding cautiously towards introducing central banks digital currencies, some have been planning to issue a fiat digital currency in the short to medium term. In particular, the survey revealed that nearly 25% of central banks have the required authority to issue a CBDC, while a third do not, and 40% remain unsure.

Logical Outcome

Chinese investors, however, were always enamoured of cryptocurrencies. With the bearish turn in the Chinese stock market in 2015-16, bitcoins became increasingly popular as an alternative asset class in China. As in media reports, in the recent past, **China has emerged as the capital of the crypto ecosystem, accounting for nearly 90% of trading volumes and hosting two-thirds of bitcoin mining operations.** The PBoC tried hard to curtail this exuberance but achieved limited success. According to the China Daily, by the end of 2017, the Chinese Cabinet approved the PBoC's own digital currency development programme, conducted jointly with qualified commercial banks and institutions. **The recent move to introduce the CBDC in China is a logical outcome of the efforts to curb and tackle its runaway crypto market practices.** Or, the philosophy of the PBoC could simply have been, if you cannot beat them, join them.

Advantages and A Concern

At a practical level, the benefits of CBDC are manifold. First, **paper money comes with high handling charges and eats up 1% to 2% of GDP.** Second, by acting as a powerful **antidote for tax evasion, money laundering and terror financing, CBDCs can materially boost tax revenues while also improving financial compliance and national security.** Third, as a tool of financial inclusion, particularly in emergencies, **direct benefit transfers can be instantly delivered by state authorities deep into rural areas, directly into the mobile wallets of citizens who need them.** On this count, it is noteworthy that the U.S. Congress recently debated the merits of implementing digital dollars in the context of the COVID-19 stimulus bill. Fourth, CBDCs can provide central banks an **uncluttered view and powerful insights into purchasing patterns at the citizen scale.** In the long run, it is believed that CBDCs will **make cross-border payments fast and frictionless.** That said, all these salutary benefits come packaged with a deep and



abiding concern about the **relentless rise of a surveillance state and the concomitant erosion in citizen privacy and anonymity**. If face-recognition technology enables states to spy on the physical movement of citizens, will CBDCs be used to spy on every movement of their money?

Signals from The Move

It is possible that China has decided to use DCEP as its silver bullet to slay three dragons. First, on the world economic stage, **it may want DCEP to challenge the hegemony of the U.S. dollar as the default global reserve currency**. Second, in its war with American BigTech, it may want to showcase DCEP as its weapon of choice to counter FB or Facebook's Libra, which is planning to offer a common cryptocurrency to 2 billion-plus FB users across the world. Third, and still in the realm of speculation, it may wish to use the DCEP to clip the wings of AliPay and WeChatPay, **gigantic fintech duopolies that control 90% of the China's domestic digital payments, and whose ambitions may one day pose a threat to the aura and authority of the central bank**. From gold to silver to paper to digital, the march of currencies goes on. China has rolled the dice on central bank digital currencies, challenging other nations to follow. Welcome to the future of money.

How China Is Seeking More Control on Hong Kong

- China has started pushing for an "improvement" in the Basic Law – the mini-constitution that defines ties between Hong Kong and Beijing – signalling a fundamental change in the way the highly autonomous city-state is run. The move came a day before the opening of the Chinese parliament, where a controversial national security law for Hong Kong is being mooted. **The new law, which is being described as the most sweeping step at curbing dissent so far, seeks to ban "treason, secession, sedition and subversion", and could be passed without consulting the Hong Kong legislature.**

Hong Kong's 'Basic Law'

A former British colony, Hong Kong was handed over to mainland China in 1997, becoming one of its Special Administrative Regions. It is governed by a mini-constitution called the **Basic Law – which affirms the principle of "one country, two systems"**. The constitutional document is a product of the **1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration**– under which **China promised to honour Hong Kong's liberal policies, system of governance, independent judiciary, and individual freedoms for a period of 50 years from 1997**. Since the handover, Hong Kong residents have time and again taken to the streets to protect their Basic Law freedoms, with the first major pro-democracy protest taking place in 2003. In 2014, over one lakh city residents took part in the **'Umbrella Revolution'** to protest against China's denial of democratic reforms.

Impact of the 2019 Protests

The largest protests since the 1997 handover took place last year, when for months tens of thousands of Hong Kongers agitated against a proposed **extradition law**, and continued with pro-democracy marches even after the legislation was withdrawn. The large-scale protests were seen as an affront by mainland China, which under President Xi Jinping has increasingly adopted a more hard-line approach to foreign policy and internal security issues in recent years. **The Hong Kong unrest is also believed to have left its mark on Taiwan, another prickly issue for Beijing which considers the island state as its own. In this year's presidential election, Taiwanese voters brought to power the Democratic Progressive Party, which openly opposes joining China.**



The Proposed National Security Law

Under **Article 23 of the Basic Law**, Hong Kong has to enact a national security law “to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People’s Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies.” When the Hong Kong government first tried to enact the law in 2003, the issue became a rallying point for the city-wide protests which occurred that year. Since then, the government has steered clear of introducing the legislation again. According to a South China Morning Post report, Beijing could now make the law applicable to Hong Kong by another route – by inserting the legislation in **Annex III** of the Basic Law. **Under Article 18, national laws can be applied in Hong Kong if they are placed in Annex III, and must be “confined to those relating to defence and foreign affairs as well as other matters outside the limits of the autonomy of the Region.”** Once listed in Annex III, national laws can be enforced in the city by way of promulgation– meaning automatically being put into effect– or by legislating locally in the Special Administrative Region. Towards the end of May, the Chinese parliament is expected to vote on a resolution that will make way for the new law, which could be promulgated in Hong Kong by June end, the report said.

What Could Happen If Such A Law Takes Effect?

As per the SCMP report, the new law would ban seditious activities that target mainland Chinese rule, as well as punish external interference in Hong Kong affairs. Many expect a revival of the protests that rocked the city last year. **A major blow to Hong Kong’s freedoms, the law could effectively bring the city under full control of mainland China, experts say.** The move could also undermine Hong Kong’s position as an East Asian trading hub, and invite global disapproval for Beijing, which is already being accused of withholding key information related to the coronavirus pandemic.

China Seeks India’s Support for Legislation

- China has sought the support and understanding of India and other countries for its controversial decision to impose a new national security law on Hong Kong, saying the new draft legislation is aimed at containing the “secessionist” forces in the former British colony who have posed a “grave threat” to the country’s national security and sovereignty. In an apparent move to blunt any international backlash, China has sent demarches to India and other countries, explaining the reason for the draft legislation with a reminder that “upholding national security” in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is “purely China’s internal affair and no foreign country can interfere in this matter”. “Hong Kong’s prosperity and long-term stability is in line with the common interests of the whole international community, including your country, as well as protection of your country’s legitimate interests in Hong Kong. “We hope that your government will understand and support China’s relevant practices,” it said.

The Changing Nature of Chinese Diplomacy (Vijay Gokhale - Former Foreign Secretary of India And A Former Ambassador to China)

- Deng died in 1997. China prospered just as Deng had imagined. It began to occupy centre stage in world diplomacy, but the ship began to come apart from its moorings. A new generation of diplomats, with knowledge of the English language and a careerist mindset, has started to whittle away at the anchors laid down by Zhou and Deng. **Arrogance has replaced**



humility. Persuasion is quickly abandoned in favour of the stick when countries take actions contrary to Chinese wishes. The Chinese pursue unilateralism instead of compromise in the South China Sea. In place of 'united front' tactics, they are bent on creating irritations simultaneously with multiple neighbouring countries. To avenge the 'Century of Humiliation' that China endured in the hands of western imperial powers from roughly 1839-1840 to 1949, they adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, uncaring that much of the world has done nothing to China and, indeed, shares a similar historical experience. Statements of fact or reasoned opinion are seen by them as insult or humiliation. Foreign governments are educated about their responsibilities in managing the media and the narrative, even as the Chinese manipulate the same media to serve their purposes. They expect to receive gratitude for everything they do, including handling COVID-19, as if it was only done with the foreigner in mind. The veneer of humility has thinned. The reserves of goodwill are fast depleting. The ship seems to be adrift at sea. China, post-COVID-19, will be operating in a very different external environment.

The Bill Passed by The US Senate That Could Delist Some Chinese Companies

- The **US Senate passed a Bill** by a unanimous vote that could delist some Chinese companies from selling shares on American stock exchanges, amid rising tensions between the two countries over the pandemic. The Bill, titled '**Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act**', was introduced to protect American investors and their retirement savings "from foreign companies that have been operating on US stock exchanges while flouting Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) oversight". The Bill must be passed by the House of Representatives and signed by US President Donald Trump before it becomes law.

What is the Bill?

The Bill prohibits securities of a company from being listed on any of the US securities exchanges if the company fails to comply with the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board's (PCAOB) audits for three years in a row. It also requires public companies to disclose whether they are owned or controlled by a foreign government, including China's Communist government. "Many Americans invest in US stock exchange as part of their retirement savings, and dishonest companies operating on the exchanges put Americans at risk. This legislation protects the interest of hardworking American investors by ensuring that foreign companies traded in America are subject to the same independent audit requirements that apply to American companies," the US government said. **The PCAOB was set up to inspect audits of public companies to ensure the information companies provide to the public is accurate and trustworthy.** Significantly, as things stand now, the Chinese government refuses to allow the PCAOB to inspect audits of companies that are registered in China and Hong Kong. This poses a substantial risk to Americans who want to invest in such companies. According to the SEC, over 224 US-listed companies are located in countries where there are obstacles to PCAOB carrying out audits. These companies have a combined capitalisation of over \$1.8 trillion. Moreover, in the last 10 years an increasing number of Chinese companies are listing themselves on US stock exchanges. Incidentally, 11 per cent of all securities class action lawsuits in 2011 were brought against Chinese-owned companies that misrepresented themselves in financial documents. Most recently, the shares of the Chinese company Luckin Coffee plummeted after an accounting fraud came to light.

What Happened with Luckin Coffee?

Earlier this month, China's Luckin Coffee, considered to be a competitor of the American coffee chain Starbucks, sacked two of its top officials after evidence of an accounting fraud came to light. Six other employees who had knowledge of the fraud or were involved, were suspended or sent on leave. In April, **the company's shares plummeted by over 80 per cent**



after fake transactions to the tune of \$310 million were revealed, which made it look like the firm was experiencing rapid growth. In a statement, American Securities Association (ASA) CEO Chris Lacovella said, "Chinese companies traded in the US have routinely avoided the SEC's rigorous company-specific disclosure and audit regulations, leaving American investors in the dark and at risk, and now we know why."

What Does This Mean for Chinese Companies?

While the Bill applies to all foreign companies, it is targeted specifically at China. A report in The South China Morning Post said that in order to comply with the requirements of the Bill, Chinese companies may have to break state secret laws in China. Therefore, the Bill might be a way to encourage the Chinese government to take a re-look at its laws.

Other China-Related Bills in the US

This is not the first time the US has passed a Bill targeting China. In November 2019, the House of Representatives approved the Senate's version of the Bill titled, 'Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act', which required the US Secretary of State to annually certify if Hong Kong retains enough autonomy to be eligible for special treatment by the US. As per the Bill, the US can also impose sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations in Hong Kong. As of November 2019, over 150 China-related legislation were pending in the US with the aim to counter Beijing. The subjects of these legislation include the mass internment of Uyghurs, cyber-security and Taiwan and the South China sea among others.

Are the United States and China Entering A New Cold War?

➔ Relations between the U.S. and China have plunged to a nadir in recent weeks. On May 15, President Donald Trump threatened to "cut off the whole relationship" with China over the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan. He had earlier called the coronavirus "Chinese virus" and threatened to seek compensation from China for the damages caused by the outbreak. China, sometimes through the state-run media, has hit back, calling Mr. Trump's recent comments "lunacy". The rising tensions between the two superpowers have prompted many experts to warn of a new Cold War. Hawks in the Trump administration openly push for a more aggressive approach towards Beijing. Relations between the two countries had started deteriorating well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2017, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy called China as "a revisionist power" seeking "to erode American security and prosperity". In September 2019, while responding to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford's comment that the American government was formulating a strategy to address potential "security challenges" by China, the Foreign Ministry in Beijing "urged" the U.S. "to abandon the Cold-War mentality"

The 'Novikov Telegram'

In early April, China's Ministry of State Security sent an internal report to the country's top leaders, stating that hostility in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak could tip relations with the U.S. into confrontation, according to a Reuters report. One of the officials the report has quoted said some in the Chinese intelligence community see the internal report as China's version of the 'Novikov Telegram', referring to a report Nikolai Novikov, the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, sent to Moscow in September 1946, laying out his analysis of the U.S. conduct. In his report, Novikov had said the U.S. was determined on world domination, and suggested the Soviet Union create a buffer in Eastern Europe. Novikov's telegram was a response to the "Long Telegram", the 8,000-word report sent by George Kennan, an official at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, to Washington, in which he said the Soviet Union was heavily armed and



determined to spread communism. Historians often trace the origins of the Cold War to these telegrams.

Nationalist Overdrive

"This situation is unlikely to ease until the U.S. presidential election. Post-election, temperatures could decrease, but a deep-rooted antipathy towards China has gripped the popular and political imagination in the U.S. Therefore, tensions will not go away. **In China, the leadership and public opinion are both on a nationalist overdrive and the Trump administration is seen as the prime antagonist.** The prognosis is not encouraging," she said. Does it mean both countries are already in a Cold War? "There are similarities between the current crisis and the Cold War. **The political elites of both China and the U.S., like the Soviet Union and the U.S. back then, see each other as their main rivals.** We can also see this antagonism moving from the political elite to the popular perception,". "But there are key differences as well. We don't see the kind of proxy conflicts between the U.S. and China which we did during the Cold War. **The world is also not bipolar any more. There are third parties such as the EU, Russia, India and Japan. These parties increasingly have a choice whether or not to align with either power as they see fit and on a case by case basis.** This leads to a very different kind of international order than during the Cold War,". "The Cold War was out and out ideological between the communist and capitalist blocs. For China, a country ruled by a communist party where the primary goal of all state apparatus is preserving the regime in power, it's always been ideological. The U.S. has started realising this angle about China now. The Republican party has ideological worldviews, too. If Trump gets re-elected, the ideological underpinnings of the U.S.-China rivalry could get further solidified."

With an Eye on U.S. Election, Iran Tries A New Tack

- ➔ After years of increasing tensions that nearly led to war, Iran has moderated its approach to the West, shifting from a policy of provocation to one of limited cooperation. The change reflects an effort to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S. that the Iranians say could benefit President Donald Trump in the November election. **Nowhere is the shift more evident than in Iraq, where Iran has backed a pro-American Prime Minister and ordered its proxy militias to cease their rocket attacks on U.S. forces.** The Americans, while publicly dismissive of any change in Iranian posture, have quietly reciprocated in modest and indirect ways. Taken together, the openings represent an **incipient détente** that, even if it does not last or lead to the end of hostilities between Iran and the U.S., has already lowered the temperature of the relationship, reducing the risk of open conflict. "Both Iran and the U.S. definitely do not want a war six months before the U.S. elections." Iran's shift, which it has not announced or explained publicly, appears to be tactical, analysts said, noting that the country still vehemently opposes the Trump administration's demand that it renegotiate its nuclear agreement with the West and that it has not backed off its goal of ousting the U.S. military from West Asia. Publicly, both countries remain engaged in verbal warfare. But the recent signs of de-escalation have been significant:

Attacks Ceased

After months of hit-and-run attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq that pushed the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war in January, Iran has called off its proxy militias, and the attacks have largely ceased. **When Iraq's Parliament chose a U.S.-backed Prime Minister this, Iran, which has been instrumental in choosing previous Iraqi governments, ultimately acceded to the choice and helped put him in office.** In April, Iran reached out to the U.S. to open negotiations for a prisoner swap, offering to release a U.S. Navy veteran held by Iran in exchange for an Iranian American doctor detained by the Americans. Attacks on merchant ships and tankers in the Persian Gulf



that threatened one of the world's busiest shipping lanes for much of last year have been ratcheted down, although not entirely ended. Diplomats, Iraqi and Iranian officials and analysts cite a combination of reasons for the change, including a fear of war with the U.S. They also note that Iran is overextended – fighting a coronavirus epidemic, a tanking economy and public unrest at home – and needs to retrench.

Caught by Surprise

Tehran was caught by surprise when the Americans retaliated for the killing of a U.S. contractor in Iraq in December by killing the leader of Iran's elite Quds Force, Gen. Qassem Soleimani. The U.S. threatened a disproportionate response if another American was killed, something Iran could ill afford. Iran has also concluded that escalating tensions with the U.S. could provoke armed conflict that, aside from being painful for Iran, could benefit Mr. Trump politically, improving his re-election chances, according to people familiar with the policy. Since taking office, Mr. Trump has withdrawn from the nuclear agreement with Iran and imposed crippling economic sanctions that have devastated Iran's economy.

Why South Korea's New Covid-19 Outbreak Has the LGBTQ Community Worried

- ➔ At one-point, South Korea had the highest number of coronavirus infections outside China. Then for weeks, the country was praised for having managed to control the spread of COVID-19. That changed after a new outbreak hit capital Seoul linked to the nightclub district of Itaewon. Along with the surge in new cases, this new wave also put sharp focus on the city's LGBTQ community, after approximately 130 new cases were traced to a coronavirus cluster related to a 29-year-old man who visited several establishments in Itaewon on May 2. South Korea's public health authorities announced that the man, who later tested positive for COVID-19, may have come in contact with approximately 5,500 people. The identification of the man as a member of the city's LGBTQ community, led to backlash against members of the community who already face discrimination and harassment in conservative South Korean society.

What Were Concerns Following This New Outbreak?

South Korea's LGBTQ community fear this singling out of the community would only increase the discrimination and harassment they face and prevent them from getting tested due to fears of being identified and the possibility of their personal information being publicly leaked. Homophobic attitudes continue to prevail in South Korea's deeply conservative society and members of the community face harassment and discrimination, with few public spaces in the country where they can feel safe and comfortable to be themselves. The clubs are among the few such spaces. Members of the community also objected to the use of the term "gay club" to identify the location of the outbreak by some in South Korean media.

How Did Discrimination Against Seoul's LGBTQ Community Intensify?

Kookmin Ilbo, a major conservative South Korean news publication, reported that the infected individual had visited several local businesses, many of which were gay clubs. Other Korean news publications followed. Many of the clubs' visitors found that their names, identities, including details of their employment were subsequently published by these news outlets. Many in South Korea who had been oblivious to Seoul LGBTQ community and especially the places of leisure that community members frequent, were now made aware of it within the context of the discrimination that the community already faces and the fear and prejudices that have been associated with COVID-19. To make matters worse for the community, soon after the nightclub cluster was recorded, it was revealed that new infections had been traced



to a sauna in the upscale Gangnam neighbourhood of Seoul that is frequented by the LGBTQ community. The focus on the community only increased, leading to homophobic attacks on social media as well as on news media.

How Did South Korea's Government Respond?

South Korean Health Ministry official Yoon Tae-ho urged people not to discriminate against the LGBTQ community. Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon asked people who had visited clubs and establishments in Itaewon to get tested and promised that personal information would be protected. He also warned that people caught evading testing could be fined. While support groups in the LGBTQ community have been busy reaching out and asking people to get in touch for help and counselling, the fear of being outed, harassed and stigmatised due to their identity has impacted many in the community in an unprecedented way. According to some social media users in South Korea, this incident has given ammunition to homophobic groups to further their anti-LGBTQ narratives by connecting the community with the outbreak of a new COVID-19 infection cluster. According to some reports by LGBTQ social media users in South Korea, following this new infection cluster, members of the community have said they received anonymous messages on social media accounts threatening to oust them.

Lessons From 2014: How School Closures in West Africa Impacted Children

- The closest and the most useful comparison for the current Covid-19-induced school closures across the world is with closures during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014. While the current pandemic and the Ebola epidemic are different in terms of scale, they were similar in how education was hit quickly and hard in the respective outbreak regions. Educationists and policymakers, especially of countries where schools have never remained closed for such extended periods, are now looking at the West Africa experience for important insights into the short- and long-term consequences of government-mandated classroom shutdowns.

Forced Out of School

More than 10,000 schools in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia were closed during the 2014 epidemic to break the chains of transmission, given that children and young people can be vectors of transmission, and contact rates are high in schools. Consequently, 50 lakh students in these countries were pulled out of classrooms. While schools in Sierra Leone were closed for nine months, those in Guinea and Liberia did not open for almost six months. By the time they reopened, students had lost roughly 1,848 hours of education, ranging from 33 weeks in Guinea to 39 weeks in Sierra Leone, according to the 2015 UNDP report on the socio-economic impact of the epidemic.

Many Never Went Back

Once the school gates reopened, many students did not return to the classrooms. According to phone surveys conducted by the World Bank, about 25% of the students in Liberia and 13% in Sierra Leone did not go back to school after reopening. Aside from the 30,000 children orphaned by the epidemic in the three countries, the school dropouts were attributed mainly to economic reasons. In other words, the negative impact of classroom shutdowns was disproportionately borne by the children of the poorest families. The Ebola epidemic caused economic hardships to many families. Business closures and also the government-mandated quarantine period for breadwinners who had come into contact with an infected person left many households without a steady income, and even resulted in job losses. With limited social protection measures in place, many families calculated the financial and opportunity costs of educating their children and that, consequently, led to students dropping out. School closures



and consequent increase in dropout rate also posed child protection challenges. A 2018 guidance note brought out by The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action reported that **school closures due to the Ebola epidemic had led to a growth in child labour in Sierra Leone as children of poor families were expected to contribute to the family income. Children also reported greater levels of corporal punishment from parents.**

Girls Worse Affected

Even among the students worst affected by school closures in 2014, there was a gender divide. **Girls, studies showed, bore the greater cost with rising physical and sexual abuse and violence and an increase in early pregnancies.** In Sierra Leone, during the Ebola outbreak, cases of **teenage pregnancy more than doubled.** “Girls’ enrolment – already lower than boys – did not return to pre-crisis levels. **In Liberia, about eight of every 100 girls of primary school age were out of school before the outbreak. By 2017, this number had almost tripled to 21.** Similarly, in Guinea, as of 2018, girls were 25% less likely than boys to enrol in secondary school compared with pre-crisis levels. One study from Sierra Leone found that girls in highly affected communities were 16% less likely to be in school after they reopened,” states a report that was released by a non-profit international organisation called the Malala Fund, which analysed data from the Ebola epidemic to ascertain educational consequences of Covid-19 for young girls. **“In the face of greater poverty and parental mortality, girls took on more domestic responsibility and were at increased risk of sexual exploitation, with many forced into transactional sex.** In areas where Ebola caused high disruption, girls aged 12 to 17 were 7.2% more likely to become pregnant,” the report states. Drawing on data from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, the report estimates that, **if dropouts increase by the same rate, as many as one crore secondary school-age girls across the world may drop out of school once they reopen.**

The Covid-19 Resolution at The World Health Assembly

- ➔ The 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) took place virtually from May 18-19. During the session, countries including India, Japan, Indonesia, New Zealand, UK and Canada accepted a resolution asking for an **“impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation” of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) response to the pandemic as well as the identification of the “zoonotic” source of the coronavirus.** The origin of the virus is currently believed to be a wet market in Wuhan, China. According to a Reuters report, **116 of the 194 member states were in favour of the resolution.**

What Is the World Health Assembly (WHA)?

The WHA is the decision-making body of the WHO and the Assembly, which is held annually in Geneva, Switzerland, is attended by member states. **During the Assembly, the WHO’s 194 member states discuss health agendas set by the body’s Executive Board, set new goals and assign tasks to fulfil these goals.** Due to Covid-19, the Assembly was held virtually this year, and has been fit into a two-day schedule from a three-week schedule. Apart from this, the Assembly also addressed a global vaccine action plan with the “Immunisation Agenda 2030” that aims to ensure immunisation for all age groups to prevent the spread of preventable diseases and sustaining vaccine supplies.

What Is the WHA Draft Resolution?

The resolution brought forward by the European Union (EU) and moved by Australia on behalf of more than 100 countries including India, Australia and Japan, was endorsed at the Assembly. While it does not mention China, the draft says the Director General of the WHO,



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus should continue “to work closely with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and countries, as part of the One-Health Approach to identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population, including the possible role of intermediate hosts, including through efforts such as scientific and collaborative field missions, which will enable targeted interventions and a research agenda to reduce the risk of similar events as well as to provide guidance on how to prevent SARS-COV2 infection in animals and humans and prevent the establishment of new zoonotic reservoirs, as well as to reduce further risks of emergence and transmission of zoonotic diseases.” Further, the resolution states, “Initiate, at the earliest appropriate moment, and in consultation with Member States, (1) a stepwise process of impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation, including using existing mechanisms, (2) as appropriate, to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19.”

Why Is the Resolution Important?

Since the pandemic, there has been increasing pressure on China, which so far has opposed suggestions for inquiry into the origins of the virus. Meanwhile, the US has repeatedly blamed the WHO and claims the organisation failed to obtain timely information and share it in a transparent fashion. The US has said that the pandemic “had spun out of control” in great part due to a costly “failure” by the WHO. US President Donald Trump threatened to permanently cut funding to the WHO. Trump halted funding to the organization after he said it had “missed the call” on the pandemic. Trump said at the time the body’s response was “China-centric” and suggested that the WHO had gone along with Beijing’s efforts to under-represent the severity of the outbreak. **At present, the US is the WHO’s biggest contributor and makes up over 14.67 per cent of the total funding, at \$553.1 million.** On Monday night Trump posted on Twitter a letter he had addressed to Ghebreyesus. In the letter, Trump accused the WHO of being “curiously” insistent on praising China and for its “alleged transparency”. “Even now, China continues to undermine the International Health Regulations by refusing to share accurate and timely data, viral samples and isolates...” Trump wrote.

So, What Does This Mean for China?

While the resolution has been endorsed at the WHA, it remains to be seen how the probe will be carried out and to what degree of independence. Significantly, the timeline of the probe is also not clear. **So far, China has opposed demands calling for an international investigation into the virus. China’s premier Xi Jinping announced a \$2 billion donation to the United Nations, which is over twice the amount the US contributed before Trump cut off funding. It also offered to set up hospitals and health infrastructure in Africa.** Speaking at the opening ceremony of the WHA, Xi said China “supports” the idea of a comprehensive review of the global response towards Covid-19 after it was brought under control. The Trump administration sees China’s announcement as a way to escape scrutiny over its alleged role in delaying providing information about the disease outbreak.



Foreign Affairs

Dr Harsh Vardhan Takes Charge as WHO Executive Board Chairman: What This Means for India

- India would now be playing a more prominent role at the World Health Organisation (WHO), with Union Health Minister **Dr Harsh Vardhan set to take charge as chairman of the WHO Executive Board at its 147th session.** Vardhan would succeed **Dr Hiroki Nakatani of Japan,** currently the Chairman of the **34-member WHO Executive Board.** The WHO, a specialised agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health, is currently at the forefront of global efforts towards containing the novel coronavirus pandemic. India is a member state of the **South East Asia Region at the WHO.** Last year, the bloc had unanimously decided that India's nominee would be elected to the executive board for a **three-year term beginning May.**

The WHO Executive Board

The WHO is governed by two decision-making bodies – the World Health Assembly and the Executive Board. The agency's headquarters are located at Geneva in Switzerland. According to the WHO website, the Board is composed of **34 members** technically qualified in the field of health, with members being elected for **three-year terms.** The **Health Assembly is the WHO's decision-making body, and consists of 194 Member States.** The Board chairman's post is held by rotation for one year by each of the WHO's six regional groups: African Region, Region of the Americas, South-East Asia Region, European Region, Eastern Mediterranean Region, and Western Pacific Region. At the main Board meeting held in January, the agenda for the forthcoming Health Assembly is agreed upon, and resolutions for forwarding to the Assembly are adopted. A second shorter meeting is held in May, immediately after the Health Assembly, for more administrative matters. **The main functions of the Board are to give effect to the decisions and policies of the Health Assembly, to advise it and generally to facilitate its work.** The Board and the Assembly create a forum for debate on health issues and for addressing concerns raised by Member States. Both the Board and the Assembly produce three kinds of documents – Resolutions and Decisions passed by the two bodies, Official Records as published in WHO Official publications, and Documents that are presented "in session" of the two bodies.

India at the WHO

India became a party to the WHO Constitution on 12 January 1948. The first session of the South East Asia Regional Committee was held on October 4-5, 1948 in the office of the Indian Minister of Health, and was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister. **The first Regional Director for South East Asia was an Indian, Dr Chandra Mani, who served between 1948-1968.** Currently, the post has again been occupied by an Indian appointee, Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, who has been in office since 2014. Since 2019, Dr Soumya Swaminathan has been the WHO's Chief Scientist.

Trump Honours Telugu Girl for Lauding COVID-19 Staff

- Little contributions in difficult times make a great difference, and **when Sravya Annapareddy sent personalised cards to healthcare workers fighting COVID-19 across the United States, little did she know that it would catch the attention of the American President himself.** The 10-year-old Telugu girl born in the U.S. was among three girl scouts in that country to be honoured



by President Donald Trump on Saturday in the White House for applauding COVID-19 frontline workers. **Sravya, along with Laila Khan and Lauren Matney from Troop 744 based out of Elkridge, Maryland, donated 100 boxes of Girl Scouts cookies to local firefighters, doctors and nurses.** They also sent personalised greeting cards to healthcare workers across the country showing their support and encouragement to their fight against the virus. **Sravya is a fourth-grade student at the Hanover Hills Elementary School in Hanover, Maryland.** “Everyone can do something is what our team believed,” said Sravya, delighted that their small work has been recognised. “We represented the entire school children of the U.S.,” she said, adding that **her parents raised her with the Indian values of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family).** President Trump praised the scouts and said he was in awe and admiration of the heroism, bravery, commitment and love of the Americans fighting the virus, said Sravya’s **father, Vijay Reddy Annappareddy, a pharmacist from Maryland, who hails from Guntur. His wife, Seeta Kallam, a medical graduate from Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam, hails from Narasaya Palem near Bapatla.** Mr. Vijay Reddy said Sravya had always shown concern for the society and had been very active volunteering for various community activities along with her brother, Aviv Annappareddy. Sravya’s parents had donated ₹25 lakh for setting up a water purification plant in Ramanayapalem, Andhra Pradesh, in Sravya’s name when she was born.

Pakistan As Both Terror Perpetrator and Victim (Mohammed Ayoob - University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University)

- The recent encounter, at Handwara in northern Kashmir, where Indian security forces took on terrorists, left five security personnel, including a colonel, dead. This has once again brought to the fore the terrorist threat emanating from Pakistan. Analysts of terrorism are well aware of the paradox that **Pakistan is both possibly the leading perpetrator of terrorism and a major victim of the same menace.**

Warfare with Neighbours

This contradiction can be traced to the **deliberate policy of the Pakistani state to create and foster terrorist groups** in order to engage in **low intensity warfare with its neighbours.** Pakistan first operationalised this strategy in regard to Afghanistan following the overthrow of Zahir Shah by his cousin Daud Khan in 1973 and intensified it with the **cooperation of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia after the Marxist coup of 1978.** The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 left the Pakistani military with a **large surplus of Islamist fighters that it had trained and armed.** Islamabad decided to use this “asset” to intensify the insurgency in the Kashmir Valley. However, **the decade-long Afghan “jihad” had also radicalised a substantial segment of the Pakistani population,** especially in the North-West Frontier Province and Punjab, as well as **augmented sectarian divisions not only between Sunnis and Shias but also among various Sunni sects – especially between the puritanical Deobandis and the more syncretic and Sufi-oriented Barelvis.** In the process, a number of homegrown terrorist groups emerged that the Pakistan Army co-opted for its use in Kashmir and the rest of India. But it soon became clear that **Pakistan had created a set of Frankenstein’s monsters some of whom turned against their creator especially after the Musharraf government, under American pressure, decided to collaborate with the latter in the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.**

‘Loyalist’ LeT

But not all terrorist groups acted in this way. **Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT),** the group involved in the latest terrorist encounter in Handwara, is a classic example of a **“loyalist”** terrorist organisation



that has played by the rules set by the Pakistani military. **It only launches attacks on targets outside Pakistan, primarily in India.** As the evidence in the case of the Mumbai carnage of 2008 clearly indicates LeT operations are coordinated with the Inter-Services Intelligence that provides it with intelligence and logistical support in addition to identifying specific targets. This is why the LeT and its front organisations have continued to receive the military's patronage and unstinting support. Consequently, **its leader, Hafiz Saeed, was until recently provided protection by the Pakistani state despite being designated an international terrorist by the UN and the U.S. putting a \$10 million bounty on his head.** A Pakistani court finally sentenced Saeed to 11 years in prison in February for terror financing activities in order to stave off the global anti-terror watchdog, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), blacklisting Pakistan as a terror financing state.

Bad Terrorists

At the other end of this good-bad spectrum lies the **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**, which has ideological affinity with the Afghan Taliban. The TTP and its affiliates have fought pitched battles with the Pakistan Army in the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas and parts of the NWFP (now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). **While both the LeT and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have been engaged in attacks on Indian targets identified by Pakistan's ISI, the latter has not hesitated to launch terrorist attacks on targets within Pakistan as well, especially against the Shias and Sufi shrines.** Leading Pakistan watcher Christine Fair in her book, *fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, explains that the **difference between LeT and JeM lies in the fact that while the former is more pragmatic and less ideological, the latter is highly ideological and sectarian.** JeM draws its ideological inspiration from a very extreme form of Deobandi puritanism that considers all those who do not believe in its philosophy beyond the pale of Islam and, therefore, legitimate targets of attack. For many JeM diehards, these include not only Shias and Barelvis but also the Pakistani state and the Pakistani military. LeT on the other hand does not consider Muslims of different theological orientations as non-believers and therefore legitimate targets of attack. According to Ms. Fair, this relatively "liberal" interpretation is related to the fact that **LeT draws its ideological inspiration from the sect called the Ahl-e-Hadis, which composes only a small proportion of Pakistan's Muslim population and cannot afford to engage in sectarian conflict.** Moreover, it draws its membership from different Muslim sects including the Sufi-oriented Barelvis and the puritanical Deobandis. Both these factors drive LeT toward greater tolerance in sectarian terms and to eschew intra-Islamic theological battles. Its primary goals are political; above all, driving India out of Kashmir. This jells well with the objectives of the Pakistani military and makes LeT and Hafiz Saeed, favourites of the Pakistani establishment. This narrative makes one thing very clear. Many of the terrorist groups were deliberately created by the Pakistani state to serve its purposes. However, its ability to control the various terrorist outfits is uneven and some of them have turned against their creator. It establishes the fact that using terrorist outfits for state objectives is a highly risky business whose blowback cannot be predicted and can have very negative consequences for the stability of the state itself.

Pak. President Issues Order to Hold Polls in Gilgit-Baltistan

- ➔ Pakistan President Arif Alvi has promulgated an order to form a caretaker government as well as to conduct elections in Gilgit-Baltistan province, a move strongly opposed by India. The presidential promulgation came days after the Pakistan Supreme Court on April 30 allowed the federal government to amend a 2018 administrative order to conduct general elections in the region. The Gilgit-Baltistan Order of 2018 provided for administrative changes, including authorising the Prime Minister of Pakistan to legislate on an array of subjects. India has conveyed its strong protest to Islamabad for its efforts to bring "material change" to territories



under its “illegal and forcible” occupation after the apex court allowed holding of elections in Gilgit-Baltistan. Earlier this month, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in Delhi said a demarche was issued to a senior Pakistani diplomat lodging a strong protest over the court ruling and clearly conveying that the entire union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, including the areas of Gilgit and Baltistan, are an integral part of India. The Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly will complete its five-year tenure on June 24.

Getting India Back to The Afghan High Table (Vivek Katju - Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan)

→ If India’s foreign and security policy planners had anticipated developments in Afghanistan, they would have pursued nimble approaches, seeking to establish open connections with all its political groups, including with those perceived to be in Pakistan’s pocket. Instead, they continued to rigidly cling to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani even as his equities diminished with each passing month. This, despite his becoming the winner of the presidential elections held in September last year but whose contested results were declared five months later.

Cut to The Quick

Inexplicably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Mr. Ghani for winning the elections, in December 2019. At that stage, the Afghanistan election commission had only announced the preliminary results and most countries maintained a discreet silence. It took the commission two months more to declare Mr. Ghani as President-elect, a result that was rejected by Mr. Ghani’s main rival, Abdullah Abdullah. It led to two simultaneous swearings-in; both Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah took oath as President. It is true that the international community ultimately supported Mr. Ghani but qualified it with an insistence that he enters into a real power-sharing agreement with Mr. Abdullah. That agreement has just been reached. It will inevitably further weaken Mr. Ghani. How has Mr. Ghani reciprocated India’s such unqualified backing? His clear and public response came last month in a manner. It could only have been disappointing to Indian decision makers. The United Nations Secretariat organised a meeting on Afghanistan where it invited the six current physical neighbours of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In addition, invitations were extended to the United States, Russia and the Ghani government. Obviously, Mr. Ghani did not condition his participation on India’s inclusion. He should have done so if only for the constructive role New Delhi has played in Afghanistan’s reconstruction since the Taliban were ousted from the country in 2001-2002 after 9/11. Also, for consistently supporting him. If Indian policymakers had adequately pondered on Mr. Ghani’s stance they would have recalled his position on India in the immediate aftermath of assuming the leadership of the National Unity Government brokered by the Americans in September 2014. He had then relegated India to the fourth concentric circle of five in importance to Afghan interests. Hence, it is not surprising that he did not bat adequately for India to become part of the meeting called by the UN. Indeed, if all his fine words of India’s importance to Afghanistan were actually true, he would have lobbied and ensured India’s participation.

Point Man’s Blunt Talk

So much for Mr. Ghani. What truly cut India more to the quick was the U.S. going along with India’s absence. So much for the personal chemistry of the leaders of the two countries. The day after the meeting, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. point man on Afghanistan and the architect of the Taliban deal, spoke to India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to assuage hurt sentiments. But the balm of good words cannot obscure the basic fact that the U.S. acts to



promote its interests in Afghanistan. It obviously expects that if in doing so Indian interests are exposed, India will protect them as best as it can. The fine diplomatese of the Ministry of External Affairs statement of the conversation between Mr. Khalilzad and Mr. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval in Delhi on May 7 cannot override the blunt message conveyed by the U.S. official in his interview, “India should talk directly to Taliban, discuss terror concerns directly,” He noted that despite India’s contributions to Afghanistan’s economic development – and these are undeniably significant covering large parts of the country, and are popular – as well as its long history of contacts with that country, it does not have a place in international diplomacy on Afghanistan. As Mr. Khalilzad put it: “But when it comes to international efforts, India yet does not have a role that it could.” He patronisingly added that the U.S. wants India to have a more active role in the peace process. Clearly, as the most significant power in the region, India should have ensured that it had a place on the table and should have devised ways to achieve that end. This is especially so because Afghanistan impacts on India’s interests, especially its security concerns. **The question that India’s security and foreign policy decision makers should therefore ask themselves is this: why did the powers not consider India’s participation vital to the present peace-making efforts, especially when the U.S.-Taliban deal was concluded leading to a possible new stage in Afghanistan’s evolution?**

The Taliban and Pakistan

Taking Mr. Khalilzad’s views in their entirety, it is clear that he feels that **by avoiding open contacts with the Taliban, India has reduced its role in international diplomatic efforts.** That the U.S. is currently crucially dependent on Pakistan for the successful implementation of its Taliban deal aimed at securing as orderly a withdrawal as possible from what is a major strategic reverse for the world’s pre-eminent power is not in doubt. Mr. Khalilzad’s positive words for Pakistan make it clear. More significant is his comment, “Our strong position is that there shouldn’t be [terror] sanctuaries on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan border....” This is in sharp contrast to U.S. President Donald Trump’s earlier focus only on Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. In such a situation, it was essential for India to have maintained its strong links with the Afghan government, built and supported its traditional Afghan allies – perhaps this was discreetly resumed – but also establish open lines of communication with the Taliban. This was especially because **they were informally conveying that India should not consider them as Pakistan’s puppets and also because they had gained international recognition.** Contacts and discussions do not mean acceptance of their ways or that their professions of not being Pakistan’s stooges should not have been tested.

Echo from The Past

It is sad that despite all that India has done in Afghanistan over the past 18 years since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul in 2001, it finds itself on the margins of international diplomacy on Afghanistan. It is reminiscent of the time in the 1990s when, at Pakistan’s insistence, India was considered a problem and kept out of crucial global forums on Afghanistan. It did not matter then because along with Iran and Russia, it kept the resistance to the Taliban going through Ahmed Shah Masood. Mr. Ghani is no Masood and there are no countries on the horizon which are really opposed to the Taliban acquiring a major place in the Afghanistan’s formal power structures. India needs to take corrective diplomatic action even at this late stage, and even in the time of COVID-19. It must begin openly talking to the Taliban and with all political groups in the country. It must realise that its Afghan policy needs changes.



Lower the Temperature, Defuse the Issue (Jayant Prasad - Former Indian Ambassador to Nepal)

- The inauguration of a road from **Dharchula to Lipu Lekh** (China border) by India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh (an event over videoconferencing on May 8) has now been followed by **Nepal's charge claiming that the stretch passes through Nepalese territory**. This road follows the traditional pilgrim route for the Kailash-Mansarovar yatra. This is an arduous walk, which I did in 1981, the year the yatra re-started after about 25 years, when India and China agreed to reopen the pilgrim route via Lipu Lekh. The conversion of the trekking route to a metalled road is a boon to both pilgrims and traders.

Explaining Nepal's Stand

The controversy has given Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli an opportunity to hide his government's incompetence and failure to meet the basic needs of the people, and to divert attention away from the rising tide of opposition from within his own party. His intemperate remarks in the Nepalese Parliament are best ignored in the interest of preserving India-Nepal ties. **Nepal deployed its armed police at Chharung, close to Kalapani, in its Sudoor Paschim**. While there is nothing untoward in deploying the armed police, whose mandate is to man the borders of Nepal, it is the manner and timing of the deployment that raised eyebrows in New Delhi. **The Nepalese contingent was dropped to the location by helicopters, very visibly**. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police is also located in Kalapani since it is close to the India-China border. **Indian forces are not there because of Nepal**. The Nepalese government has raised the stakes further and has made a negotiated settlement more complex by authorising a new map extending its territory across an area sensitive for India's defence.

The Sugauli Treaty

The boundary delineation has a long history. **Before the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, the Nepalese kingdom stretched from the Sutlej river in the west to the Teesta river in the East**. Nepal lost the Anglo-Nepalese War and the resulting Treaty limited Nepal to its present territories. The Sugauli Treaty stated that "[t]he Rajah of Nipal [Nepal] hereby cedes to the Honourable [the] East India Company in perpetuity all the under-mentioned territories", including "the whole of the **lowlands between the Rivers Kali and Rapti**." It elaborated further that "[t]he **Rajah of Nipal [Nepal] renounces for himself, his heirs, and successors, all claim to or connection with the countries lying to the west of the River Kali** and engages never to have any concern with those countries or the inhabitants there of." The present controversy has arisen since the **Nepalese contest that the tributary that joins the Mahakali river at Kalapani is not the Kali river**. Nepal now contends that the Kali river lies further west to the Lipu Lekh pass. The British used the Lipu Lekh pass for trade with Tibet and China. The Survey of India maps since the 1870s showed the area of Lipu Lekh down to Kalapani as part of British India. Both the Rana rulers of Nepal and the Nepalese Kings accepted the boundary and did not raise any objection with the government of India after India's Independence. **As a reward for the military help rendered by Jung Bahadur Rana in quelling the 1857 uprising, the areas of Nepalgunj and Kapilvastu were restituted to Nepal soon thereafter**. The British did not return any part of Garhwal or Kumaon, including the Kalapani area, to Nepal. India did not exist in 1816 when the Treaty of Sugauli was concluded. And India's present borders, not just with Nepal, but with many of its other neighbours, were drawn by the erstwhile British regime. India inherited the boundaries of British India. It cannot now unravel the historic past.



On the Way to Resolution

The Nepal-India Technical Level Joint Boundary Working Group was set up in 1981 to resolve boundary issues, to demarcate the international border, and to manage boundary pillars. By 2007, the group completed the preparation of 182 strip maps, signed by the surveyors of the two sides, covering almost 98% of the boundary, all except the two **disputed areas of Kalapani and Susta**. It also ascertained the position of 8,533 boundary pillars. The remaining issues concerning the boundary are not difficult to resolve unless they are caught up in domestic or international concerns. The next steps are the approval of the strip maps by the respective governments (that of the Nepalese Government is still awaited), the resolution of the differences of opinion over Kalapani and Susta, and speeding up the erection of damaged or missing border pillars.

India has successfully resolved far more intractable border issues with Bangladesh not so long ago, covering both the land and maritime boundaries. The land boundary settlement required an exchange of territories in adverse possession of the two countries, including the transfer of population, and a constitutional amendment (Number 100 of May 15, 2015) to give effect to the 1974 India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement. The maritime boundary issue was even more difficult. India agreed to go to the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration, knowing well that if the Court applied the principle of equity, India would lose up to four-fifths of the disputed area, as India had established its claim on a baseline that took into account the curved nature of the India-Bangladesh shoreline, thus boxing Bangladesh's maritime claims to within Indian and Myanmar waters. The Court ruling accepted much of Bangladesh's claim. Despite the Indian member of the tribunal giving an adverse entry, the government of India accepted the ruling.

Compared to what was accomplished between India and Bangladesh, the India-Nepal border issues appear more easily solvable, so long as there is political goodwill and statecraft exercised on both sides. The way to move forward is to formally approve the strip maps, resolve the two remaining disputes, demarcate the entire India-Nepal boundary, and speedily execute the work of boundary maintenance.

Ties Are Unique

India's leadership and the Indian people have been conscious of the self-respect and pride of the Nepalese people. **Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in The Discovery of India as also in Glimpses of World History that Nepal has been the only truly independent country of South Asia**. Nepal, in turn, has in the past responded to India's needs as a friendly neighbour. Its political leaders contributed to India's struggle for freedom. **The only time since Independence that foreign troops were deployed on Indian soil was when, in 1948-49, Nepalese soldiers under the command of General Sharda Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana came to India's northern cantonments, depleted by deployments in Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad**. The people-to-people relationship between India and Nepal is unmatched. In the far corners of India, sometimes locals turn against those from other Indian States, but seldom against the Nepalese. It is the government-to-government relationship that generally lags. There is nobody in India that wishes ill for Nepal. **For India's Chief of Army Staff, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, to charge at an interaction at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, that Nepal, at someone else's behest, has objected to India laying a road connecting the Lipu Lekh pass, was ill-advised**. It widens the door for that someone else to foment more trouble. This is a matter best handled bilaterally, through quiet diplomacy. The Official Spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs, Anurag Srivastava, has said recently that India and Nepal have an established mechanism to deal with all boundary matters. He has affirmed that India is committed to resolving outstanding boundary issues through diplomatic dialogue, in the spirit of India's close and friendly bilateral relations with Nepal. The best is to activate the existing mechanisms as soon as possible, before any further damage is done. The



more the trouble festers, those who stand to gain by deteriorating India-Nepal relations will benefit. There is need for the two countries to lower the temperature and defuse the issue. They must invest time and effort to find a solution. Raking up public controversy can only be counterproductive to the relationship.

- India and Nepal have reached a flashpoint over the Kalapani territorial issue that appears to threaten the basis of their special relationship, which has nurtured open borders and the free movement of people. Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli took New Delhi by surprise this month with an aggressive posture on the issue, especially over the inauguration of a motorable road to the Lipulekh pass, near the disputed Kalapani area, which is used by Indian pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar. For India, the Lipulekh pass has always been part of the road to Tibet, and was mentioned as one of the border passes for trade in a 1954 agreement with China, which was also reaffirmed in another trade agreement in 2015. Since 1981, when China re-opened the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage route for Indians, they have also used the pass to walk into Tibet. The road built now follows the same alignment, and would essentially cut down their travel time by three days each way. As a result, the government has been even angered by Nepal's strong protests, followed by fiery speeches by Mr. Oli and Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali, threatening to send more forces to the India-Nepal border. The Nepali cabinet's decision to adopt a new political map that claims not only Lipulekh but other areas that are in Indian territory that have been claimed by Nepal invoking the 1816 Sugauli treaty with the British, was described by India's MEA as "artificial", "unilateral" and "unacceptable". Tensions have also been fuelled by Mr. Oli's jibe that the "Indian virus looks more lethal than the one from China" and the Indian Army Chief's contention that Nepal raised the dispute at the "behest of an external force", namely China.

Boundary disputes are common ground for countries that have an ancient history and shared borders, and the Kalapani issue is one such dispute that India and Nepal have resolved to sort out. It is unfortunate that the respective Foreign Secretaries, tasked by Prime Minister Modi and then Nepal leader Sushil Koirala in 2014 to discuss the matter, have failed to find an acceptable date for a meeting since then. India must concede it has dragged its feet on the issue: even two weeks ago, when matters came to a boil in Kathmandu, the MEA's response that it would convene the meeting after the pandemic had been dealt with, was unnecessarily dismissive of an issue important to Kathmandu. Mr. Oli's government had raised it last November as well; its offer to send a political envoy to New Delhi was rebuffed. It is clear that the struggle within the ruling Nepal Communist Party has spurred Mr. Oli's more combative posture. Given the importance of ties with Nepal, often romanticised as one of "roti-beti" (food and marriage), India must not delay dealing with the matter, and at a time when it already has its hands full with the pandemic and a faceoff with China in Ladakh and Sikkim.

- Nepal's new official map is "artificial" and unacceptable to India, the Ministry of External Affairs said after Kathmandu unveiled a new political map that claimed Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh of Uttarakhand as part of its sovereign territory. Earlier in the day, the new map was launched at a press conference in Kathmandu by Minister of Land Management Padma Kumari Aryal, who said the government of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli is committed to protecting the territorial integrity of the country. India said Nepal was aware of the understanding on this issue and asked the government of Mr. Oli to return to dialogue. Nepali diplomatic sources maintain the region of Kalapani and the contiguous areas to the east of the river Kali and Susta on the Uttar Pradesh-Bihar border are the only parts of the nearly 1,800-km boundary that remain unresolved. The area of Susta near Gorakhpur can also be noted in the new map. Kathmandu says India has encroached upon this area and wants New Delhi to evacuate its population from the location. Nepal claimed the area and Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli said his government was willing to give a road towards Tibet on lease to India without surrendering the region.



→ **Army Chief General M M Naravane** said (May 15) that Nepal's protest against a newly built Indian road in Uttarakhand, up to Lipu Lekh pass on the China border, was at **"someone else's behest"**. His statement has been widely taken to mean that Nepal was acting as a proxy for China, at a time when tensions have spiked sharply on the LAC between the Chinese PLA and the Indian Army at Ladakh. The road is far from the present scene of tension in Ladakh. It is on the route of the annual Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, which goes through Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who inaugurated it on May 8, said the road, built by the Border Roads Organisation, was important for "strategic, religious and trade" reasons. **The 80 km road goes right up to the Lipu Lekh pass on the LAC, through which Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims exit India into China to reach the mountain and lake revered as the abode of Siva. The last section of 4 km of the road up to the pass still remains to be completed.** An official statement said what used to be a difficult trek to the gateway, situated at 17,060 ft, would now be an easy road trip. Although some officials have said it should be possible to complete the entire distance from Delhi to Lipu Lekh in 2 days, the sharp rise in altitude from 6,000 ft at Ghatiabagarh, where the new road starts, may require a slower journey for better acclimatisation, at least for pilgrims. **The government has underlined that through this improved route, yatis do not need the alternative routes now available for the pilgrimage, one through the Nathu La border in Sikkim and the other via Nepal, which entailed "20 per cent land journeys on Indian roads and 80 per cent land journeys in China ... the ratio has been reversed. Now pilgrims to Mansarovar will traverse 84 per cent land journeys on Indian roads and only 16 per cent in China."** The defence minister called it a "historic" achievement as he opened the road via video conferencing. The new road is also expected to provide better connectivity to Indian traders for the India-China border trade at the Lipu Lekh pass between June and September every summer.

Importance of The Road

Building roads leading to the contested LAC with China has been a fraught exercise for the government. The India China Border Roads as they are known, were conceptualised in the late 1990s by a consultative group called the China Studies Group, cleared at the highest level of the Cabinet Committee on Security, and given the go-ahead for construction in 1999. **But the deadlines were movable targets, and it was only in the wake of the 70-day Doklam stand-off with China in 2017, that India realised with shock that most of those roads had remained on the drawing board.** In all those years, only 22 had been completed. The Standing Committee on Defence, in its 2017-2018 report, noted that "the country, being surrounded by some difficult neighbours, with a view to keeping pace, construction of roads and development of adequate infrastructure along the borders is a vital necessity". The parliamentary committee demanded a higher budgetary allocation for the BRO. Another report on border roads, submitted by the Standing Committee in March 2019, flagged the ICBRs as a crucial element in "effective border management, security and development of infrastructure in inaccessible areas adjoining the China Border".

Is Nepal's Objection New or Sudden?

On the day the road was inaugurated, there was an outcry in Nepal. The Indian envoy in Kathmandu was summoned by the Nepal Foreign Ministry. Some in India ask why Nepal was silent through the time that the road was being built, and has objected to it now. But Kathmandu has pointed out that it has brought up its concerns on the border issue several times, including in November 2019, when Delhi put out its new political map of India to show the bifurcation of Jammu & Kashmir. Nepal's objection then was the inclusion of Kalapani in the map, in which it is shown as part of Uttarakhand. The area falls in the trijunction between India, China and Nepal. The publication of the map brought protesters out on the streets. The ruling Nepal Communist Party and the opposition Nepali Congress also protested. The Nepal



government described India's decision as "unilateral" and claimed that it would "defend its international border", while the Ministry of External Affairs then said that map "accurately reflects the sovereign territory of India". Nepal is right in pointing out that the border issue is not new, and has come up now and again in the bilateral relationship since the 1960s. **In the 1980s, the two sides set up the Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group to delineate the boundary, which demarcated everything except Kalapani and the other problem area in Susta.** When it was discussed at the prime ministerial level in 2000, between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and B P Koirala during the latter's visit to Delhi, both sides agreed to demarcate the outstanding areas by 2002. That has not happened. **The Nepal-India border was delineated by the Sugauli Treaty of 1816, under which it renounced all territory to the west of the river Kali, also known as the Mahakali or the Sarada river.** The river effectively became the boundary. **The terms were reiterated by a second treaty between Nepal and British India in 1923.** The rival territorial claims centre on the source of the Kali. **Nepal's case is that the river originates from a stream at Limpiyadhura, north-west of Lipu Lekh. Thus Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura, and Lipu Lekh, fall to the east of the river and are part of Nepal's Far West province in the district of Dharchula. New Delhi's position is that the Kali originates in springs well below the pass, and that while the Treaty does not demarcate the area north of these springs, administrative and revenue records going back to the nineteenth century show that Kalapani was on the Indian side, and counted as part of Pithoragarh district, now in Uttarakhand.** Both sides have their own British-era maps as proof of their positions.

India-China-Nepal

Since the 1962 war with China, India has deployed the ITBP at Kalapani, which is advantageously located at a height of over 20,000 ft and serves as an observation post for that area. Nepal calls it an encroachment by the Indian security forces. **Nepal has also been unhappy about the China-India trading post at Lipu Lekh, the earliest to be established between the two countries. Shipkila in Himachal followed two years later, and Nathu La only in 2006.** Nepali youth protested in Kalapani, and there were protests in Nepal's Parliament too when India and China agreed to increase border trade through Lipu Lekh during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Beijing in 2016. At the time, Global Times, an accurate barometer of what the Chinese state is thinking on any international issue, declared that Beijing should remain "neutral" and be mindful of the "sensitivities in the India-Nepal relationship". A year later, during the Doklam crisis, a senior official in the Chinese Foreign Ministry raised temperatures by suggesting that India would not be able to do anything if the PLA decided to walk in "through Kalapani or into Kashmir, through PoK", both trijunctions like Doklam. **Though China has said nothing about the road construction to Lipu Lekh, it has protested similar road building activity at other places on the Indian side close to the LAC, including Ladakh.** In view of all this, Kalapani and the approach to Lipu Lekh has only grown in strategic importance for India, especially as relations between the two countries have remained uneven over the last few years, and China has upped its game for influence in India's neighbourhood. **India's tacit support to a blockade of the landlocked country during protests over the new Constitution in Nepal by the Madhesi community was an inflection point in the relationship.** Despite the open border with India and the people to people contact through the hundreds of thousands of Nepali people who live and work in this country, the levels of distrust in Nepal about India have only increased. For its part, **India perceives Nepal to be tilting towards China under the leadership of Prime Minister K P Oli and his Nepal Communist Party.** Responding to Nepal's protests, India has said it is ready to discuss the matter at foreign secretary level talks between the two countries. The talks were meant to be held earlier this year, but were put off due to the COVID outbreak.



India Opposes Rejoining RCEP Over China Concerns

→ As the deadline for a response to a fresh proposal of India re-joining negotiations on the ASEAN-led trade Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) ran out, a senior Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) official indicated that global post-COVID-19 concerns over China had strengthened India's opposition to the grouping. "If anything, the COVID-19 experience and the experience of countries that have been overly dependent on imports from China or one country would have reinforced and revalidated the decision to stay out of the RCEP," said Ashok Malik, policy adviser in the MEA. The letter sent by the RCEP's Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) Chairperson last month, had an offer to reconsider India's objections to giving market access for a "limited number of products", if it would rejoin the talks. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced India's decision to quit the grouping, which includes the 10 ASEAN nations, Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea in November, citing lack of protection for country's agricultural sector among others. After pulling out of the grouping, India skipped at least two separate meetings it was invited to, including one in Bali in February, and a virtual meeting in April. At the April RCEP-TNC meeting, negotiators who ironed out legal issues with the pact committed to signing the agreement by the end of 2020. "The RCEP will provide a more stable and predictable economic environment to support the much-needed recovery of trade and investment in the region, which has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic," said a statement issued on April 30, which added that "Against this backdrop, the 15 [countries] reaffirmed their commitment to continue working with India to address its outstanding issues...[and] would welcome India's return to the RCEP negotiations." However, Mr. Malik said **India's experience of trade pacts in the past was that they had "hollowed out" manufacturing in the country, and would hamper the government's renewed commitment to the 'Make in India' policy.** "At a time when our 'Make in India' programme is moving from Level 1 to Level 2, and it has to go to Level 10, I think it was a good decision [to leave RCEP]," he said, speaking at a web seminar organised by the Carnegie India Foundation. **Significantly, Australian High Commissioner-Designate Barry O'Farrell cited the 'Make in India' policy as the reason for India to join.** Australia and Japan have been at the forefront of efforts to convince India to rejoin the RCEP as a possible counterweight to China in the grouping that would represent a third of global trade. "If India did want to rejoin the [RCEP] negotiations, there would be no better time than now, because it would send a signal to the world that not only is India an attractive place to invest, but also, its potential of being a global manufacturing hub as envisaged by the government's 'Make in India' policy was realisable" Mr. O'Farrell said.

What Does the Increase in Chinese Transgressions Mean?

→ As tensions remain high between Indian and Chinese soldiers, the number of recorded Chinese transgressions across the disputed India-China border surged by 75 per cent in Ladakh in 2019, and the Chinese forays into Indian territory in the first four months of the current year have also witnessed an increase compared to the same period last year.

What Exactly is a Chinese Transgression?

A Chinese transgression across the border is recorded once the Indian border guarding forces in an area – either the Army or the ITBP – are "reasonably certain" that the Chinese soldiers had crossed over to the Indian side of the LAC. A Chinese transgression – in air, land or the waters of Pangong Tso lake – can be recorded, officials said, if it is visually observed by border posts, through use of surveillance equipment, in face-offs by patrols, indicated reliably by locals, or based on evidence left by the Chinese in the form of wrappers, biscuit packets etc to show their presence in an unmanned area.



What Does The 'Indian Side' Of the LAC Mean?

The border is not fully demarcated and the LAC is neither clarified nor confirmed by the two countries. Except for the middle sector, even the mutual exchange of maps about their respective perceptions has not taken place between India and China. This has led to different perceptions of the LAC for the two sides, and soldiers from either side try to patrol the area up to their perception of the LAC. Essentially, **what Indians believe to be 'their side' is not the same as what the Chinese believe to be 'their side'** – this is different from the **Line of Control (LoC)** between India and Pakistan where everything was agreed upon by the two armies following the 1971 War.

What Are the Various Sectors on The India-China Border?

India-China border is divided into three sectors, where the LAC in the **western sector** falls in the **union territory of Ladakh** and is **1597 km long**, the **middle sector** of **545 km** length falls in **Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh**, and **1346 km long eastern sector** falls in the states of **Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh**. The **middle sector is the least disputed sector**, while the **western sector witnesses the highest transgressions between the two sides**.

Do the Higher Number of Chinese Transgressions Matter?

A higher number indicates that the Chinese soldiers are coming to the Indian side more often, and their movements are being observed and recorded by the Indian soldiers. This can be seen as an indicator of increased Chinese assertiveness, but as long as there are no major incidents, it means that the established border mechanisms between the two sides are working. So far, there has been no major standoff between the two sides after the 73-day Doklam standoff on Sikkim-Bhutan border in 2017.

But PM Modi And President Xi Met in Wuhan, Following the Doklam Crisis, And Passed Some Instructions. What Were They?

Yes, Modi and Xi had met for their first **informal summit at Wuhan** in April 2018, where the two leaders had "issued strategic guidance to their respective militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs". They had also "directed their militaries to earnestly implement various confidence building measures agreed upon between the two sides, including the principle of mutual and equal security, and strengthen existing institutional arrangements and information sharing mechanisms to prevent incidents in border regions".

Has the Wuhan Spirit Vanished?

That is hard to say but tensions between India and China have shot up suddenly in 2020, even as both countries grapple with containing the spread of COVID-19. A terse statement by the Chinese foreign ministry was responded to by the Indian foreign ministry in equally strong terms. Besides tensions at **Naku La in Sikkim** and **at Galwan river** and **Pangong Tso in Ladakh**, Indians have been worried about the Nepal government's recent behaviour on the border map issue. Army Chief General MM Naravane didn't leave much to imagination when he said that Nepal was doing it at "the behest of a third party," ostensibly referring to China.

Should One Be Worried?

India and China are both nuclear-armed countries with strong militaries. **Although not a shot between them has been fired since 1976 or a military skirmish happened after 1967, the fact that Indian and Chinese soldiers are in an eyeball to eyeball situation at two places in Ladakh, with strong statements coming from both sides, can't be construed as a very happy situation.**



Because matters on the border have always been resolved peacefully by the two countries in the past four decades, there is hope that the tensions will soon subside.

- Prime Minister Modi and President Xi both agreed differences should not be allowed to escalate into disputes. Also, a clear message was sent to the two militaries to abide by the **detailed protocols already in place, such as those agreed to in 2005 and 2013**. These regulate the activities of troops in the contested zones that lie in between both sides' overlapping claim lines of the undefined LAC. On May 19, its Foreign Ministry accused the Indian Army of "attempting to unilaterally change the status" of the LAC. **The stand-off in Ladakh appears to have been triggered by China moving in troops to obstruct road construction activity by India. Last year, India completed the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulet Beg Oldi (DBO) road which connects Leh to the Karakoram Pass.** India also maintains a key landing strip at DBO at 16,000 feet. The broader context for the tensions is the **changing dynamic along the LAC. India has been upgrading its roads as it plays catch-up, with China already enjoying an advantage in both terrain and infrastructure.** China now seems to be telling India it has no right to carry out the kind of activity that Beijing has already done. India is well within its right to carry out construction work. Delhi needs to remind Beijing that **a fundamental principle that underpins all previous agreements is recognising the right to mutual and equal security of the two sides.** The immediate priority is for both sides to use existing channels and step back. **Flag meetings between brigade commanders have so far been unable to break the stalemate.** The incidents have underlined how the **new LAC situation is placing existing mechanisms under renewed stress.** India and China should grasp the current situation as an opportunity to revive the stalled process of clarifying the LAC. China has resisted this as a distraction to the boundary negotiations. But rather than agree on a line, both can instead simply seek to better understand the claims of the other and reach a common understanding to regulate activity in these areas. Clarifying the LAC may even provide a fresh impetus to the stalled boundary talks between the Special Representatives. **Beyond the posturing, both sides know a final settlement will ultimately have to use the LAC as a basis, with only minor adjustments.** Only a settlement will end the shadow boxing on the LAC. With both countries in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic, the time to push for a settlement to a distracting, protracted dispute is now.

Border Disputes A Reminder of The Threat Posed by China

- The U.S.'s top diplomat for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, called the recent tensions between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) a reminder of the "threat posed by China." Her comments come at a time when the U.S.-China relationship, already strained due to trade disputes, has further deteriorated over U.S. accusations of China's mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic. "The flare-ups on the border I think are a reminder that Chinese aggression is not always just rhetorical. And so whether it's on the South China Sea or whether it's along the border with India, we continue to see provocations and disturbing behaviour by China that raises questions about how China seeks to use its growing power," she said during a briefing call with reporters in response to a question on the India-China border tension. **Ms. Wells also said China's behaviour was causing other nations to group together to reinforce the post Second World War economic order. She cited ASEAN, the trilateral partnership between India, the U.S. and Japan as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with these countries and Australia.** "What we want to see is an international system that provides benefit to everyone. And not a system in which there is a suzerainty to China. And so, I think in this instance the border disputes are a reminder of the threat posed by China," she said. The U.S. has been pushing back against China on other fronts as well. China's global infrastructure projects under the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) are a case in point. In response to the controversy between the ruling Nepal Congress Party and the opposition Nepal Communist Party over the U.S.'s grant assistance of \$500 million (Nepal is putting forward another \$130



million) via its **Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)**, Ms. Wells said the controversy was “disturbing” and expressed confidence that Nepal wasn’t being dictated to by China. Nepal’s Parliament will need to ratify the MCC grant before it can take effect. The assistance has been seen as an alternative to China’s BRI, which Nepal has signed on to. “The fact that this grant assistance – not a loan – and the potential of this grant assistance has become a political football is disturbing,” Ms. Wells said.

Adopting more open and welcoming policies and reducing tariffs would help India make use of an opportunity, Ms. Wells said, highlighting the critically important role that India would play in the treatment and health of the world, with its vaccine, pharmaceutical and generic drug production. Ms Wells is due to retire from a decades-long diplomatic career at the end of this month.

India-China conflict in Ladakh: The importance of Pangong Tso lake

- The countries disagree on the exact location of the LAC in various areas, so much so that **India claims that the LAC is 3,488 km long while the Chinese believe it to be around 2,000 km long.** The LAC mostly passes on the land, but Pangong Tso is a unique case where it passes through the water as well. The points in the water at which the Indian claim ends and Chinese claim begins are not agreed upon mutually. Most of the clashes between the two armies occur in the disputed portion of the lake. As things stand, 45 km-long western portion of the lake is under Indian control, while the rest is under China’s control. Eastern Ladakh forms the western sector, to the east of the Karakoram and Ladakh Ranges. It runs from the Karakoram Pass in the north – 18 kilometres from **the country’s highest airfield at Daulat Beg Oldie** which is now connected by a road to DS – to Chumur in the south, almost bordering Himachal Pradesh. Pangong Tso lies closer to the centre of this 826 km long disputed border in eastern Ladakh.

The Pangong Tso Lake

Pangong Tso lake in eastern Ladakh has often been in the news, most famously during the Doklam standoff, when a video of the scuffle between Indian and Chinese soldiers – including kicking and punching, the throwing of stones, and the use of sticks and steel rods, leading to severe injuries – on its banks went viral on August 19, 2017. It was a visual confirmation of what had been reported about the incident that took place on that Independence Day morning. **In the Ladakhi language, Pangong means extensive concavity, and Tso is lake in Tibetan.** Pangong Tso is a long narrow, deep, endorheic (landlocked) lake situated at a height of more than 14,000 ft in the Ladakh Himalayas. The western end of Tso lies 54 km to the southeast of Leh. The 135 km-long lake sprawls over 604 sq km in the shape of a boomerang, and is 6 km wide at its broadest point. **The brackish water lake freezes over in winter, and becomes ideal for ice skating and polo.** The legendary 19th century Dogra general Zorawar Singh is said to have trained his soldiers and horses on the frozen Pangong lake before invading Tibet.

Tactical Significance of The Lake

By itself, the lake does not have major tactical significance. But **it lies in the path of the Chushul approach, one of the main approaches that China can use for an offensive into Indian-held territory.** Indian assessments show that a major Chinese offensive, if it comes, will flow across both the north and south of the lake. **During the 1962 war, this was where China launched its main offensive – the Indian Army fought heroically at Rezang La, the mountain pass on the south-eastern approach to Chushul valley, where the Ahir Company of 13 Kumaon led by Maj. Shaitan Singh made its last stand.** This was made memorable in Chetan Anand’s 1964 war film, Haqeeqat, starring Balraj Sahni and Dharmendra. Not far away, to the north of the lake, is the **Army’s Dhan Singh Thapa post**, named after Major Dhan Singh Thapa who was awarded the country’s highest gallantry award, the Param Vir Chakra. Major Thapa and his platoon were

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



manning Sirijap-1 outpost which was essential for the defence of Chushul airfield. The award was announced posthumously for Major Thapa, as reflected in the citation, but he was subsequently discovered to have been taken prisoner by the Chinese. He rejoined his unit after being released from the PoW camp.

Connectivity in The Region

Over the years, the Chinese have built motorable roads along their banks of the Pangong Tso. At the People's Liberation Army's Huangyangtan base at Minningzhen, southwest of Yinchuan, the capital of China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, stands a massive to-scale model of this disputed area in Aksai Chin. It points to the importance accorded by the Chinese to the area. Even during peacetime, the difference in perception over where the LAC lies on the northern bank of the lake, makes this contested terrain. In 1999, when the Army unit from the area was moved to Kargil for Operation Vijay, China took the opportunity to build 5 km of road inside Indian territory along the lake's bank. The 1999 road added to the extensive network of roads built by the Chinese in the area, which connect with each other and to the G219 Karakoram Highway. From one of these roads, Chinese positions physically overlook Indian positions on the northern tip of the Pangong Tso lake.

Fingers in The Lake

The barren mountains on the lake's northern bank, called the Chang Chenmo, jut forward in major spurs, which the Army calls "fingers". India claims that the LAC is coterminous with Finger 8, but it physically controls area only up to Finger 4. Chinese border posts are at Finger 8, while it believes that the LAC passes through Finger 2. Around six years ago, the Chinese had attempted a permanent construction at Finger 4 which was demolished after Indians strongly objected to it. Chinese use light vehicles on the road to patrol up to Finger 2, which has a turning point for their vehicles. If they are confronted and stopped by an Indian patrol in between, asking them to return, it leads to confusion, as the vehicles can't turn back. The Indian side patrols on foot, and before the recent tensions, could go up to Finger 8. The fracas between Indian and Chinese soldiers earlier this month happened in this general area at Finger 5, which led to a "disengagement" between the two sides. The Chinese have now stopped the Indian soldiers moving beyond Finger 2. This is an eyeball-to-eyeball situation which is still developing.

Confrontation on The Water

On the water, the Chinese had a major advantage until a few years ago – their superior boats could literally run circles around the Indian boats. But India purchased better Tampa boats some eight years ago, leading to a quicker and more aggressive response. Although there are well-established drills for disengagement of patrol boats of both sides, the confrontations on the waters have led to tense situations in the past few years. The Chinese have moved in more boats – called the LX series – in the lake after the tensions which rose in the area from last month.

Out of Bounds for Tourists

Finally, if you go as a tourist to see the lake that the climax scene of Aamir Khan's 3 Idiots made famous, will you be able to travel up to the Chinese border? No, because tourists are only allowed up to Spangmik village, around 7 km into the lake. In fact, tourists were not allowed at all at Pangong Tso until 1999, and even today, you need to obtain an Inner Line Permit from the office of the Deputy Commissioner at Leh.



Behind New Incidents, A Changed Dynamic Along India-China Border

→ A greater capability by India to patrol up to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) coupled with an increasingly assertive Chinese posture is fuelling new tensions along the border. Chinese state media said the People's Liberation Army was "tightening control" in one of the flashpoints in Galwan Valley in the western sector, after it accused India of "unilaterally" changing the status quo by "illegal construction". A build-up has also been reported in Demchok in Ladakh. Separately, troops from both sides were involved in fisticuffs that led to injuries following stand-off incidents on May 5 near the Pangong Tso lake in Eastern Ladakh and on May 9 in Naku La in North Sikkim. Face-off incidents occur routinely in the summer months when both sides are able to more frequently patrol up to their respective perceptions of the LAC. Detailed protocols are in place for troops to handle such incidents. According to the 2005 protocol on modalities for implementing confidence-building measures, neither "shall use force or threaten to use force" and "both sides shall treat each other with courtesy and refrain from any provocative actions". The 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement said patrols "shall not follow or tail patrols of the other side in areas where there is no common understanding" of the LAC. It called for both sides to "exercise maximum self-restraint, refrain from any provocative actions, not use force or threaten to use force against the other side" in face-offs. "With more intensified patrolling on both sides, the open space available has shrunk, so face-to-face situations will occur; what is different is the aggressive manner in which Chinese troops behaved and prevented Indian troops from patrolling," said Ashok Kantha, Ambassador to China from 2014 to 2016. Jostling and fisticuffs were a cause for concern because they could lead to unintended consequences or escalation, he said. "There is a larger pattern that the Chinese are becoming more assertive in pursuing their territorial claims in contested areas, that is happening both in the South China Sea and along the India China border." **India has been upgrading its infrastructure along the border, thereby allowing troops to patrol with greater depth and frequency into areas where the Chinese had, by virtue of favourable terrain and better infrastructure, established a more frequent presence. That is now being challenged.** By December 2022, all 61 strategic roads along the border, spread across Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, will be completed, adding up to 3,417 km in length.

On-The-Ground Dynamic

These incidents were more likely fuelled by the on-the-ground dynamic than other geopolitical factors or tensions, such as India's tightening of FDI from China or the COVID-19 pandemic, said Gautam Bambawale, who was India's Ambassador to China from 2017 to 2018. "What is happening is both sides are patrolling more aggressively. As a result of that, it is more than likely that you will run into each other, because of better connectivity and roads on both sides." Clarifying perceptions of the LAC could help, but China has stalled the process. "They are afraid the LAC will become the boundary," Mr. Bambawale said. "Our point is we don't have to negotiate one common line, but negotiate a line that they don't cross, and another line that we don't cross." "India is seeking to restore a balance, to the extent that it is possible given enduring advantages of terrain and logistics on the Chinese side, by creating road and air connectivity to the LAC," he said. "The PLA is rattled by this. With both sides now engaged in forward policies and convinced of their right to do so, it makes for an explosive mix."



Nation

Bois Locker Room, A Reflection of An Existing Mindset

→ The controversy triggered by leaked lewd chats from 'Bois Locker Room', an Instagram group run by some teenagers, and the death of a 17-year-old boy in Gurugram, allegedly in connection with the incident, have raised serious questions about the mindset of youngsters, their use of social media and the way forward. The Hindu spoke to a few psychologists, specialising in adolescent counselling, who narrowed down the reasons to **lack of proper sexual education and gender sensitivity among teenagers**. "There are multiple episodes – the Bois Locker Room, a 17-year-old ending his life, and the Snapchat screenshot. Though we may feel they are all different, what comes out is that there is a complete lack of sex education, gender sensitisation and sensitivity among teenagers," said Mahalakshmi Rajagopal, a psychologist who works as a consultant with some Delhi schools.

'Forbidden Topic'

According to Dr. Rajagopal, while girls are imparted with some amount of sex education when they start their menstrual cycle, for boys' sex is often a "forbidden topic". **"The reason you have a boys room locker, where all these discussions are taking place, is because at that age they are curious and they haven't been given healthy sensitisation about sex, women and things related to sexual health. Nothing has been provided,"** she said. Roma Kumar, a counselling psychologist at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, echoed Mr. Rajagopal's views. She said it is common and natural to be curious about sex, especially when it is hushed up, and stressed on open and constructive conversations about these topics. Dr. Kumar said misogyny is rampant in society, illustrated by "how people like to sexually objectify women and laugh on sexist jokes". She said boys should be educated about the thin lines that separate banter and abuse. Even social media chat groups are fine, she said, if the members don't slander each other and turn abusive. **"As long as they are talking about sexual stuff, it should be fine because everybody talks about these things. We talk in a different manner; children are learning differently. But there should be some rules,"** she stressed. Taking the instance of even special needs children exploring their sexuality, Dr. Kumar said, "We can't stop them, and we shouldn't stop them because it's a sexual energy that you are born with. But somebody has to be able to talk to these children in that manner, connect with them and also engage in conversations related to sexuality," she said.

Learning from Adults

In the absence of proper sex education, children are observing adults at home and accordingly developing their attitudes and patterns of behaviour, counsellors said. "A 17-year-old doesn't suddenly start objectifying women. It builds up over time. Such children are either coming from homes where they listen to parents using these kinds of words casually, or they see and observe their extended families engaging in such casual exchange. So, the children grow up thinking it is okay to objectify women. This then gets reinforced with their peers," said Dr. Rajagopal. Damini Grover, another counselling psychologist, agreed. "It's a reflection of an already existing mindset," she said. She also pointed out the role of Bollywood movies that engage in similar conversations between men about women. This, she said, comes from a "sense of superiority, an assertion of masculinity which involves thinking and talking about women casually". Taking the example of asking for consent, Dr. Kumar said, "We don't take consent in our homes. We just order. It's how we communicate to our children also. And they learn from the environment, how a man or the father is talking to the wife. And how the wife is connecting to the in-laws or to the husband."



Still a Stigma

Stigma attached to sex and sexuality has been a hindrance, observed counsellors. Dr. Grover said there is reluctance among parents to talk about sex and sexuality to their children. Because of it, a volley of topics, like exploring one's sexuality, sex and its consequences, ideas of masculinity and femininity, consent, building relationships and treating partners are left undiscussed, she said. Removing the sense of taboo is the first step, said Dr. Rajagopal. "We as a society must be comfortable to sit down and talk about the sexual act. We give the impression that it is a big secret and something bad. Even today the minute there is an intimate scene in a movie, parents tell their children to get up and leave. We have to get out of that sort of mindset. We should be able to have a healthy and open conversation," she said. "If somebody's asking about masturbation or oral sex, talk about it. Tell them," said Dr. Kumar, adding that parents too need to learn to deal with their children. "They shouldn't stop children, but guide them," she said.

'Sexual' Education

Looking forward, Dr. Kumar said that there is a need for sexual education and not just sex education among children. Dr. Rajagopal stressed that apart from proper sex education and gender sensitivity among children, it is important to teach parents about such concerns and ensure a positive environment at home. Dr. Grover asserted the need for social media education, given a complete lack of any kind of sensitivity training to children either in schools or at home.

A Violation of Right Found, But No Remedy Given (Suhrit Parthasarathy - Advocate Practising At the Madras High Court)

- The maxim Ubi Jus Ibi Remedium (where there is a right, there is a remedy) has anchored the common law for centuries. In India, the Constituent Assembly regarded the principle as so foundational that, through Article 32, it granted the Supreme Court the authority to issue a set of prerogative writs to enforce the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Over the last four decades, though, the idea of remedies moving in parallel with rights has come to wither. In this period, the Supreme Court has enunciated a number of rights which it found ought to be manifest on a proper reading of the Constitution. These have included the rights to clean air, health, shelter, human dignity, and privacy. But this articulation, stentorian as it might have been, hasn't always led to just results. The court's history is littered with cases where a violation of a right is found, but a remedy hasn't been forthcoming. The ruling delivered on May 11, in Foundation for Media Professionals v. Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir [FMP], is, in many ways, symptomatic of this trend. It ought to enjoin us to think more deeply about what the Court's institutional role really should be. The judgment begins thus: "Again, this Court is called upon to address a very important but a sensitive issue... we have to ensure that national security and human rights can be reasonably and defensibly balanced, a responsibility, that this Court takes with utmost seriousness." But while the Court found that a prohibition of 4G Internet in J&K was potentially disproportionate, it could not extend itself to remedying the wrong by issuing a writ to the state. What it did instead was to relegate the decision-making to a newly formed committee comprising officials from the executive. In doing so, it effectively reversed the age-old principle that no person shall act as a judge in his own cause.



Vagueness of Purpose

In January, when, in Anuradha Bhasin, the Court recognised something akin to a fundamental right to access the Internet, the judgment was widely acclaimed. But of what use is the fashioning of a new right to the people of J&K if a decision on whether that **right has been violated is consigned to the very authority that made the original call?** Indeed, the petitioner in FMP relied on the Court's judgment in Anuradha Bhasin to argue that a blanket restriction on 4G Internet across the region had had a deleterious impact on a slew of rights, including the rights to free speech and expression, education, freedom of trade, and health. The Court's own past decisions, including that of the very bench which heard FMP, **prescribes a standard of proportionality to judge cases where a fundamental right is limited by state action.** The test would have required the Court to engage in a **rigorous analysis of the facts, to examine whether the state's rationale for limiting access to the Internet was, one, predicated on legitimate grounds; two, was the least intrusive measure available to the government; and three, whether on a balance of the competing interests the restriction was justified.** Given this doctrine and given that the Supreme Court often functions as a court of first resort, it cannot absolve itself from the job of fact-finding. In a system of justice that is adversarial, it is incumbent on the Court to appreciate the rival versions of the facts submitted before it and arrive at what it deems to be the truth. And once it does so, should it find the state's actions illegitimate, it must issue a writ to remedy the wrong, unless it finds compelling reasons not to do so. And if such reasons do exist, they require voicing. There is no doubt that there might be instances in which appreciating evidence can prove to be a confounding exercise. But judicial review is not meant to be easy. What we need today is a reversion to first principles – where the Court seeks to treat the art of delivering a judgment as an exercise in persuasion, where there is a clear link drawn between rights and remedies. **In far too many cases the Court has inverted the basic logic of judicial review: it has either enunciated a violation of rights only to deny a remedy or it has granted remedies without articulating what right has been violated.**

Faking Danger

→ The frequency with which journalists have been arrested since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is quite disturbing. The reasons given by the police across India for arresting reporters and editors of news portals indicate that **special provisions enacted to prevent the spread of rumour during disasters are being used to suppress reporting on political developments and possible governmental corruption.** The most egregious case involves a criminal provision that governments invariably fall back upon to suppress dissent. **The arrest of Dhaval Patel, editor of a news portal in Gujarat, on the serious charge of sedition, is a shocking instance of misuse of criminal laws to intimidate journalists.** The case concerned an article speculating that State Chief Minister Vijay Rupani may be replaced by the BJP for his alleged inept handling of efforts to combat the pandemic. The report had even named a possible successor. It is befuddling how such a report could amount to sedition, regardless of **whether the speculation is true.** Oftentimes, the source of such speculation is a disgruntled section of the ruling party itself, and it is excessive to punish reportage with inadequate verification with arrest and prosecution for sedition. Mr. Patel has also been charged under Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act for allegedly spreading panic through a false alarm concerning a disaster.

The Editors Guild of India has seen a "growing pattern" in the misuse of criminal laws to intimidate journalists. The concern is not misplaced. In the Andamans, a reporter was arrested for a social media post claiming people who had contacted a COVID-19 positive patient over phone were also being quarantined. In Coimbatore, police arrested a news portal founder following a report on alleged corruption in food distribution as part of the local administration's efforts to handle the fallout of the pandemic. **In Delhi, a reporter was summoned in response**



to a report that claimed that an audio clip purportedly containing a speech by the head of the Tablighi Jamaat was doctored. While asking a journalist to join the investigation may not by itself be illegal, the police should not use the power of summons to intimidate reporters or extract details of the source. There ought to be greater restraint while invoking special provisions relating to handling disasters and epidemics. Section 54 only penalises the spreading of panic relating to the severity or magnitude of a disaster – claiming falsely, for instance, that a dam had breached – and does not extend to mere incorrect reporting. In normal circumstances, the authorities ought to be content with getting their version or response to be carried by the news outlets concerned, and not seek to use the pandemic as an excuse to curb inconvenient reporting.

Licensed to Beat, Abuse and Kill (M.P. Nathanael - Retired Inspector General of Police, CRPF)

- On April 16, Mohammed Rizwan, 19, a resident of Chhajapur village, Uttar Pradesh, ventured out of his home to buy biscuits. He was beaten with rifle butts and lathis by the police, while other residents purchased their groceries from the shop. In a battered condition, he managed to reach home. After some home remedies did not work, he was admitted to the local hospital where he died in the wee hours of April 18. There was nothing unusual in this incident or similar acts of brutality committed by the police as migrant workers, taking an arduous inter-State journey, attempted to return to their respective villages. In several places, elderly people were ruthlessly beaten. The high-handedness shown by the police during the various phases of the ongoing lockdown even led to a petition being filed with the State Human Rights Commission of Tamil Nadu. The petition called for the institution of a grievance redressal mechanism to inquire into the excesses committed by law enforcement personnel. Taking a serious view of police brutality, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in March issued a set of guidelines for police, in no uncertain terms prohibiting them from using force on persons violating the lockdown regulations. In this regard, the Bengaluru Police later set an example by divesting the policemen of batons and instead engaging in the use of persuasive methods to seriously implement the lockdown.

Trained to Be Fierce

A legacy of the British rulers, brutality has been a tenacious characteristic of the Indian police and precious little has been done to eradicate it. Most policemen are made to believe from their very training days that brutality is inherent in the very role to be performed by them, to instil a certain degree of fear in the citizens. This attitude is reinforced by training instructors, who abuse and even manhandle errant trainees. Unfortunately, posting to police training institutions is considered a punishment. Having picked up the traits and armed with the power to take anyone to task, policemen exercise their unbridled power to beat, abuse and even kill after they have donned the khakis. Application of force is definitely a legal requirement and it is justified by arming policemen with lathis, pistols, rifles and other modern weapons. But the mere issue of lathis and weapons in no way justifies their indiscriminate use on innocents or even the accused. Prudence demands that these weapons be used in a just manner. Though the subject of human rights is a part of training curriculum in training institutions, no seriousness is attached to it. Those who violate human rights are seldom taken to task. By virtue of being from the same fraternity, most superiors overlook instances of brutality as they consider it an innate demand of the job of policing. True, there are officers who brook no unjustified use of force but their numbers are few. To make matters worse, seldom are senior officers seen on the spot when their junior-ranking personnel are on duty. Presence of senior officers with their personnel in the field not only will be conducive in building up a spirit of



camaraderie with them, it will also serve as an opportunity to brief the personnel and deter them from any wrongdoing.

Difficult Working Conditions

On the other hand, it is true that long duty hours tend to test the patience of policemen. Working under tremendous pressure without any respite for relaxation, some of them are constantly on a short fuse and tend to vent their ire on innocent victims. Large vacancies in police forces are also responsible for this state. **Against the UN recommendations of 222 police personnel for a population of one lakh, most States in our country have around 100 personnel only.** Proper planning in recruitment, training, in service courses and close supervision by senior officers can go a long way in reducing, if not eradicating, brutality by policemen.

What's a 'Covid death' in Delhi?

- The Delhi government released new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) under which it declared that “no sample for Covid-19 test will be taken of a dead body”. **This meant that there would henceforth be no testing for the novel coronavirus in a patient who was brought dead to the hospital – and, if there were any suspicions, the last rites would be performed as per the routine Covid protocol.** What does this change of SOPs mean? What are the new guidelines and procedure for handling bodies?

So, What Is Now Considered to Be A “Covid-19 Death”?

- ❖ The deceased person would be considered to have been Covid-19 positive if that person had been tested before death, and found positive for the virus.
- ❖ The death would be considered a Covid-19 death also if the person had been alive when the sample was taken – even if the person had died by the time the sample returned a positive result.
- ❖ If the person had been admitted to hospital with severe symptoms of Covid-19, and if the doctors had then categorised the patient as a suspected case of Covid-19, the patient would, after death, be considered as a Covid-19 positive case.

As per the new SOPs, the hospital will not take a sample after the person has died. However, “if doctors are satisfied from clinical examination that the cause of death may be Covid-19 infection, the dead body may be released as suspect Covid-19 infected dead body”, according to the SOPs.

And How Is a Covid-19 Death Recorded in Delhi?

As per the updated guidelines issued by the Delhi government, the Health Department records only those cases where the primary cause of death is found to be Covid-19. This means if a person suffering from any co-morbid condition such as renal failure, heart disease, hypertension, uncontrolled diabetes, etc., and if Covid-19 is a secondary cause of death, then the case will not be counted as a Covid-19 death in Delhi. The cases are audited by a three-member death audit committee formed by the government to assess the Covid-19 deaths.

Lockdown 4.0 Explained: What Changes for You in The Latest Phase

- From public transport to markets, everything has been opened in non-containment zones. All factories, manufacturing units, supply lines and offices can now function without any restrictions. Buses and private vehicles can now move about freely without any special conditions. The government has basically obliterated the idea of zones (unless you are in a



containment zone) for common people. Earlier there were graded relaxations in Red, Green, and Orange zones, with the maximum restrictions applying in the Red zones. Now there are no Zone-wise restrictions or relaxations. Everything is applicable across the country.

So, What Is It That Continues to Be Not Allowed?

The Centre's guidelines have banned certain specific activities across the country. These include air travel – both domestic and international – and Metro rail services. The limited availability of long-distance trains for migrant workers and common public will continue. Schools, colleges, and other educational institutions will remain closed, as would be hotels, cinema halls, malls, swimming pools and gyms. You cannot yet go to a dine-in restaurant, but you can order a home delivery. All social, political, and religious functions and gatherings will continue to be barred, and places of worship will remain shut.

What About Sporting Activities?

If you have been missing sport on television, you may get lucky soon. Sports complexes and stadia have been permitted to open – but without spectators. However, don't expect to see IPL matches on TV – that's probably not happening, and here's why. But your neighbourhood parks have been allowed to open, and you can again go for your morning walks.

Is There Anything Else I Need to Know About What Is Allowed and What Is Not?

Please note this: The guidelines have said that barring the prohibited activities, "All other activities will be permitted." Which means that all services, including those of barbershops, salons and spas, domestic helps, electricians, AC repair/service people, car cleaners – and just about anything you can imagine – are now permitted. All liquor shops, including those in market complexes, will open too. E-commerce delivery of non-essential items, which were earlier prohibited in Red zones, have now been permitted. Cycle-rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and taxis will also be allowed. Even the restrictions on the numbers of passengers in vehicles has been removed – and this includes buses. Offices can run with 100% attendance – even though the government has advised "work from home" to the extent possible.

So, Does This Mean That I Can Just Drive or Take A Bus to Visit My Relatives in Another State?

Technically, yes. The government has permitted inter-state movement of all vehicles, including both buses and private cars. However, it has put a condition that this movement would be with the consent of the states between which the travel is being undertaken. Under the Disaster Management Act, states have full right to ignore relaxations allowed by the Centre. Thus, if a state decides to continue having its borders sealed, it can do so. So, before embarking on this journey, wait for state-specific guidelines to be issued by the states to and from which you intend to travel — as also any states through which you intend to pass on the way.

OK, Surely This Will Ease the Misery of The Migrants Walking on The Roads?

To an extent yes, but not significantly. Given the poor state of inter-state bus transport in many states, the major mode of transportation for migrants has always been the Railways. And rail services continue to be restricted, and buses are unlikely to fill in the huge gap between demand and supply. This gap has been widened by the massive influx of migrants moving from the more industrialised states to states such as UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Bihar, for example, has practically no state transport. "There are several other issues on the ground other than not having enough buses to carry



migrants. Drivers and helpers are scared of contracting Covid-19. They just abscond on some or the other pretext. On multiple occasions we have tried to put migrants on buses during the present crisis, but have been unable to match the supply given the huge demand. So we have had to allow trucks to carry them despite the journey being very dangerous,” said a senior official from the UP government. Also, some states are reluctant to receive migrants given the apprehensions of a surge in Covid-19 cases after their arrival – and this has only added to the problem.

And Why Is There A 7 Pm-7 Am Night Curfew When People Can Move Freely During the Day? It's Not as Though the Virus Becomes More Active at Night!

This condition was first inserted in the guidelines issued on May 1, and there has been no cogent explanation from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) for this ever since. **Indeed, if the whole idea of the lockdown is to avoid gatherings and ensure social distancing, that is needed more during the day than at night, when public presence outdoors thins out anyway.** An MHA official suggested this has been done on the suggestion of states. However, a few officials from different states that The Indian Express spoke to, said they had not made any such suggestions. Delhi had, in fact, suggested that the night curfew be limited to 9 pm to 5 am. **“Perhaps the Centre is wary of people gathering for parties at night where social distancing may be difficult to maintain. Also, the availability of police resources is less during the night and largescale vigilance is not possible,”** said a senior official from UP government. Police officers from states across Delhi, UP and Maharashtra expressed surprise that the Centre should allow offices and factories to function normally, but also lay down that the curfew would begin at 7 pm. “It could be a logistical nightmare for the police. At this time of the year, it’s not even fully dark by 7 pm in large parts of India. Will those who attend office, be able to finish work and reach home by 7 pm? The police will begin setting up barricades beginning 6.30 pm, and there could be chaos on the roads. It could also lead to rent-seeking on the ground,” said a senior police officer.

The Centre Has Given the States Freedom to Decide on Zones. What Does That Mean?

States had been demanding the freedom to notify smaller Zones rather than entire districts or municipal areas, so that they get more elbow room to kickstart the economy. However, there are no restrictions in any Zone barring containment zones now – and to that extent, this devolution of power to the states is immaterial. States such as Delhi had asked for freedom to notify wards as Red Zones instead of an entire district or municipal area, as the latter engulfed the entire state. As all of Delhi was in Red, the state government had no room to open the economy in any meaningful way. The current devolution of power could have been beneficial to states during the last lockdown, when there were severe restrictions in Red Zones. However, it would still be beneficial to states from the healthcare perspective – states can now concentrate resources on surveillance, contact tracing, testing and treatment in smaller zones notified by them.

Behind CM Uddhav Thackeray's Appeal to Sons-Of-The-Soil, The Labour Shortage

- ➔ Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray **appealed to bhoomiputras (sons of the soil) from the state's green zones to take up work in the industries** that are starting after the lockdown. These industries are facing a labour problem.



How Serious Is the Labour Problem?

A number of workers in Maharashtra's industries, especially small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs), left have left on Shramik Express trains for their homes in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal etc. Chandrakant Salukhe, founder president of the SME Chamber of India, estimated that **migrant workers formed 40% of the 78-lakh workforce in the 14 lakh registered SMEs in the state**. Around 80% of the workers were semi-skilled. Most industry insiders expect that it will be not until August that the migrant labour would make any move to return to Maharashtra. June and July would bring heavy monsoon rain, making travel difficult.

What Is This Solution the Government Has Proposed?

The government had already enacted laws to ensure 80% direct employment is reserved for local residents. The Industry and Labour Departments will identify skilled and unskilled labour from the districts while the Skill Development Ministry will take up the task of skilling them. Desai also talked of extending tax concessions to companies that hire local youths on contract.

How Has the Industry Reacted to This?

However, industry insiders said there are some major concerns. The task of mapping the labour shortage district wise as well as **skilling the unskilled will be time-consuming** and might not meet the immediate requirement.

One of the reasons why the industry has preferred to employ migrant labour in blue-collar jobs has been because of their flexibility to adjust to many situations. "The cost of hiring migrants is generally lower as they come alone, stay in shared accommodation and are ready to work extended hours for less pay. This might not be possible with local people," he said.

What Can Be the Solution to The Labour Crisis, Then?

Pawar, for his part, strongly pushes for zone-wise fixation of minimum payment, which will ensure workers stick with companies. "For a zone like Pune, the minimum payment should be around ₹25,000 per month which would allow the worker to have two square meals a day," Pawar said. The government's move to attract local youth would work only if the payment is lucrative, he said. Prashant Girbane, director general of the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce Industries and Agriculture, called for immediate execution of the government's scheme to provide alternative labour to instil confidence in industries.

Bihar Is Becoming Trouble State

- For several days now, Bihar had been showing signs of a big surge in its novel Coronavirus cases. The state reported 380 cases, which was nearly 25 per cent of its entire caseload till now. With close to 2,000 cases now, more than half of which has been discovered in just last one week, Bihar is fast developing into the next trouble state. At the start of this month, Bihar had less than 450 cases. As migrants started flowing in following an easing of lockdown restrictions from May 4, Bihar's cases started rising rapidly. Most of the new cases being detected in the state were amongst those who were returning to their hometowns from their workplaces in other parts of the country. Even now, the migrant workers comprise more than half of Bihar's total cases. Interestingly, Bihar's growth rate had shot up after it had crossed the 100-figure mark around April 20. But that was mainly because of a low caseload. And it had slowed down considerably in the week before the migrant workers started coming in. In the first week of May, Bihar had a growth rate of 3.75 per cent and a doubling time of over 19 days. But the cases began to rise rapidly as more and more migrant workers started to test positive. As of now, Bihar has a seven-day average growth rate of 10.32 per cent, and a



doubling time of less than seven days. The national doubling time of cases is 13.45 days right now. There was a big jump in new cases nationally as well, with more than 6,000 cases being reported for the first time.

Cinema After COVID-19 (Kunal Ray Teaches at FLAME University, Pune)

→ The lockdown will be eventually relaxed at some point as can be seen in different parts of the world but many are of the opinion that this pandemic will significantly impact our film-viewing behaviour and other economic decisions around it. **We might stay away from film theatres to avoid large gatherings. This could also indicate a shift towards viewing films on online platforms which have already made a dent during the lockdown. Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.,** have witnessed a record surge in subscriptions during the lockdown. This doesn't mean that everybody has suddenly turned a film lover, but that these platforms offer a plethora of entertainment options for people locked inside their homes. The content and range of programmes on these portals is also far superior to what is available on regular television. There are films and TV series which are especially commissioned by and released exclusively on these platforms.

Direct to Home Releases

Also, the choice and diversity of content on these platforms is much greater. A film theatre has to cater to mainstream audience expectations for business reasons. In the process, many deserving films often miss out on decent screening slots or have to make do with whatever is available. The online platforms do not have to deal with these concerns and offer a good mix of both mainstream and art-house cinema. No denying the fact that watching a film on the big screen has its own merits and an inherent sense of community but safety concerns might outweigh everything else. During the lockdown, some films available on these online platforms have gained a new lease of life. Otherwise, public memory is essentially short lived. Our celebrity-based film culture largely pivots around the star. The film is forgotten while we find ways to memorialise the star. **Malayalam film Virus is the talk of the town again owing to its availability on these platforms. Dealing with the Nipah crisis in Kerala, this film is a great reminder of the actions taken by the State government to tackle the crisis.** Kerala has also been widely praised for its successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps there's another film in waiting. Steven Soderbergh's Contagion is also doing the rounds. Released in 2011, the film seems prophetic in its depiction of a similar crisis that the world is facing today.

Bypassing the Censors

Also, you could bypass many of the problems of censor certification if you release films on these platforms. Amidst the ongoing pandemic, many film festivals are moving online. Britain's most famous socialist filmmaker, Ken Loach, has made some of his best films available for free on YouTube. Other film streaming platforms are making foreign and documentary cinema available at a nominal fee for a limited time span. **With increased awareness about films, will we go back to theatres and settle for the same content that mainstream cinema peddles after the lockdown?** However, there is also a grave danger. **Access to these platforms is largely limited to an urban demography that can afford an Internet connection, along with the subscription fees which also determines the class character of its potential viewers. If this were to become the norm, it would exclude a large majority of the film-viewing population.** That will be a denial of cinema to those who have been its utmost supporters.



A Good Year for Olive Ridley Turtles

- Mass hatching of the Olive Ridley turtle eggs has ended at the Rushikulya rookery on the Odisha coast. Lakhs of Olive Ridley hatchlings entered the sea at the beach in Ganjam district. The eggs, buried in nests along the sandy beach, began on May 7. The number of hatchings had reached its peak within a week. At present, hatchings continue to take place at a few stray nests along the coast. On an average, 80 to 100 hatchlings come out from each nest. **This year, 3,23,063 Olive Ridley turtles had nested at the Rushikulya rookery. Despite the destruction of some nests and eggs by the high tide, a large number of hatchlings entered the sea from here. According to wildlife experts, approximately one in every 1,000 hatchlings entering the sea survive to reach adulthood.** Following the mass mating that takes place at sea near the coast, male Olive Ridleys begin their return journey to destinations several hundred kilometres away. After the mass nesting, the female turtles do the same. The eggs, laid in nests dug along the beach, incubate on their own with the help of the heat from the sand. **Depending on the temperature of the sand, the eggs hatch in about 45 to 60 days.** The mass nesting had begun on the beach in the wee hours of March 21, and continued till March 28. The lockdown also reduced the inflow of tourists and local movement. Except for Forest officials and a few volunteers, no one was allowed to enter the area. There was also a reduction of waste along the beach, allowing for easier movement of the hatchlings to the sea.

Hotter Oceans Spawn Super Cyclones

- Higher than normal temperatures in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) may be whetting 'super cyclones' and the lockdown, indirectly, may have played a role, meteorologists and atmospheric science experts told The Hindu. Super cyclone Amphan that is the strongest storm to have formed in the BoB since the Super Cyclone of 1999 that ravaged Paradip in Odisha.

Warmer Waters

Cyclones gain their energy from the heat and moisture generated from warm ocean surfaces. This year, **the BoB has posted record summer temperatures a fall-out, as researchers have warned, of global warming from fossil fuel emissions that has been heating up oceans.** "The BoB has been particularly warm. Some of the buoys have registered maximum surface temperatures of 32-34°C consecutively, for the first two weeks of May. Cyclone Amphan intensified from a category-1 cyclone to category-5 in 18 hours, an unusually quick evolution. **Last year Fani**, a category 4 cyclone, which swept through the Odisha coast, was again fuelled by high temperatures in the BoB. **While tropical cyclones in these seas are a typical feature of the summer months and play a role in aiding the arrival of the monsoon**, Dr. Koll said warming around India is no longer restricted to just the BoB but also the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. This makes storm prediction less reliable as well as disrupting monsoon patterns.

Lockdown Impact

Another researcher said the elevated ocean temperatures this year could, in part, be explained by the lockdown. Reduced particulate matter emissions during the lockdown meant fewer aerosols, such as black carbon, that are known to reflect sunlight and heat away from the surface. Every year, increased particulate pollution from the Indo-Gangetic plains is transported towards the BoB and this also influences the formation of clouds over the ocean. "Fewer clouds and more heat in the Bay of Bengal may have amplified the strength of the cyclone," he told The Hindu. "We've observed that **during the lockdown from March-April, BoB temperatures have been 1-3°C higher than normal.** But the exact contribution from aerosols to this still to be determined." He and his colleagues are working on a research paper on these lines.



How Tropical Cyclones Are Named

- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) recently released a list of 169 names of future tropical cyclones that would emerge in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. **Cyclones that form in every ocean basin across the world are named by the regional specialised meteorological centres (RSMCs) and Tropical Cyclone Warning Centres (TCWCs).** There are six RSMCs in the world, including the India Meteorological Department (IMD), and five TCWCs. **As an RSMC, the IMD names the cyclones developing over the north Indian Ocean, including the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea, after following a standard procedure.** The IMD is also mandated to issue advisories to 12 other countries in the region on the development of cyclones and storms.

How Are the Cyclones Named?

In 2000, a group of nations called WMO/ESCAP (World Meteorological Organisation/United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), which comprised Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand, decided to start naming cyclones in the region. After each country sent in suggestions, the WMO/ESCAP Panel on Tropical Cyclones (PTC) finalised the list. The WMO/ESCAP expanded to include five more countries in 2018 – Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. **The list of 169 cyclone names released by IMD last month, in April, were provided by these countries – 13 suggestions from each of the 13 countries. The new list included the last name from the previous list (Amphan) as it remained unused at the time of release.** Incidentally, the IMD has issued an alert for Cyclone Amphan, which is forming over the southeast Bay of Bengal and adjoining south Andaman sea.

Why Is It Important to Name Cyclones?

Adopting names for cyclones makes it easier for people to remember, as opposed to numbers and technical terms. Apart from the general public, it also helps the scientific community, the media, disaster managers etc. With a name, it is easy to identify individual cyclones, create awareness of its development, rapidly disseminate warnings to increased community preparedness and remove confusion where there are multiple cyclonic systems over a region.

What Are the Guidelines to Adopt Names of Cyclones?

While picking names for cyclones, here are some of the rules that countries need to follow. If these guidelines are following, the name is accepted by the panel on tropical cyclones (PTC) that finalises the selection:

- The proposed name should be neutral to (a) politics and political figures (b) religious beliefs, (c) cultures and (d) gender
- Name should be chosen in such a way that it does not hurt the sentiments of any group of population over the globe
- It should not be very rude and cruel in nature
- It should be short, easy to pronounce and should not be offensive to any member
- The maximum length of the name will be eight letters
- The proposed name should be provided with its pronunciation and voice over
- The names of tropical cyclones over the north Indian Ocean will not be repeated. Once used, it will cease to be used again. Thus, the name should be new.



What Cyclone Names Has India Suggested?

The 13 names in the recent list that have been suggested by India include: Gati, Tej, Murasu, Aag, Vyom, Jhar (pronounced Jhor), Probaho, Neer, Prabhanjan, Ghurni, Ambud, Jaladhi and Vega. Some of the names picked by India were suggested by the general public. An IMD committee is formed to finalise the names before sending it to the PTC. Here is the complete list of 169 names. The first cyclone name which will be chosen will be the one in the first row of the first column – Nisarga by Bangladesh. Next, India's choice, Gati, will be chosen, and so on. Subsequent cyclones are being named sequentially, column-wise, with each cyclone given the name immediately below that of the previous cyclone. Once the bottom of the column is reached, the sequence moves to the top of the next column.

Bangladesh	Nisarga	Biparjoy	Arnab	Upakul	Barshon	Rajani	Nishith
India	Gati	Tej	Murasu	Aag	Vyom	Jhar	Probaho
Iran	Nivar	Hamoon	Akvan	Sepand	Booran	Anahita	Azar
Maldives	Burevi	Midhili	Kaani	Odi	Kenau	Endheri	Riyau
Myanmar	Tauktae	Michaung	Ngamann	Kyarthit	Sapakyee	Wetwun	Mwaihout
Oman	Yaas	Remal	Sail	Naseem	Muzn	Sadeem	Dima
Pakistan	Gulab	Asna	Sahab	Afshan	Manahil	Shujana	Parwaz
Qatar	Shaheen	Dana	Lulu	Mouj	Suhail	Sadaf	Reem
Saudi	Jawad	Fengal	Ghazeer	Asif	Sidrah	Hareed	Faid
Sri Lanka	Asani	Shakhti	Gigum	Gagana	Verambha	Garjana	Neeba
Thailand	Sitrang	Montha	Thianytot	Bulan	Phutala	Aiyara	Saming
UAE	Mandous	Senyar	Afoor	Nahhaam	Quffal	Daaman	Deem
Yemen	Mocha	Ditwah	Diksam	Sira	Bakhur	Ghwyzi	Hawf

Business & Economics

Impact of RBI's Decisions to Slash Repo Rate, Extend Loan Moratorium

- The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on slashed its key policy rates to stabilize the financial system and tackle the economic fallout from the ongoing nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. **The RBI panel unexpectedly cut the repo rate by 40 basis points to 4 per cent and the reverse repo rate by 40 basis points to 3.35 per cent.** In another significant move, the RBI also announced **extension of moratorium on loan repayments by another three months to August 31.**

What Will Be the Impact of Rate Cut?

The 40-bps cut in the repo rate – the interest rate that the RBI charges for funds given to banks – will make funds cheaper for banks thus aiding them to bring down lending rates. This comes at a time when credit offtake is sluggish and investments have halted in the economy. EMI on home, auto, personal and term loan rates are expected to come down in the coming days. However, **banks will also slash deposit rates on various tenures to manage its asset-liability position.** Savers and pensioners will see their returns coming down. Further, the 40-bps cut in



reverse repo rate – the interest rate that the RBI offers to banks for funds parked with the central bank – will prompt banks to make available funds for the productive sectors of the economy. Now, banks have been parking close to ₹7-8 lakh crore at the RBI's reverse repo window instead of lending these funds.

What's the Significance of Extension of Moratorium?

The RBI has now extended the moratorium on term loan repayment by another three months to August 31, 2020. On March 27, the RBI had announced a three-month moratorium till May 31 (March 1-May 31). This will help borrowers, especially corporates which have halted production and are facing cash flow problems, to get more time to stabilize their operations and restart their units. All borrowers, including home loan, term loans and credit card outstanding's, will get the benefit of the moratorium. In another significant measure, the RBI has allowed borrowers and banks to convert the interest charges during the moratorium period (from March 1 to August 31) into a term loan which can be repaid by March 2021. This is expected to reduce the burden on borrowers who have gone for moratorium.

What the Market Expected and The RBI Did Not Announce?

The RBI did not make any announcement on one-time restructuring of loans as relief measures to tackle the impact of lockdown and the slowdown in the economy due to the Covid pandemic. Non-banking finance companies were expecting permission from the RBI for direct infusion from banks instead of banks investing in the debt securities of NBFCs. The RBI was silent on easing of bad loan recognition norm from 90 days to 180 days.

What's Governor's Comment on Growth?

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said the growth is likely to be in the negative territory in 2020-21. However, he did not mention any specific figure on the growth rate. MPC said economic activity other than agriculture is likely to remain depressed in Q1 of 2020-21 in view of the extended lockdown. Even though the lockdown may be lifted by end-May with some restrictions, economic activity even in Q2 may remain subdued due to social distancing measures and the temporary shortage of labour. Recovery in economic activity is expected to begin in Q3 and gain momentum in Q4 as supply lines are gradually restored to normalcy and demand gradually revives.

Will Migrants Benefit from The Centre's Measures?

- In her second tranche of COVID-19 relief package announcements, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the steps taken by the government for migrants and farmers during the national lockdown, including free ration for stranded workers. Acknowledging the significance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) during the pandemic, she said it had helped provide jobs to returning workers in rural areas and advised States to continue the process in the monsoon season as well. Migrant workers, the urban poor and small farmers are the targeted beneficiaries of these announcements.

Why and How Have Migrant Workers Suffered During the Lockdown?

One of the most severely affected sections of the population due to the extended lockdown has been migrant workers, especially those in urban areas across the country. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted in 2017 by the National Sample Survey Office of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, had estimated that there were around 1,49,53,750 urban workers who had vulnerable jobs. These workers included helpers in a



household enterprise and who did not receive a regular salary and casual labourers who received daily wages; besides this, the number considers only those in the bottom 50% of the wealth pyramid in 2017-18, based on their monthly per capita expenditure. This number extended to an estimated 2.5 crore people if those who had salaried jobs but did not receive any paid leave and other benefits were included. Migrant workers numbered more than 81 lakh people among this segment. Once the national lockdown was announced, it was this segment of the population which was hurt the most as many of them lost their jobs (the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, or CMIE, estimates unemployment to have reached 24.2%, with urban unemployment being 26%) and had barely any income to tide over the lockdown. Many migrant workers sought to return home to their home towns, but the absence of transport prevented them from doing so. **State governments were supposed to set up relief camps and shelters providing food and other amenities for these workers, but implementation was skewed (69% of the overall shelters and camps were situated only in Kerala,** according to an affidavit submitted by the Union government to the Supreme Court in early April). With increasing distress, many migrant workers took recourse to their own means of transport to go home – many had no other option but to walk long distances – before the central government finally notified the start of services of “Shramik trains” to transport them. Migrant workers have continued to travel to escape distress conditions at their places of work and in the absence of any social security net.

What Has Been Announced for Migrant Workers?

The Finance Minister acknowledged the significance of the MGNREGS in providing jobs to workers returning to rural areas. The government noted that work off-take increased in May. This followed instructions from the Centre to restart the scheme after work hours fell drastically in April. The Centre has now advised States/Union Territories to provide work through the scheme and to extend this to the monsoon season as well in providing jobs in plantations, horticulture, livestock-related work. **The CMIE’s latest unemployment survey report also found that while various segments (small traders, salaried employees, entrepreneurs, etc) have suffered significant job losses, the number of farmers in the survey had increased, indicating that farm work has been a source of livelihood during the lockdown.** The government has promised a free supply of 5 kg of food grain per person and 1 kg channa per family per month for two months, for those migrants who are neither beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act (2013), or NFSA, nor possess State cards. The government expects eight crore migrants to benefit from this scheme and the Centre will spend ₹3,500 crore on this. States will be in charge of implementation and distribution. The inclusion of these estimated eight crore beneficiaries will bring the total number of people under the Public Distribution System coverage close to the level legally mandated by the NFSA of 67% of the population. Food Minister Ram Vilas Paswan has said that if the number exceeds eight crores, the Centre is ready to provide additional food grain for free supply but it would leave it to States to identify genuine beneficiaries. “States can directly supply free ration at shelter camps, or issue distress coupons or adopt any suitable method for free distribution of the food grains and channa,” Food Secretary Sudhanshu Pandey clarified at a briefing.

What About the One Nation One Ration Card Scheme?

The Centre has also said that the One Nation One Ration Card scheme will be enhanced by assuring national portability of 83% by August 2020 and 100% by March 2021. The scheme should allow migrant workers to access food in States other than that of their permanent residence. But concerns remain about availability of ration in shops to allow for distribution to migrant workers as well. In places where the scheme has been implemented so far, the utilisation of the scheme has been very low (800 workers on an average in a month before the lockdown and an average of only 200 workers during the lockdown). Besides these steps for



immediate relief to the workers, the government has also announced that it will launch a scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) to convert government funded housing in the cities into affordable rental housing complexes under PPP mode through a concessionaire. A special credit facility with liquidity of up to ₹5,000 crore has been announced for street vendors through a special scheme that will facilitate easy credit and will be launched in a month.

Will Small Farmers Benefit?

Among steps announced to ease credit for small farmers, the government said that the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) will extend an additional refinance support of ₹30,000 crore for crop loan requirement of rural cooperative banks and regional rural banks.

Cabinet Okays NBFC Liquidity Plan

- The Union Cabinet approved a ₹30,000-crore special liquidity scheme for non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) and housing finance companies aimed at improving the cash position of these entities. A special purpose vehicle (SPV) would be set up by a public sector bank to manage a Stressed Asset Fund (SAF) whose special securities would be guaranteed by the Government of India and purchased by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) only, the government said. The scheme will be administered by the Department of Financial Services, which will issue the detailed guidelines. "The SPV would issue securities as per requirement subject to the total amount of securities outstanding not exceeding ₹30,000 crore to be extended by the amount required as per the need," a statement by the government said. "The securities issued by the SPV would be purchased by the RBI and the proceeds thereof, would be used by the SPV to acquire the debt of at least investment grade of short duration (residual maturity of up to three months) of eligible NBFCs / HFCs," it added. Raman Aggarwal, co-chairman, FIDC, the industry body of NBFCs, termed the scheme a non-starter due to the short tenure of the funds. "The details of the special liquidity scheme have come as a disappointment," he said. "The funds will be made available for a tenor of up to three months while a majority of the lending done is for a tenure of 2-3 years. "In order to prevent any asset-liability mismatch, the expectation was for a tenure of three years," said Mr. Aggarwal.

How Will The COVID-19 Relief for MSMEs Help?

- The government has proposed to offer collateral-free loans to MSMEs which will be fully guaranteed by the Centre. There will be a principal repayment moratorium for 12 months and the interest rate will be capped and there will be no guarantee fee. All MSMEs with a turnover of up to ₹100 crore and with outstanding credit of up to ₹25 crore will be eligible to borrow up to 20% of their total outstanding credit as on February 29, 2020. These loans will have a four-year tenure and the scheme will be open until October 31. A total of ₹3-lakh crore has been allocated for this.

How Will This Benefit MSMEs?

Banks, though flush with funds, have been unwilling to lend to this category of borrowers as they fear that the money will not be repaid. These small businesses have also pledged all their assets already for other loans and do not have any more assets to pledge. It is to break this logjam that the government has said that it will backstop banks up to ₹3-lakh crore and said that these loans do not need collaterals.

Under the scheme, 100% guarantee coverage will be provided by National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company Limited (NCGTC) to eligible MSMEs and interested borrowers of the MUDRA



scheme, in the form of a Guaranteed Emergency Credit Line (GECL) facility, the government said. Banks are now expected to be more comfortable in assisting this category of borrowers because the risk is zero (since the loans are guaranteed by the central government). This is the single biggest proposal in the last three tranches of announcements under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan and small businesses are expected to benefit from this in a big way. About 45 lakh MSMEs are expected to gain from this proposal.

Are These the Only Proposals for MSMEs?

No. A partial credit guarantee scheme has been extended to enable promoters of these units to increase their equity. A total of ₹20,000 crore will be funnelled through the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE) whereby banks will lend money to promoters which can be infused as equity in their businesses. About two lakhs stressed MSMEs with non-performing assets (NPAs) are projected to benefit from this. The CGTMSE will offer a partial credit guarantee to banks. There is also a proposal to infuse equity into MSMEs through a Fund of funds system where the government will provide ₹10,000 crore as initial corpus of the Fund. This will be leveraged to raise ₹50,000 crore which will be used to support MSMEs in desperate need of equity through 'daughter funds' of the main Fund of funds. The aim is to expand size and capacity of the MSMEs with equity and help them get listed on the stock exchanges.

Was Not A Change in The Definition of MSMEs Also Announced?

Yes, henceforth MSMEs will be defined not based on their investment alone but also on their turnover. The definition has been tweaked and the existing distinction between manufacturing and services units has been eliminated. Henceforth, a unit with up to ₹1 crore investment and ₹5 crore turnover will qualify as a micro unit, investment up to ₹10 crore and turnover up to ₹50 crore will qualify as a small unit, and investment up to ₹20 crore and turnover up to ₹100 crore will qualify as a medium enterprise. It has been a long-standing demand from industry to hike the investment limits, as with inflation, units often cross the threshold that will bring them benefits. To prevent this, they either run their operations at a reduced level or incorporate multiple units so that turnover is distributed in a way that they remain within the threshold that will give them the benefits. The decision to add turnover criteria to investment is seen as a good decision as there are units that leverage a small capital to post large revenues.

What Are the Proposals for Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs)?

NBFCs, housing finance companies and micro finance institutions are finding it difficult to raise debt capital due to a confidence crisis in the debt markets. The government has, therefore, announced a special liquidity scheme of ₹30,000 crore to pick up investment grade debt paper from both primary and secondary markets. Such paper will be fully guaranteed by the government. This is expected to break the low confidence cycle in the market for lending to the above category of borrowers. In addition, to help low rated finance companies to raise debt, the existing partial credit guarantee scheme has been extended to cover primary market debt paper wherein the first 20% loss will be borne by the government. A total of ₹45,000 crore has been set aside for this Partial Credit Guarantee Scheme 2.0 that will offer liquidity to paper rated AA and below and even unrated paper.

What Are the Measures for The Common Man?

In March, when the first relief package called the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana was announced, the government offered to pay the 24% provident fund contribution (employer + employee) for those earning up to ₹15,000 a month as salary and working in units that employ less than 100 workers for three months. This has now been extended for another three months



up to August. The statutory PF contribution for those employed in the private sector (and not in the category of establishments above) has been reduced to 10% (from 12% now) for the next three months in order to increase liquidity in their hands. This is expected to benefit 4.3 crore people and 6.5 lakh establishments and release a total of ₹6,750 crore liquidity. In addition to the above, **the rate of tax deducted at source (TDS) and tax collected at source (TCS) has been reduced by 25% for a whole range of receipts.** Thus, in payments to contractors, professional fees, rent, interest, commission, brokerage, etc. the TDS will be 25% lower. The TCS paid while buying a car of over ₹10 lakh in value and TCS collected in property transactions will also be lower. The lower TDS is not applicable on monthly salaries that employees receive. In the cases where TDS/TCS has been reduced, the tax liability is not reduced. It will be payable while filing return or while paying advance tax. The idea is only to offer immediate cash relief to people. The lower TDS/TCS kicks in right away and will stay until March 31, 2021.

Bankers Unimpressed By ₹3 Lakh Crore Funding for MSMEs

- However, bankers said that since the government is not giving a direct guarantee, this may not solve the 'risk averse' issue that the lenders are facing. "It is like the CGTMSE [Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises] scheme. The claims will not be settled unconditionally. Questions will be asked... they may like to see the loan appraisal process once a claim is made when the borrower defaults," an official from a public sector bank said. **Since the scheme is not directly guaranteed by the government, banks still have to attach a risk weight of 20% for the loans.** And, if the claim is not settled, banks have to make provision in line with the age of default. Bankers said they may approach the Reserve Bank of India to allow them not to attach any risk weight.

Where Is Health in The Stimulus Package? (A.K. Shiva Kumar - Delhi-Based Development Economist)

- Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the critical importance of the public sector in health provisioning. However, **stuck at around 1.15% of GDP for well over a decade, the low level of public spending on health is both a cause and an exacerbating factor accounting for the poor quality, limited reach and insufficient public provisioning of healthcare.** Despite this, the public health system has risen to the challenge so far. The Union and State governments seem to have found the financial resources to provide an emergency response to deal with the pandemic. With agility and speed, orders have been placed for PPEs, ventilators, testing kits, and other supplies needed to detect and treat COVID-19 patients. It is possible that resources allocated for other health programmes are being diverted to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The opportunity cost of such diversion of funds could be high. Media reports point out, for instance, that people's access to routine maternal and child health as well as family planning services in parts of the country has been negatively impacted. Also, many States are simply not in a position to deal with a second wave of infections. The pandemic has exposed a hard truth: most private healthcare providers seem to be incapable of and unwilling to help even during a national crisis. And India's private sector in health is sizable. **According to recent figures, the private sector accounts for 93% of all hospitals, 64% of all hospital beds, and 80-85% of all doctors. Rapidly declining revenues and sharply eroding profits are leading to the closure of many private hospitals.** Only a few private providers have come forward to extend support to the government. Not addressing weaknesses in the public health delivery system can thwart all efforts at reviving the economy. State governments need to be prepared as the worst maybe yet to come. **This is the time then to seize the opportunity and invest in universal health coverage (UHC) by reversing the financial neglect of public**

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



healthcare. Nearly every country in the world that has achieved anything like UHC has done it through the public assurance of primary healthcare. Announcing a new 'health investment plan' (as part of the stimulus package) is the urgent need of the hour. At least 1% of GDP out of the stimulus package should be earmarked for improving the country's health infrastructure and strengthening public health service delivery. And up to 70% of the additional expenditures should be ring-fenced for primary healthcare and further strengthening health and wellness centres, primary health centres and community health centres. Only then can State governments be better prepared to face a second round of the pandemic. Investing in health, apart from improving people's well-being, is also essential for accelerating and sustaining India's economic growth. If cricket is a game of chance, so is the match against COVID-19. What the immediate future holds for India in terms of the spread of the virus is not known. As is said of matches, 'it isn't over till it's over.' There is only one way to win this match and establish a self-reliant and prosperous India: seize the opportunity and step up investments in public health across the country.

- There is robust evidence that investments in public health and primary care pay rich economic dividends. Apart from the WHO Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (2001), two other economists-led reports on Investing in Health (1993, 2013) concluded that investments in population health will yield rich returns of economic growth. The 2013 report estimated that low- and middle-income countries will realise 9 to 20-fold returns respectively on investments in health. A UN High Level Commission, headed by the Presidents of France and South Africa, reported in 2016 that **investments for augmenting the size and skills of the health workforce yields economic growth through improved population health and productivity, reduced healthcare costs and job creation even in a gloomy global scenario of job loss.** The Baumol hypothesis on investments in health was strongly disputed by this report. India, in particular, stands to gain greatly by investing in health, especially health beyond illness care. Productivity boost promised by a demographically young population can be protected. Education and skilling of a diversified health workforce can uplift health services for health protection at both population and individual levels. When domestic needs are met, this expanded health workforce can also meet global health needs, both as a rapid action force for health emergency response and as a unit taking care of the chronic care needs of aged societies. Innovative health technologies and inexpensive pharmaceutical products can be created at scale, for domestic use and global export. This calls for stepped up public financing for the health sector. Questions may be posed as to how this can be done at a time of economic downturn. History teaches us that such an investment is especially useful in times of economic adversity. South-East Asian countries invested in health and universal health coverage during and soon after the Asian Financial Crisis of the 1990s. The United Kingdom adopted universal health coverage soon after the Second World War. Japan adopted it in the early 1960s to hasten recovery from the economic injuries inflicted by defeat in that war. All of them recognised that greater investment in health is a winning bet for economic development. India too must choose that path to boost the trajectory of its economic growth. At the bottom of the Pandora's box lies hope. As COVID-19, which emerged through our indiscretions, exits, its attendant ills which afflict our economic and social life, too can fade away. If we let hope rise, through health.

How Atmanirbhar Small Loans Scheme Gives Hope For The Self-Employed In Gujarat

- Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani has announced a "Atmanirbhar Gujarat Sahay Yojana" that offers a loan of up to ₹1 lakh for a period of three years to small entrepreneurs and self-employed workers such as electricians, plumbers and carpenters. The scheme also aims to



cover domestic helps, vegetable vendors, construction workers, and others who have lost their incomes in the Covid-19 lockdown. Applicants to the scheme will need guarantors to help push their case before credit societies and urban and district cooperative banks that will hand out ₹5,000 crore worth of collateral-free loans. They will also need to be aware of the penalties in case of a default.

How Will the Atmanirbhar Gujarat Sahay Yojana Work?

A total 260 urban cooperative banks, 18 district cooperative banks, and 6,500 credit cooperative societies registered under the Gujarat Cooperative Act will provide collateral-free loans at an **interest rate of 2 per cent to successful applicants. The state government will bear the cost of an additional 6 per cent interest on the “unsecured loans”, which will have a moratorium of six months during which the applicant will not have to pay either the interest or the principal amount. The loans will, however, need to be paid back in equal instalments over the following 30 months.** “The scheme is applicable to any conceivable business, provided the person falls under the category of a small trader, shopkeeper or self-employed workmen,” said Manish Bhardwaj, Secretary, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries and Cooperation.

When Will the Scheme Be Rolled Out?

The scheme will begin on May 21, and the lending agencies will accept applications until August 31. The banks and credit societies have been asked to finish all disbursements by November 15, 2020. “The banks have been given full freedom to decide on the applications... depending on their assessment of each person’s capacity to repay,” Bharadwaj said. The scheme also applies to those who have branded franchises.

What Details and Documents Must an Applicant Supply?

The application form asks for the “purpose of loan”, apart from family income and monthly expenses, and details of existing loans. Applicants have to also provide “two guarantors” along with the details of their incomes. Along with the application form, an affidavit, an acceptance letter of having taken a loan, a demand promissory note, and a loan agreement needs to be submitted. Other documents needed include a letter from the concerned association regarding self-employment, documents to prove that the applicant was self-employed as on January 1, 2020, copy of the Aadhaar of the applicant and all members of his/her family, copy of PAN or Form-60, and copy of ration card.

What If an Applicant Has A Pending Loan in The Same/Any Other Bank?

Officials say the existence of a continuing loan will not be a disqualification as long as the applicant is not a defaulter. The conditions listed for the loan state the applicant should “not have an overdue loan in this bank or any other banks”.

What Happens If the Applicant Fails to Repay the Loan Under This Scheme?

The loan becomes an NPA in case of default in repayment. The bank will have the right to take legal action against the applicant, at the cost of the applicant or the guarantor. A “penalty interest” of 3 per cent will be charged from the date of default if the applicant is unable to return the loan amount.

How Will the Government Keep A Tab on Repayments?

A state-level monitoring committee headed by Additional Chief Secretary, Finance, will conduct a periodic review of the scheme, and will keep a watch on the performance of each bank which is part of the scheme. It will also keep a tab on NPAs.



Does the Applicant Need to Be A Member of a Credit Society? Is There A Cap on Lending Beyond ₹5,000 Crore?

Cooperative banks have been mandated to extend loans up to 10 per cent of their total assets. "The state government is in the process of sending a proposal to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) through the Union Finance Ministry to allow banks the freedom to lend up to 20 per cent of their total assets," Bhardwaj said. "Also, cooperative banks and societies can lend money only to their members. All applicants will not be members, so we are asking them to be made nominal members," the official said.

How Much Will the Gujarat Government Pay to The Lending Agencies During the Three-Year Period?

Apart from the 2 per cent interest that an applicant pays on the loan, the Gujarat government will reimburse the 6 per cent interest on a quarterly basis (generally it is done annually) to the lending agencies. The government will also give a one-time, 2 per cent (of the loans extended) incentive to the banks and societies for extending the loan.

Why the Govt Had to Inject Money into The Power Sector

- Part of the package announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman (May 13) was a ₹90,000-crore liquidity injection into power distribution companies (or Discoms). The move is aimed at helping the Discoms clear their dues with gencos (or electricity generation companies), who in turn can clear their outstanding dues with suppliers, such as coal miners, easing some of the working capital woes of Coal India Ltd and contract miners. This is subject to the condition that the Centre will act as guarantor for loans given by the state-owned power finance companies such as PFC and REC Ltd to the Discoms.

Why Was This Needed

The primary trigger is the poor financial condition and revenue collection abilities of most state Discoms. This is despite several interventions, including a scheme called UDAY that was launched in 2015 to fix the problems of a sector where the upstream side (electricity generation) was drawing investments even as the downstream (distribution) side was leaking like a sieve. To understand how the sector works, we have to imagine a three-stage process.

First Stage: Electricity is generated at thermal, hydro or renewable energy power plants, which are operated by either state-owned companies such as NTPC Ltd, NHPC Ltd, or private companies (also called Independent power producers or IPPs) such as Tata Power, Adani Power, or renewable companies such as ReNew Power or Greenko.

Second Stage: The generated electricity then moves through a complex transmission grid system comprising electricity substations, transformers, and power lines that connect electricity producers and the end-consumers. The transmission segment is dominated largely by state-owned companies such as Powergrid Corp, which operate the grid. Similarly, each state has a State Transmission Utility (STU) along with private transmission companies which are responsible for setting up intra-state transmission projects. Companies like Power System Operation Corporation (POSOCO) along with National, Regional and State Dispatch Centres (NLDC, RLDC, SLDC) work in tandem to ensure grid security and balance. The entire electricity grid consists of hundreds of thousands of miles of high-voltage power lines and millions of miles of low-voltage power lines with distribution transformers that connect thousands of power plants to millions of electricity customers all across the country.



Third Stage: This last mile link is where Discoms come in, operated largely by state governments. However, in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and Kolkata, private entities own the entire distribution business or parts of it.

Why There Is A Problem

Discoms essentially purchase power from generation companies through power purchase agreements (PPAs), and then supply it to their consumers (in their area of distribution). The key issue with the power sector currently is the continuing problem of the poor financial situation of state Discoms. This has been affecting their ability to buy power for supply, and the ability to invest in improving the distribution infrastructure. Consequently, this impacts the quality of electricity that consumers receive. There are two fundamental problems here. One, in India, electricity price for certain segments such as agriculture and the domestic category (what we use in our homes) is cross-subsidised by the industries (factories) and the commercial sector (shops, malls). This affects the competitiveness of industry. While the government has started a process through which the extent of cross-subsidisation is gradually being reduced, this is easier said than done as states do not like to increase tariffs for politically sensitive constituents, such as farmers. So, industry continues to cross-subsidise these categories. Second, there is the problem of AT&C (aggregate transmission and distribution losses), which is a technical term that stands for the gap between the cost of the electricity that a Discoms gets from the generating company, the bills that it raises and the final realisation from the collection process from end-consumers such as you and me. While there are regulatory bodies such as the Regulatory Commissions of the state (SERCs), which are largely responsible for ensuring that tariff revisions happen regularly and a Discoms recovers the money for the electricity that it supplies to each customer, this has not been that successful on the ground. As a result, the Discoms are perennially short of funds, even to pay those supplying power to them, resulting in a cascading impact up the value chain. Hence the intervention announced last week seeks to ensure time-bound funding assistance to Discoms through PFC and REC, so that they can clear their bills. In turn, generating and transmission companies that are upwards in the value chain will get relief, and they, in turn, can pay their suppliers such as Coal India Ltd or GAIL (coal and gas suppliers) and L&T or BHEL (equipment, civil works contractor).

- At the core of DISCOM woes is the **two-part tariff policy**, mandated by the Ministry of Power in the 1990s at the behest of the World Bank. As more private developers came forward to invest in generation, DISCOMs were required to sign long-term power purchase agreements (PPA), committing to pay a fixed cost to the power generator, irrespective of whether the State draws the power or not, and a variable charge for fuel when it does. The PPAs signed by DISCOMs were based on over-optimistic projection of power demand estimated by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), a central agency. The 18th Electric Power Survey (EPS) overestimated peak electricity demand for 2019-2020 by 70 GW. The 19th EPS published in 2017, by 25 GW, both pre-COVID 19. In the event, DISCOMs locked into long-term contracts end up servicing perpetual fixed costs for power not drawn. NTPC Limited's Kudgi, in Karnataka, alone received ₹4,800 crore as idle fixed costs during 2018-19, operating at a plant load factor of only 22%. Due to the CEA's overestimates, the all-India plant load factor of coal power plants is at an abysmal 56% even before COVID-19.

Factor of Renewable Energy

From 2010, solar and wind power plants were declared as "must-run", requiring DISCOMs to absorb all renewable power as long as there was sun or wind, in excess of mandatory renewable purchase obligations. This means backing down thermal generation to



accommodate all available green power, entailing further idle fixed costs payable on account of two-part tariff PPAs. Second, power demand peaks after sunset. In the absence of viable storage, every megawatt of renewable power requires twice as much spinning reserves to keep lights on after sunset. DISCOMs, especially in the southern region, have had to integrate large volumes of infirm power, mostly from solar and wind energy plants which enjoy must-run status irrespective of their high tariffs (₹5/kwh in Karnataka and ₹6/kwh in Tamil Nadu for solar power) even as the demand growth envisaged in the 18th EPS failed to materialise. Third, in 2015 the Centre announced an ambitious target of 175 gigawatts of renewable power by 2022, offering a slew of concessions to renewable energy developers, and aggravating the burden of DISCOMs. Incidentally, China benefited by as much as \$13 billion in the last five years from India's solar panel imports.

The Fine Print

It is against this backdrop that we must examine the proposals in the Electricity Act 2020. First, the amendment proposes sub-franchisees, presumably private, in an attempt to usher in markets through the back door. Going by past privatisation experiments, private sub-franchisees are likely to cherry-pick the more profitable segments of the DISCOM's jurisdiction. The Electricity Bill 2020 containing the proposed amendments is silent on whether a private sub-franchisee would be required to buy the expensive power (averaging out the idle fixed costs) from the DISCOM or procure cheaper power directly from power exchanges. If it is the first, the gains from the move are doubtful since the room for efficiency improvements is rather restricted in the already profitable regions attractive to sub-franchisees. If it is the second, DISCOMs will then be saddled with costly power purchase from locked-in PPAs and fewer profitable areas from which to recover it. Second, the amendment proposes even greater concessions to renewable power developers, with its cascading impact on idling fixed charges, impacting the viability of DISCOMs even more. Third, and the most controversial amendment proposed, seeks to eliminate in one stroke, the cross-subsidies in retail power tariff. This means each consumer category would be charged what it costs to service that category. Rural consumers requiring long lines and numerous step-down transformers and the attendant higher line losses will pay the steepest tariffs. Disingenuously, the proposed amendments envisage that State governments will directly subsidise whichever category they want to, through direct benefit transfers. Cross-subsidy is a fact of life in even private industries, soap, newspapers, or even utilities such as telecom. There is undoubtedly a case for reducing the steep cross-subsidies in electricity. But eliminating them in one stroke when State governments are already struggling with direct power subsidies is bound to be ruinous to their finances, not to mention the myriad problems with Direct Benefit Transfer. Without going into the political arguments relating to subsidies, and the impact of COVID-19 which has not been factored in, this proposal is practically infeasible; if forcibly implemented, it will lead to chaos. Fourth, State regulators will henceforth be appointed by a central selection committee, the composition of which inspires little confidence in its objectivity, jeopardising not only regulatory autonomy and independence but also the concurrent status of the electricity sector. Finally, the last claw in this multipronged pincer is the establishment of a centralised Electricity Contract Enforcement Authority whose members and chairman will again be selected by the same selection committee referred to above. The power to adjudicate upon disputes relating to contracts will be taken away from State Electricity Regulatory Commissions and vested in this new authority, ostensibly to protect and foster the sanctity of contracts. This is to ensure that States saddled with high-priced PPAs and idling fixed costs, yet forced to keep increasing the share of renewables in their basket, have no room for manoeuvre. When the country is reeling under the economic impact of the novel coronavirus crisis, the Electricity Bill 2020 is indeed a disingenuous document drafted to shift the burden imposed by the short-sighted



policies of the Centre onto hapless States, with serious consequences for the nation's energy security.

Why Is the Companies Act Being Changed?

- Finance and corporate affairs minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday announced that the government was moving to decriminalise provisions of the Companies Act to enhance ease of doing business in the country as part of the government Covid-19 relief package. The move, which was initially announced on March 4, is part of a larger effort by the government since 2018 to remove criminal penalties from all provisions of the Companies Act, except provisions dealing with fraudulent conduct. A number of offences previously classified as compoundable offences, i.e. those offences that had either imprisonment or fines as punishments have had the imprisonment penalty removed. Some of these offences have been omitted altogether while others have been shifted from the purview of the National Company Law Tribunals (NCLT) to an in-house adjudication mechanism.

Why the Change?

The move has been part of larger government efforts to boost ease of doing business since 2018. The recently decriminalised offences include administrative offences such as delays in filing CSR reports, or failure to rectify the register of members in compliance with orders from the NCLT. Experts point out that the decriminalisation efforts are really an effort to pull back on regulations introduced in 2014 aimed at boosting corporate compliance. The government had also introduced amendments to the Companies Act making violations of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) provisions punishable by imprisonment but did not operationalise the provision after feedback from industry. The Companies Act amendment bill 2020 has also proposed to remove criminal liability from CSR provisions.

What Is the Change?

The number of compoundable offences under the Companies Act have come down to 31 from 81 prior to the 2018 amendment to the Companies Act. A number of these offences have been moved from needing to be prosecuted through the National Company Law Tribunals to being dealt with by the Registrar of Companies. The RoC is empowered to decide penalties for these offences and companies can appeal to the Regional Director (RD) of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) to appeal or seek modifications to these decisions. This move would help free up the bandwidth of NCLTs to deal with cases dealing with insolvency and other higher priority matters. The total number offences to be dealt with the in-house adjudication mechanism has risen from 18 in 2018 to 58 proposed in the latest amendment.

What Are the Next Steps?

According to experts, the ministry is expected to come out with further measures to decriminalise provisions in the companies act particularly those relating to auditors. An auditor with a leading audit firm said the MCA had announced that it would move towards removing criminal liability for issues such as negligence by auditors. "The ministry said they would remove criminal liability for a number of provisions dealing with auditors," said the person noting that there was an issue with auditors being considered to be colluding with management if any fraud was found. The Company Law Committee had also in its report said that it would take up the matter of easing provisions of debarment of audit firms in the next phase of decriminalisation of the Companies Act. The corporate affairs ministry is however currently in the process of seeking debarment of audit firms Deloitte as well as KPMG affiliate firm BSR & Co. for their alleged role in the IL&FS scam.



Labour Rights Are in Free Fall (Anamitra Roychowdhury - Teaches at The Jawaharlal Nehru University)

- As India slowly attempts to lift its nationwide lockdown, under compulsion of reviving the economy, labour rights are disappearing at an astonishing pace. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, which are States ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party, took the lead in suspending crucial labour laws for varying lengths of time.

Undemocratic Introduction

This strategy visualises effecting an economic turnaround through **improvement of India's rank in the "ease of doing business" index**, thereby attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and enthusing domestic private capital. Flexible labour and environmental laws are key instruments through which improvement in ranking is sought (incidentally, India's rank jumped from 130 in 2016 to 63 in 2019). Such thinking forms the core of the 'Make in India' programme; therefore, elements of labour law dilution are already visible in the **four labour codes aimed at consolidating 44 central labour laws (these are on wages, industrial relations, social security and occupational safety, health and working conditions)**. However, what is surprising is the **undemocratic manner**, by promulgating ordinances and notifying rules, in which labour rights are suspended without tripartite discussion. The continuity in direction of policy, although more vigorously pursued now, is obvious: for instance, consider the extension of a work day up to 12 hours. It is argued that this would address the problem of labour shortages at a time when social distancing is the norm. Interestingly, **draft rules on the Code on Wages, 2019 already proposed extension of a workday by one hour (from eight to nine hours) when the novel coronavirus pandemic was nowhere on the horizon**. Further, even though working hours are extended, there is no provision for overtime pay in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat (although such provisions are available in Uttarakhand, Haryana, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh).

Shades of An Agenda

Next, take the U.P. ordinance that shockingly exempts employers from complying with the Minimum Wages Act 1948. However, the Code on Wages, 2019 makes a distinction between national minimum wage (calculated on the basis of an objective formula) and national floor wage (without providing a methodology to calculate it). This was done on purpose, for **the minimum wage calculated by a government-appointed committee in 2018 was ₹375 per day, whereas, the national floor wage in the same year was a mere ₹176 per day; however, State governments, under the wages code, are directed to set their minimum wages only above the national floor wage**. Thus, States, vying for private investments, would essentially consider the national floor wage, and this in effect would dilute the idea of minimum wage. Additionally, the U.P. ordinance also exempts employers from complying with the Industrial Disputes Act 1947. Therefore, employers can hire and fire workers at will; however, employers even now are allowed to offer "fixed-term" employment without any restrictions on the number of renewals. Hence, firms hardly face any problem in adjusting their workforce. Now check the M.P. ordinance which **exempted factories employing less than 50 workers** from regular inspections and allowed third-party inspections. Again, the wages code severely eroded the inspection mechanism by **snatching away the power of inspectors to conduct surprise checks**. Even when violations in law are detected, they are mandated to advise, provide information and facilitate employers to comply with the law; in fact, they are now called inspector-cum-facilitator. The M.P. ordinance further states that **for new establishments, provisions guiding industrial dispute resolution, strikes/lockouts and trade unions would cease to operate**. This is in line with the Industrial Relations Code, 2019, which proposes to raise the membership threshold



of a trade union from 15% to 75% of the workforce in an establishment, for it to be recognised as the negotiating union. Therefore, it seems the novel coronavirus pandemic simply provided a window to aggressively fulfil the long-term agenda of diluting labour rights. This becomes evident from the length of suspension of these labour rights – which vary from 1,000 days (M.P.) to three years (U.P.). Surely there is no basis to expect that the impact of the lockdown will stretch for so long and it appears that State governments are competing to project themselves to be investor-friendly. But will such suspension of labour rights, aimed at reducing labour cost, stimulate private investment and ensure recovery? Past experience does not inspire confidence. The Reserve Bank of India, for some time now, has single-mindedly designed policies that reduce the cost of borrowing capital, but this has clearly failed to unleash animal spirits. Further, reductions in corporate tax in September 2019 made no impact in boosting private capital and reviving growth in subsequent quarters. Actually, **banking on private investment for economic recovery when the economy is wrapped in acute uncertainty is essentially futile**. This is easy to understand: for example, home buyers, once uncertain about completion of a housing project, will never evince interest even if flats are offered at dirt-cheap rates accompanied by additional benefits. Private agents wait and watch for a predictable environment before committing their money and, therefore, cannot be the principal agent for guiding an economy caught in a downward spiral.

Issue of Timing

Finally, consider the timing of labour rights suspension. Although industry associations and government are projecting these changes as necessary for enticing FDI relocating from China, this is only a cover for the unique opportunity provided by the lockdown. **In other times, such a violent attack on the fundamental rights of workers would lead to widespread protests and massive strikes**. Both instruments are toothless now; protests are prohibited by lockdown rules and strikes are meaningless when production days are lost anyway. However, this exposes the authoritarian nature of the state, and every section of society must come together to protect the rights of workers. This is essential for destroying the rights of one section of society makes the rights of other sections of society vulnerable as well. For example, the plight of migrant workers will now spread to the working class as a whole, and industrial accidents such as the ones in Bhopal and Vishakhapatnam could engulf larger sections of society. It is time we see these interconnections and resist unitedly.

What Facebook Shops Mean for The Future Of (Hyper-Local) Retail

- Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced the launch of Facebook Shops, a platform that small mom-and-pop stores across the world could leverage to sell things directly across its apps, such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook too. The launch of this platform coincides with the plans of many other global conglomerates to launch themselves in the Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSME) segment, by providing some kind of platform or training space. While it is unclear if Facebook Shops would be launched in India as well, it does raise a few questions.

Why Are Big Tech Companies Trying to Get into The Hyper-Local Space by Getting Small Stores Online?

The answer could lie in these companies wanting to explore newer opportunities by expanding their footprint. With a huge chunk of population in developing countries still joining the mainstream internet bandwagon, the smaller unorganised sector could be the new revenue and traffic generator for the big tech companies. For example, in December last year, US-based retailers Walmart and Amazon stepped up efforts to boost their image of being MSME-friendly,



by launching similar, albeit different, training programmes for India. Similarly, about a month ago, Facebook announced it had bought about 10 per cent stake in Reliance Industries' Jio Platforms.

What Does the Launch of Facebook Shops Mean for Small Store Owners?

For small store owners in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the launch of this platform could mean easy access to the large customer base of the social media giant, Facebook. With WhatsApp and Instagram, the trio makes a formidable presence on the internet. The three apps together also have a large captive user base that could be used by small mom-and-pop stores to expand their presence in their local markets. For example, Facebook-owned WhatsApp's ability to offer consumers easy access to the nearest kiranas, or grocery stores, which can provide products and services to their homes, can help the latter increase their revenue multi-fold.

Does Launch of Facebook Shops Impact the Facebook-Jio Deal Announced A Month Ago?

Though it is unclear whether Facebook Shops would be launched in India as well, the model adopted by Facebook for its own platform appears to be very similar to the one in the JioMart-WhatsApp deal. Though experts say there is a chance of cannibalisation of platforms if Facebook Shops launches in India, they also say that the platform could just be a replication of JioMart-WhatsApp arrangement.

Reforms and Agriculture

- With mandi closures and supply chain disruptions causing havoc in agricultural marketing, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on some of the critical infrastructure gaps and long-pending governance issues that plague the farm sector. The third tranche of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan listed measures to deal with those gaps, though there has been no announcement on an immediate economic stimulus for the sector.

What Are the Reforms Announced in The Farm Sector?

The third tranche announced on Friday focused on long-term issues in the agricultural sector, by promising financing to strengthen infrastructure, build better logistics and ramp up storage capacities, as well as proposing three major governance and administrative reforms that have been in the pipeline for many years. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's rationale for the third tranche was that improving farmers' income needed such long-term investments and changes, rather than a focus on short-term crop loans. However, a number of farmers and activists said that in the light of the COVID-19 crisis, immediate support and relief in the form of cash transfers, loan waivers, and compensation for unsold produce should have come before long-term reforms.

How Will They Change the Agriculture Sector?

Taking the opportunity of a crisis situation, the Finance Minister has pushed through reforms that the Centre has been trying to implement for years. For instance, the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 came into being at a time of food scarcity and famine; last year's Economic Survey called it an "anachronistic legislation". It allows the government to control price rise and inflation by imposing stock limits and movement restrictions on commodities, giving States the power to regulate dealer licensing, confiscate stock and even jail traders who fail to comply with restrictions. Earlier this year, it was used to control soaring onion prices. Traders have long complained of harassment under the Act on the suspicion of hoarding, black



marketing and speculation, while food processors and exporters have also pointed out that they may need to stock commodities for longer periods of time. The Act has disincentivised construction of storage capacity and hindered farm exports. Discussions about amending or repealing the Act have been going on for almost two decades. On Friday, the Finance Minister announced that the Act would be amended to deregulate six categories of agricultural foodstuffs: cereals, pulses, edible oils, oilseeds, potato and onion. Stock limits on these commodities will not be imposed except in times of a national calamity or a famine, and will not be imposed at all on food processors or value chain participants, which/who will be allowed to store as much as allowed by their installed capacity. Exporters will also be exempted. It is hoped that the amendment will bring more private investment into warehouses and post-harvest agricultural infrastructure, including processors, mills and cold chain storage. It could help farmers sell their produce at more competitive rates if there is no fear of government intervention to artificially suppress market prices, and is likely to give a boost to farm exports.

What About the Other Planned Reforms?

The Centre plans to bring in a new federal law to break the nearly half-century long monopoly of the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) mandis. It has already tried the route of trying to coax State governments into adopting its Model APMC Amendment Act which aims at developing unified State-level markets by offering a State-wide licence and single point levy of market fees while also allowing private markets, direct marketing, ad hoc wholesale buying and e-trading. However, only a few large States ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party, including Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, have amended their Acts. Now, the Centre proposes to bypass States altogether by bringing in a federal law to abolish inter-State trade barriers. The hope is that these reforms will bring in more options for the farmer, offering more competitive prices if there is a wider choice of buyers. The plan to bring in a legal framework for contract farming also aims to provide more certainty and choice for farmers, although some experts caution that recent drafts of contract farming law promote the interests of the large corporate player at the expense of safeguarding the small farmer.

How Are Infrastructure Investments Expected to Help?

Reforming governance structures is of no use unless there is infrastructure on the ground to enable farmers to take advantage of the wider choices with which they are being provided. A ₹1-lakh crore agriculture infrastructure fund run by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development will help create affordable and financially viable post-harvest management infrastructure at the farm gate and aggregation points. The Finance Minister emphasises that her announcements would also bring better infrastructure and logistics support to fish workers, dairy and other livestock farmers, beekeepers and vegetable and medicinal plant growers. She also offered support to lakhs of small informal food processors, mostly women, who need technical upgradation and marketing support in order to compete in a changing marketplace.

- Among other proposals approved by the Cabinet was a subsidy of almost ₹3,110 crore for distribution of extra food grains to about eight crore migrant workers and their families. The Cabinet also approved a new centrally-sponsored scheme to support micro food processing units at an outlay of ₹10,000 crore, the expenditure being shared by the Centre and the States on a 60:40 basis. The scheme will be implemented over a five-year period and will benefit about two lakh self-help groups, farmer producer organisations and other small units through a credit-linked subsidy, providing money for working capital and tools, a marketing grant, skills training and technical upgrade. It also approved the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana, a scheme announced in the 2020 Budget, to develop the fisheries sector over a five-year period. Of the total investment of ₹20,050 crore, the Centre will spend ₹9,407 crore, the States



₹4,880 crore while beneficiaries themselves will have to invest about ₹5,763 crore. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs also approved the adoption of a new methodology for the auction of coal and lignite blocks on a revenue-sharing basis. The tenure of coking coal linkage was increased to 30 years. It will also permit commercial exploitation of coal-bed methane in the mining lease area. Rebates in revenue share payments will be given in the event of an early production of coal from the mine. Further rebates will be offered for gasification of coal to encourage environment-friendly actions.

Life & Science

What Is the SpaceX Demo-2 Mission, Set to Launch Next Week?

- ➔ On May 27, NASA's SpaceX Demo-2 test flight will lift off for International Space Station (ISS), becoming the first crewed flight to launch from American soil since the conclusion of the space shuttle era in 2011.

What Is the Mission?

The Demo-2 mission is part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program, and will see astronauts Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley fly on SpaceX's Crew Dragon spacecraft. The craft will lift off from a Falcon 9 rocket, from Florida. NASA's Commercial Crew Program has worked with several American aerospace industry companies to facilitate the development of US human spaceflight systems since 2010, with the aim of developing reliable and cost-effective access to and from the ISS. Essentially, the lift-off on May 27 is a flight test to certify if SpaceX's crew transportation system can be used to ferry crew to and from the space station regularly. This is the final flight test for the system and intends to validate its different components, including the spacecraft (Crew Dragon), the launch vehicle (Falcon 9), the launch pad (LC-39A) and the operations capabilities. After its launch, the Crew Dragon will perform a series of phasing manoeuvres to gradually approach and autonomously dock with the ISS on May 28. After docking, the two astronauts will go aboard the ISS. They will perform tests of the Crew Dragon and conduct research with Expedition 63, the space station crew currently in residence at ISS. The Crew Dragon spacecraft being used for this mission can stay in orbit for up to 110 days, though the specific duration is yet to be determined. If SpaceX spacecraft are used regularly, they will need to stay in orbit for a period of at least 210 days as per NASA's requirements. Once the mission is over, astronauts Behnken and Douglas will board the Crew Dragon, which will automatically undock, depart from the station and re-enter the Earth's atmosphere.

The Commercial Crew Program

The main objective of this program is to make access to space easier in terms of its cost, so that cargo and crew can be easily transported to and from the ISS, enabling greater scientific research. Secondly, by encouraging private companies such as Boeing and SpaceX to provide crew transportation services to and from low-Earth orbit, NASA can focus on building spacecraft and rockets meant for deep space exploration missions. Boeing and SpaceX were selected by NASA in September 2014 to develop transportation systems meant to transfer crew from the US to the ISS.



Why Is the International Day of Light Celebrated?

- The United Nations marks the International Day of Light (IDL) – an annual initiative held globally to raise awareness on the critical role played by light-based technologies in everyday life – on May 16. The IDL highlights the contribution of such technologies in various avenues such as science, technology, art, and culture, thus helping achieve the UNESCO goals of education, equality, and peace. **The day selected, May 16, marks the anniversary of the first successful operation of the laser in 1960 by physicist and engineer Theodore Maiman. The IDL is administered from the International Basic Science Programme (IBSP) of UNESCO, and its Secretariat is located at the Abdus Salam International Centre of Theoretical Physics (ICTP) at Trieste, Italy.**

Objectives behind the IDL

According to lightday.org, the major objectives of the IDL include:

- ❖ Improve the public understanding of how light and light-based technologies touch the daily lives of everybody, and are central to the future development of the global society.
- ❖ Highlight and explain the intimate link between light and art and culture, enhancing the role of optical technology to preserve cultural heritage.
- ❖ Emphasise the importance of basic research in the fundamental science of light, the need for investment in light-based technology to develop new applications, and the global necessity to promote careers in science and engineering in these fields.
- ❖ Promote the importance of lighting technology and the need for access to light and energy infrastructure in sustainable development, and for improving quality of life in the developing world.

What Is the Sonic Boom That Rattled Bengaluru?

- The 'loud sound' heard in Bengaluru on Wednesday afternoon, which puzzled lakhs of city dwellers, was revealed to have emanated from an **IAF test flight involving a supersonic profile**. The sound effect caused due to such high-speed flights is known as 'sonic boom'. In a statement, the Ministry of Defence's PRO in Bengaluru said, **"The sonic boom was probably heard while the aircraft was decelerating from supersonic to subsonic speed between 36,000- and 40000-feet altitude."** It confirmed that the aircraft belonged to the Aircraft Systems and Testing Establishment (ASTE) and had flown in allocated airspace outside city limits. Explaining the unusual sound heard in the city, the Training Command headquarters of the Indian Air Force, said in a separate statement, "These (test flights) are done well beyond the city limits in specified sectors. However, considering the atmospheric conditions and reduced noise levels in the city during these times, the aircraft sound may become clearly audible even if it happened way out from the city."

What Is A 'Sonic Boom'?

Sound travels in the form of waves which are emitted outwards from its source. In air, the speed of these waves depends on a number of factors, such as the temperature of the air and altitude. From a stationary source, such as a television set, sound waves travel outwards in concentric spheres of growing radii. **When the source of sound is moving – e.g, a truck– the successive waves in front of the truck get closer together, and the ones behind it spread out.** This is also the cause of the Doppler effect– in which bunched waves at the front appear at a higher frequency to a stationary observer, and spread out waves that are behind are observed at a lower frequency. As long as the source of the sound keeps moving slower than the speed of sound itself, this source– say a truck or a plane – remains nested within the sound waves that are travelling in all directions. When an aircraft travels at supersonic speed – meaning faster than sound (>1225 kmph at sea level) – the field of sound waves moves to the rear of



the craft. A stationary observer thus hears no sound when a supersonic flight approaches, since the sound waves are at the rear of the latter. At such speeds, both newly created as well as old waves, are forced into a region at the aircraft's rear called a 'Mach cone', which extends from the craft and intercepts the Earth in a hyperbola-shaped curve, and leaves a trail called the 'boom carpet'. The loud sound that is heard on the Earth when this happens is called a 'sonic boom'. When such aircraft fly at a low altitude, the sonic boom can become intense enough to cause glass to crack or cause health hazards. Overland supersonic flights have thus been banned in many countries.

Supersonic Flights

In 1947, the American military pilot Chuck Yeager became the first to breach the sound barrier, flying the Bell X-1 aircraft at 1127 kmph. Since then, many supersonic flights have followed, with advanced designs allowing speeds of over Mach 3, or three times the speed of sound. According to the Indian Air Force website, India's fastest jets include the Sukhoi SU-30 MKI (Mach 2.35) and the Mirage-2000 (Mach 2.3).

The 'Travel Bubble' Idea That Many Are Pinning Their Hopes On

- The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania started what is being referred to as a 'travel bubble' to help put their economies back on track post-Covid lockdowns. With the pandemic throwing both international and domestic trade and travel out of gear since earlier this year, such 'travel bubbles' are now being recommended to keep at least parts of the global economy afloat. The three European Union (EU) states, who have launched this measure, have so far remained comparatively unscathed by the virus, recording less than 150 combined Covid-19 deaths as of May 17.

What Is A Travel Bubble?

Creating a travel bubble involves reconnecting countries or states that have shown a good level of success in containing the novel coronavirus pandemic domestically. Such a bubble would allow the members of the group to rekindle trade ties with each other, and kickstart sectors such as travel and tourism. According to a report in The Economist, potential travel bubbles among better-performing countries around the world would account for around 35 per cent of the global GDP. Such arrangements are especially being favoured by smaller countries, who are likely to benefit after being able to trade again with larger partners. In the Estonia-Latvia-Lithuania travel bubble, residents would be able to travel freely by rail, air, and sea without quarantine measures. All three are sparsely populated (Lithuania- 28 lakh, Latvia- 19.2 lakh, Estonia- 13.3 lakh people) and have been fairly successful at managing the outbreak. Those wanting to enter this corridor from countries outside would first have to go into isolation for 14 days. To be able to freely travel in the zone, one should not have travelled outside the three countries in the past 14 days, should not be infected with coronavirus, and should not have come in contact with anyone who has been coronavirus infected. As per a BBC report, the Baltic economies are expected to shrink by 8 per cent this year.

Where Are Other Such Bubbles Expected to Start?

On May 5, Australia and New Zealand reached an agreement to form a travel bubble between the two countries once it becomes safe to operate flights between them. Both have had success in suppressing the pandemic domestically. Once it opens, the trans-Tasman zone will allow travel without a quarantine period. China and South Korea, who have also enjoyed success in containing the outbreak, have launched a fast track channel for business travellers. In the US, travel bubbles are being suggested to group states who are faring well against the



pandemic, but constitutional challenges are also being cited as a possible roadblock for such plans.

Can Facebook's Self-Regulation Ensure Information Hygiene?

→ We have spent a decade discussing the problems posed by social media platforms and looked at issues such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, information silos, viral virus, misogynist trolling and amplification of toxic content. The platform companies have now started acknowledging their role in vitiating the information universe and undermining the lives of millions. **Last week, Facebook apologised for its role in the 2018 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka.** An in-house probe found that incendiary content on the social media platform may have led to the deadly violence. The social media conglomerate has also launched a content oversight board, which will be able to overturn decisions by the company and Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg on whether individual pieces of content should be allowed on Facebook and Instagram. Google has launched its Google News Initiative to help journalism thrive in the digital age. Will these initiatives and measures by the platform companies be enough to sanitise our news and information environment? I can reasonably claim that I am not only familiar with the works of two members of the 20-member Facebook oversight group – Alan Rusbridger, former editor of The Guardian and Nighat Dad, the Executive Director of Pakistan's Digital Rights Foundation – but also respect their contribution to a free and fair information space. Mr. Rusbridger has written an explanatory note on why he agreed to join the team. He sees the social media giant at the intersection of three humongous crises in front of credible information space: information chaos, crisis in free expression and crisis in journalism. Though he is guarded about the final outcome, Mr. Rusbridger said: "There is, in my view, no excuse for not trying. The balancing of free expression with the need for a better-organized public square is one of the most urgent causes I can imagine." I am a votary of self-regulation but I am sceptical of the mechanism created by Facebook. **First let us look at some of the proven instances of its gross failures: the anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka, the violence against Rohingya in Myanmar, the sordid details of the harvesting of personal data by Cambridge Analytica and the mindless censoring of the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of the "Napalm girl" that spoke about the barbarity of war. People from other regions have their own lists of failures of the platform.**

Dealing with Localized Propaganda

Second, there is a huge gap between the magnitude of Facebook's size, reach, linguistic diversity and influence on one hand, and the limitation of the oversight board to look into localised propaganda on the other. As of the first quarter of 2020, Facebook has 2.6 billion monthly active users and the number surpasses 3 billion people a month if one includes the other popular products of the company such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Messenger. It is available in 101 languages. For instance, how will the oversight board handle a toxic posting in Tamil? I have noticed a growth in bigotry, hate and abuse in Tamil-language postings. These do not reveal their true colour if they are subjected to mechanical translation without providing adequate context. What are the mechanisms to capture the gravity of the polarising content that fills cyberspace? Problematic posts should be removed on a war footing because there is a political dividend for inciting hate. We must remember that the grim images broadcast by the killer in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand could not be controlled or moderated by the social media giants despite the conscious and collective decision to take down the offensive video. There seems to be no mechanism to prevent reposting of offensive content, which was taken down. Rebecca MacKinnon, a fellow with the University of California National Centre for Free Speech and Civic Engagement and co-founder of Global Voices, is convinced that the oversight board "cannot stop the exploitative collection and sharing of user data, or



stop the company from deploying opaque algorithms that prioritize inflammatory content to maximize engagement.” I tend to agree with her. In print and broadcast organisations, there is a shared value system between all the stakeholders which makes self-regulation an effective mechanism. But there is no unifying objective between Mark Zuckerberg, his hand-picked corporate board, Facebook’s nearly 2.5 billion users and the oversight board, despite the individual credentials of its members.

A New Species Discovered on Twitter, Named After Twitter

→ A new species has just been discovered – on Twitter. It’s a type of parasitic fungus, which researchers have described in the journal MycoKeys. Its name: *Troglomyces twitteri*.

How It Turned Up

Ana Sofia Reboleira, biologist and associate professor with the University of Copenhagen’s Natural History Museum of Denmark, was scrolling through Twitter when she stumbled upon a photo of a North American millipede (*Cambala annulata*). It had been posted in 2018 by entomologist Derek Hennen, now a PhD student at Virginia Tech, who was sending millipede photos to people who had tweeted at him that they had voted in the US midterm polls. This particular photo had been tweeted at entomology student Kendal Davis; the millipede was from Ohio. “I could see something looking like fungi on the surface of the millipede. Until then, these fungi had never been found on American millipedes,” she said in a statement released by the University of Copenhagen.

Search & Discovery

Reboleira showed the image to her colleague Henrik Enghoff. Both of them then “ran down to the museum’s collections and began digging”, Reboleira said. The museum has a large collection of insects and millipedes. Reboleira and Enghoff found several specimens of the same fungus on a few of the American millipedes in the collection. These were fungi that had never before been documented before. Millipede specimens from the Museum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris helped confirm the discovery of the new species. The research was conducted by Sergi Santamaria (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Enghoff and Reboleira, who tweeted on Wednesday: “Hi @Twitter you have a new species named after you.”

Troglomyces Twitteri: What It’s Like

Troglomyces twitteri belongs to an order called Laboulbeniales – tiny fungal parasites that attack insects and millipedes. They look like tiny larvae. These fungi live on the outside of host organisms; in this case, on the reproductive organs of millipedes. Laboulbeniales were first discovered in the middle of the 19th century. Of these, approximately 30 different species attack millipedes (University of Copenhagen). Most of these species were recently identified; Reboleira believes many more remain to be discovered.

Rare Palm from Andamans Gets Second Home

→ A rare palm endemic to the South Andaman Island is finding a second home at Palode here, courtesy the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI). An earlier JNTBGRI effort in this direction had been thwarted by mischievous wild elephants that ate up all the specimens! At first glance, *Pinanga andamanensis* – which at one point was written off as extinct – resembles the areca palm to which it is closely related. But its entire population of some 600 specimens naturally occurs only in a tiny, evergreen forest pocket in South Andaman’s Mount Harriet National Park. By conserving the germplasm on the Indian



mainland, JNTBGRI can ensure its continued survival in the event of its minuscule original home getting wiped out by, say, a natural calamity. 'Such conservation efforts assume special significance in the era of climate change,' he said. JNTBGRI scientists termed the *Pinanga andamanensis* "a critically endangered species and one of the least known among the endemic palms of the Andaman Islands". While its uses are yet to be understood fully, this elegant palm holds promise as an avenue tree for gardens, pavements and homesteads, said Sam Mathew, Senior Scientist, Plant Genetic Resource Division, JNTBGRI.

Colorful History

Pinanga andamanensis has a colourful history. It was originally described by the Italian botanist Odoardo Beccari in 1934. His description was based on an old herbarium specimen collected by E.H. Man, a late-19th century assistant superintendent in the Andaman administration. After that first identification, it was thought to be extinct till 1992. In 1992, Mr. Mathew, who was with the Botanical Survey of India (BSI) at the time, and his BSI colleague, the late K.C. Malick, encountered a few specimens at the Mount Harriet National Park. Such a small gene pool means the species is vulnerable to natural calamities such as cyclones, earthquakes, Mr. Mathew said. After he moved to the JNTBGRI, five or six specimens were introduced at the Field Gene Bank at Palode in 1994. Unfortunately, rampaging wild elephants ate them all up in 2012. "The pith of the trunks of these palms is sweet," he said. In 2014, a few more seedlings were introduced, which has started flowering. "On fruit setting, JNTBGRI will resume seed germination experiments for mass multiplication as part of the conservation strategy. So why is this palm called Pinanga? Well, it has something to do with areca nuts, after all. The name is derived from 'Penang', the modern-day Malaysian state. "Penang itself has its origins in 'Pulau Pinang', which means 'Island of the Areca Nut Palm,'" says Mr. Mathew.

Whole Fat Dairy Products Offer Some Health Benefits

- It's the stuff of dreams, for some people at least. A study now claims that **consumption of whole fat dairy products actually offers some protection from metabolic syndrome (MetS), diabetes and hypertension across races**. A multi-centric study has showed that higher intake of whole fat dairy is associated with a lower prevalence of MetS and most of its component factors, especially, a lower incidence of hypertension and diabetes. The results were published in the paper, Association of dairy consumption with metabolic syndrome, hypertension and diabetes in 147812 individuals from 21 countries by Bhavadharini B, Dehghan M, Mente A, et al., in a recent issue of BMJ Open Diabetes Research & Care. Several cohort studies have already shown higher dairy intake is associated with lower risk of MetS, diabetes, and hypertension. "To date, most studies were conducted in North America and Europe, with limited information from other world regions (China, India, South America, and Africa)," the paper said. The aim was to study **whether there was a link between eating dairy products and the onset of MetS (defined as a cluster of five conditions: high blood pressure, abdominal obesity, elevated triglycerides, low HDL cholesterol, and high blood sugar); diabetes and hypertension, in a population that was healthy at the start of the study**. The study was conducted as part of the PURE study being conducted in 21 countries, including India, on five continents. A higher intake of total dairy (at least two servings per day, compared with zero intake) was associated with a lower prevalence of MetS. Higher intake of whole fat dairy consumed alone, or consumed jointly with low fat dairy were associated with a lower MetS prevalence. In contrast, **higher intake of low-fat dairy was associated with a modestly higher prevalence of MetS**. This could be because of the effect's dairy has on angiotensin converting enzyme that controls blood pressure; peroxisome proliferator activated receptors that play a role in gene expression, hepatic de novo lipo genesis or the liver's synthesis of fat, hepatic and adipose fatty acid oxidation, again a function of the liver, and inflammation. "Further, there are



some gut microbiomes that yoghurt or cheese fermentation makes available, and they improve insulin sensitivity," he added. Will these benefits also accrue to those who already have diabetes or hypertension? "Well, there is some evidence to show that dairy products help in causing satiety, so people don't stuff themselves. There are known, definite health benefits with gut microbiota. But we need to do a randomised clinical trial to see if there are specific benefits for them," Dr. Mohan explained.

IIT-Guwahati Takes 'Trojan Horse' Route to Fight Alzheimer's Disease

- A war trick borrowed from Greek mythology, specifically poet Homer's epic Iliad, could help reduce short-term memory losses associated with Alzheimer's disease. Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (IIT-G) have, after a five-year study, arrived at **methods for preventing the accumulation of neurotoxic molecules in the brain, which leads to memory loss**. One is the use of "trojan peptides" that does what the Trojan horse did for the ancient Greeks in their victory over Troy. The other is the application of a low-voltage electric field toward preventing amyloid plaques from aggregating to cause memory loss. **The cause of Alzheimer's is the accumulation of amyloid-beta peptides in the brain**. "This peptide is akin to the plaque that blocks arteries over a period of time, affecting blood supply and leading to cardiovascular diseases. Its aggregation, meaning the formation of one over the other, deforms the cortex of the brain leading to Alzheimer's," Vibin Ramakrishnan of IIT-G's Department of Biosciences and Bioengineering, told The Hindu. The peptide molecules need to have a certain structure to aggregate. **The use of an external electric or magnetic field modulates these molecules to "pull back the possibility of Alzheimer's to a certain extent". The second approach has been to design a "deceitful" peptide with "negative syncretical points" for checking the plaque formation**. "Through intravenous injection of the trojan peptide, we can retard the degeneration of nerve cells by 17-35%, translating into a 10-year delay in the onset of the disease," Dr. Ramakrishnan said.

Next Step

The next step for the researchers is to work with these techniques on mice induced with Alzheimer's at the National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research in Guwahati. The IIT-G researchers said some 100 potential drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease failed between 1998 and 2011. **The development of a cure for the disease is important for India, which is third behind China and the U.S. in the number of Alzheimer's patients**, they said.

Why Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Sects Are More Vulnerable to Covid

- Three weeks after Israel marked its first COVID-19 infection on February 21, the country witnessed a spike in infections particularly in the **densely populated city of Bnei Brak, where there is a large population of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews**. The government had begun imposing public health rules and social distancing measures to curb the spread of the infections – and on March 19, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared a national state of emergency. On April 7, Israel's Health Ministry announced in a report that nearly one-third of the COVID-19 cases in the country had been traced to the cities of Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, concentrated in the ultra-Orthodox neighbourhoods. The Health Ministry recommended isolating the Haredi neighbourhoods to prevent the spread of the infection, which the government later implemented. News reports and social media content in Israel soon began showing police and security officials struggling with the enforcement of public health and social distancing guidelines in these neighbourhoods, including making arrests of radical Haredi Jews found violating rules. **Videos on various platforms showed that police and security officials were subjected to slurs and accusations, being called 'Nazis' and**



'Communists' by some radical Haredi Jews. Some other reports showed these altercations becoming physical, and how in some cases, young Haredi boys were retaliating against these public health rules by spitting on officials. Most of these incidents of violence have been recorded in neighbourhoods with large Haredi populations in Jerusalem and in the nearby city of Beit Shemesh. In New York, where there is a large population of Orthodox Jews, there have also been incidents of conflict between members of the community and police. Local news reports said Orthodox Jewish communities in and around New York were among the first to record COVID-19 infections. Despite the implementation of public health orders in New York, several Jewish weddings and funerals had taken place. Following the funeral of a prominent local rabbi, New York police had to step in to disperse large crowds of Orthodox Jews. Members of the Jewish community felt that they were being unfairly singled out due to the actions of some people in the community. There were also reports of anti-Semitic threats against the community following this incident on social media. Some members of the community believe that the controversy concerning violations of health rules by Orthodox Jews, including their reluctance to vaccinate, is unfairly inflated and highlighted in the news.

Why Are Orthodox Jewish Communities Reluctant to Follow Government Public Health Guidelines?

According to Prof Benjamin Brown of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, who has conducted extensive research on Orthodox Judaism and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, this isn't a case of the community being against health services, but rather that of them simply not being up-to-date with these developments due to their lifestyle and related religious beliefs. In Judaism, explains Brown, it is a religious commandment that tells people to get medical care and to do everything necessary to stay away from dangers, including potential dangers to health. "All Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews are aware of that and accept that. In their private lives, they all do that. Even during the COVID-19 epidemic, a vast majority of the Haredim did comply with the rules and regulations," says Brown. So why then was this spike in infection numbers observed among members of the community? That happened in part due to the lifestyles that the Haredim follow, that are characterised by segregation, them largely containing themselves within their own neighbourhoods and cities.

How Do Ultra-Orthodox Jews Learn About Public Health Issues?

The ultra-Orthodox Jews also do not use the Internet, smartphones, mass media, social media and other information sources and rely on their own community members for it. Government officials also do not do much to communicate with them. However, there are some political figures in Israel who are involved with the community. Some within the community too, are more modernised, and do use the Internet and acquire information from newspapers, television and social media to help spread necessary information. When the COVID-19 outbreak surfaced, many in the community suddenly found that the epidemic was at their doorstep.

What Are the Reasons Behind the Hostility Towards Israel's Government?

The hostility towards Israel's government is, in fact, long-standing. Members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, says Brown, are anti-Zionist and according to their religious belief, they believe they are prohibited from following a secular government. "They believe that only the Messiah can establish Jewish sovereignty. Anything the government does; they think it is to stop the religious commandments. They then have clashes with the police," explains Brown. Hence, many in the community have believed that government regulations that have enforced closures of synagogues, shuls and mikveh, Jewish ritual baths etc, post the outbreak



of COVID-19, have interfered with religious beliefs and practises that are important to them. However, Brown emphasizes that only the most radical among the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews have been engaged in these violent altercations between the communities and police and security forces that have been highlighted post the outbreak of COVID-19, and they are a relatively small minority. There have been other instances of conflict between the Israeli government and these communities in the past, on other issues such as compulsory military conscription in the country.

Are There Other Reasons for Greater Numbers of Infections in These Communities?

Brown says that there are some socio-cultural factors that are also rooted in the spread of infections in Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities. **An average Haredi family will have seven to 10 children. Since men spend their time focusing on religious studies, they usually have low income and are sometimes not employed.** They also tend to live in small apartments, in close proximity, increasing the chances of spreading infections. Concepts like social-distancing and self-isolating are not feasible within this social structure. Also, COVID-19 couldn't have arrived at a worse time. Pesach or Passover, which just went by in March, is an important religious festival that requires the families to engage in a lot of preparations and cleaning of homes. Having to follow these government-imposed restrictions particularly during this time, was a challenge for many in the community. This outbreak has been unprecedented for people around the world, and for religious leaders within these communities, the consequences of it were even more unexpected and unusual, particularly for the older Haredim.

Will Ultra-Orthodox Communities Be Forced to Make Changes to Religious Practises Post COVID-19?

This outbreak may lead the modernised Haredim, who are already using the Internet and are more open to social and cultural changes and technological advances. "Half of the Haredi men go to work and the other half continue religious study all their lives. But once poverty becomes (challenging) and the government reduces financial support, the Haredim will have to go to work and adapt to modern ways of life. And that may change them,".

In Pregnant Women with Covid-19, Injuries in Placenta

- It is by now understood that a pregnant woman can possibly transmit the novel coronavirus to her baby (or also deliver a healthy baby); the Indian Council of Medical Research laid down norms for the care of mother and child last month itself. Now a new concern has emerged around pregnant women who have Covid-19 – injuries in placentas. **In 16 women who had tested positive for Covid-19 while pregnant, tests conducted immediately after birth found their placentas had evidence of injury. The study was conducted by researchers from North-western University, Chicago, and published in The American Journal of Clinical Pathology on Friday.** The babies themselves did not contract Covid-19. The type of injury showed abnormal blood flow between mothers and babies in utero. The researchers said the findings could help inform how pregnant women should be clinically monitored during the pandemic. As of now, it was not clear where these could cause health issues among the babies, Goldstein said, while referring to long-term health effects in people born to women who had been infected during the Spanish flu pandemic a century ago. **"we know the people in utero during the 1918-19 flu pandemic had higher rates of heart disease and other long-term outcomes – we need to continue to look at the outcomes for these kids."** In that epidemic, too, the flu doesn't cross the placenta; so whatever is causing life-long problems in those people is most likely due to



immune activity and injury to the placenta, Goldstein said. She suggested non-stress tests, which examine how well the placenta is delivering oxygen, or growth ultrasounds, which measure if the baby is growing at a healthy rate.

WHO Response, Under Review

- India became the chair of the World Health Organization Executive Board at its 147th session. Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan succeeded Dr Hiroki Nakatani of Japan as Chairman of the 34-member Board. India takes charge at a pivotal moment, when the world is grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also a time when the WHO itself has become a battleground of global politics. Earlier this week, the WHO was at the centre of the world's attention as it convened and over 60 countries, including India, asked for an “impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation” of the WHO's response to Covid-19.

Why Has WHO's Response Come Under Question?

The final resolution in the World Health Assembly, co-sponsored by 122 countries including India, was adopted by consensus without a vote. The resolution has asked for a “systematic review”, also calling for “a stepwise process of impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to Covid-19” at the earliest and appropriate time in consultation with member states. **WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus – a former foreign minister of Ethiopia and earlier its health minister – has been under criticism for not acting on time.** With the WHO having been accused by US President Donald Trump of being a “puppet of China”, the WHO head has said he would initiate the evaluation at the “earliest appropriate time”. The WHO, a specialised agency of the United Nations, could have questioned China's handling of the outbreak in Wuhan so that the WHO could better prepare the world for the dangerous disease, but has been criticised for failing to act decisively.

Who Has Raised This Criticism?

This criticism stems from the **International Health Regulations (IHR)**, the leading international agreement on infectious diseases and other serious disease events **adopted by WHO member states in 2005.** The IHR empowers WHO to take actions that can challenge how governments exercise sovereignty. The IHR authorises WHO to collect disease-event information from non-governmental sources, seek verification from governments about such information, and, if necessary, share the information with other states. Also, the IHR grants the WHO Director-General the power to declare a public health emergency of international concern, even if the country experiencing the outbreak objects.

How Effectively Has WHO Responded to Earlier Global Outbreaks?

During the **SARS outbreak in 2003**, then WHO Director-General Gro Brundtland had taken on China over the outbreak and, without the nod of the countries concerned, had issued warnings against travel to SARS-affected regions. Brundtland had acted without authority to take these steps. **After the IHR guidelines came into play in 2007**, the **H1N1 influenza spread around the world in 2009**, and WHO Director-General Margaret Chan declared the world's first public health emergency of international concern and issued recommendations that, among other things, advised against trade and travel measures. This was seen as a success of the IHR. “Then came the **Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014**, which was a disaster for WHO and the IHR. WHO's response was so bad that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created an ad hoc emergency response effort. WHO Director-General Chan failed to act on information that WHO had received from non-governmental sources, did not challenge governments that wanted to



keep the outbreak quiet, and only declared a public health emergency of international concern after the epidemic was already a crisis," Fidler wrote. "The next major crisis was an Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that started in late 2018. WHO's response to this outbreak demonstrated that it had re-invigorated its functional capacities," he wrote.

What Is the Significance of The Resolution in International Politics?

Apart from WHO's approach in not confronting the Chinese leadership over Covid-19, Beijing's general resistance to any external criticism and action has been at the centre of the debate. To add to that, the US administration under President Trump has seized the opportunity to blame China for the pandemic, as it faces an election year. Beijing, which views itself as a natural successor to the global leadership role, has been riled at the international community's calls for "transparency and accountability". What has happened in the current churning is that an unprecedented coalition of those asking for accountability have emerged. From Australia to Europe, India to Japan & South Korea – many of these countries who have high stakes in their bilateral relations with China, have all come out to question Beijing. So, what a global initiative like Belt and Road Initiative could not do – get more and more countries question China's ambitious initiative – the pandemic has done.

How Important Is India In This Debate?

India has been advocating for reforms of the WHO along with other international organisations, and this demand has been articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the virtual G-20 summit in March this year. As India takes the leadership role, much will depend on how it is able to navigate the global politics over the next three years, when it remains on the Executive Board. And, on how it handles its own disease trajectory in a transparent manner.

Aiming to Achieve Herd Immunity Naturally Is 'Dangerous', WHO Warns

- The World Health Organization has condemned the "dangerous" concept of herd immunity for managing the coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO's health emergencies programme said it was wrong to think that countries can "magically" make their populations immune to novel coronavirus. During a press briefing on May 12, Dr. Ryan said the concept of herd immunity is generally used for calculating how many people will need to be vaccinated in a population in order to protect those who are not vaccinated. "We need to be careful while using terms in this way around natural infections in humans because it can lead to a very brutal arithmetic which does not put people, life and suffering at the centre of that equation," he said. It was mistakenly assumed that as this disease spreads across the world, only the severe cases become apparent while most people would indeed be infected as reflected in sero epidemiology results. Greater proportion of people getting infected would mean that the pandemic will be over soon and people can go back to normal business. "But the preliminary results from in sero epidemiology studies are showing the opposite. The proportion of people with significant clinical illnesses is a higher proportion of all those who have been infected. This is because the number of people infected in the total population is probably much lower than we expected. That means we have a long way to go. This is a serious disease; this is public enemy number one. We have been saying this over and over again," he said. "No one is safe until everyone is safe," Dr. Ryan added. The WHO director also warned about the dangerous assumption by countries that have had "lax measures and haven't done anything [that they] will all of a sudden magically reach some herd immunity" by losing a few old people along the way. "This is a really dangerous calculation. We need to get our priorities right as we head to the next phase of this fight," he said.



Other Challenges

Achieving herd immunity through natural infections has other challenges. While antibodies (IgG and IgM) against novel coronavirus generally develop in one–three weeks after infection, some people do not seem to develop a humoral immune response, as reflected by detectable antibodies. It is unclear why this happens. Writing in a Perspective piece in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), Dr. Robert D. Kirkcaldy, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., and others say the relationship between antibody response and clinical improvement is still not clear. Though a small study involving just nine patients found a direct correlation between clinical severity and levels of antibody response, “antibody detection and higher titers have not always been found to correlate with clinical improvement in COVID-19”, they say. Also, mild infections can resolve even before detectable antibodies are produced.

Durability of Response

Also, how long neutralising antibodies against the virus would last is currently not known, though one study found that they persist for up to 40 days from symptom onset. In the case of the 2002 SARS, levels of IgG remained high for nearly four–five months before declining during the next two–three years. For MERS, the antibodies persisted for up to 34 months. “Detection of IgG and neutralising antibodies is not synonymous with durable immunity,” they write. A small study posted in a preprint server bioRxiv found that four rhesus macaques that were infected with coronavirus and recovered did not get reinfected when exposed to the virus 28 days after the first infection. Whether humans too will exhibit such protection is not known, though no cases have so far been reported of people getting reinfected. The detection of over 220 cases of “reinfection” in South Korea was found to be a case of virus remnants being detected and not reinfection or reactivation.

Reinfections Possible

Reinfection is mightily possible with at least three of the four coronaviruses which cause common cold. “The reasons for this reinfection are not fully known, but evidence suggests that possibilities include both short-lived protective immunity and re-exposure to genetically distinct forms of the same viral strain,” they write. But WHO cautions that “there is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 and have antibodies are protected from a second infection”. Infected people may have some level of protection against the virus, but the level and duration of protection is still not known. Finally, they caution about reading too much from antibody testing of the general population to know the extent of virus spread in the community. Antibody tests have been known to produce wrong results as the sensitivity and specificity of these tests is not known. “It is presently premature to use such assays to determine whether individuals are immune to reinfection” they say. “It remains to be determined whether a robust IgG response corresponds with immunity.” According to them, only well-designed longitudinal studies involving those who have recovered from COVID-19 for recurrent illness can help provide the much-needed information about reinfection and the duration of protection by the antibodies.

How Human Challenge Works

- ➔ At a time when the whole world is focused on protecting itself from the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, more than 20,000 people from 102 countries have enrolled on a US website to voluntarily infect themselves with the virus. It is the “human challenge” in the quest for a vaccine against the novel coronavirus disease Covid-19 – the objective is to go on to test whether a given vaccine works on any of these infected persons. Lawmakers in the US have



been pushing for human challenge trials and the **World Health Organization (WHO)** has given the go-ahead, subject to a set of preconditions being met.

What Is A Human Challenge?

According to a recently released WHO Working Group for Guidance on Human Challenge Studies in Covid-19, "Controlled human infection studies (or 'human challenge studies') involve the deliberate infection of healthy volunteers. **Human challenges expedite trials because a lot of time may be lost waiting for a trial subject to contract the disease naturally from the community. Till such time that happens, whether the vaccine works or not cannot be tested. Then again, if infection does not happen normally, there is little way of finding out whether it is because of the vaccine or whether it is because the person was never exposed at all.**

Has Such A Measure of Deliberately Infecting Individuals Been Used on Previous Occasions?

Human challenge trials are routinely done for diseases such as malaria, dengue, influenza and cholera which exact a heavy public health toll but are not otherwise deadly. Back in 1796 Edward Jenner, father of the smallpox vaccine, infected his gardener's son with the smallpox virus after having used his newly developed vaccine on the eight-year-old. The child did not get smallpox. Later, Jenner used the deliberate infection strategy on 6,000 other people to test the efficacy of his vaccine that eventually became the principal reason why smallpox could be eradicated. In the 1980s and 1990s the University of Virginia School of Medicine conducted challenge studies with influenza A and B which helped speed the development of oseltamivir (Tamiflu)— an antiviral medication that features on the World Health Organization's List of Essential Medicines. After the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, researchers at the National Institute of Health (NIH) began using human challenge models to investigate and develop countermeasures against influenza A." **WHO says that in the last 50 years, challenge studies have been performed safely in tens of thousands of consenting adult volunteers under the oversight of research ethics committees.** These studies have recently helped to accelerate the development of vaccines against typhoid and cholera among others.

How Necessary Is This Programme For Deliberate Infection?

There is currently no approved treatment against COVID. This means that there are only two ways of stopping the global march of SARS-CoV-2. The first is herd immunity – when a critical mass of people in a given population get infected by the virus, develop some immunity against it and thus stop being the vessels for further transmission of the disease. This involves a lot of death and suffering; there is also an element of uncertainty because nobody knows how long immunity against Covid lasts in a person who has already had it. Some estimates say 60-70% of a population needs to have been infected by the virus for herd immunity to kick in. The other way of stopping it is a vaccine. That is why there is so much work going on across the world on a Covid vaccine. There are estimates that even a vaccine that clears all trials in a breeze could have a waiting period of 12-18 months before it is available at a global scale.

Is It Ethical to Infect People Deliberately with A Virus That Has Caused So Much Suffering?

There are no easy answers to this. That is why it is important to choose volunteers with care, with full disclosure given and informed consent sought from them, before going ahead with the actual act of infection. WHO, in its guidance document says: "Challenge studies are nonetheless ethically sensitive and must be carefully designed and conducted in order to minimize harm to volunteers and preserve public trust in research. In particular, investigators must adhere to standard research ethics requirements. Furthermore, research should be



conducted to especially high standards where (a) studies involve exposing healthy participants to relatively high risks; (b) studies involve first-in-human interventions (including challenge) or high levels of uncertainty (for example, about infection, disease and sequelae); or (c) public trust in research is particularly crucial, such as during public health emergencies.”

Based on the data available so far, WHO estimates that participation in SARS-CoV-2 challenge studies would be the **least risky for young healthy adults**. In ages 18-30 years (whether healthy or not), **hospitalisation rates for Covid-19 are currently estimated to be around 1% and fatal infection rates around 0.03%**.

- In human challenge studies, healthy participants are first administered the candidate vaccine and then deliberately exposed to novel coronavirus. In conventional clinical trials, healthy participants are administered the candidate vaccine, and the safety and efficacy of the vaccine is assessed through natural infection.

Human challenge studies are to be carried out only in specialised centres where close monitoring and ready access to early supportive treatment for participants, including critical care if required is available, the WHO says. **But what makes such studies for COVID-19 particularly risky and challenging is the fact that pathogenesis of the disease is poorly understood and there is no approved treatment available in case participants develop the disease.**

Why Does Age Make It More Difficult to Fight Covid-19?

- Data across countries has shown that age and underlying health conditions make people more vulnerable to the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. A new study has now suggested a possible genetic explanation for this. **A group of molecules that should be fighting the virus are diminished with age and chronic health problems, researchers report in the journal Aging and Disease.** These molecules are tiny RNA, called **microRNA**, and are non-coding molecules, meaning that they do not translate into protein. **MicroRNAs play a major role in our body in controlling the expression of genes, and more importantly in the context of Covid-19, they are part of our line of attack against a viral infection. They fight the virus by latching on to the virus's genetic material (RNA) and cutting it. But with age and some chronic medical conditions, the attacking microRNA numbers dwindle.** The researchers describe this as being much like not having enough troops on the ground in an actual war. The coronavirus is thus better able to hijack our cell machinery so that it can replicate. In the study, the reporters identified what appear to be the key microRNAs involved in responding to this virus. Then they looked at existing literature on these microRNAs, specifically in the context of age and certain health conditions. They looked at the RNA sequence of two coronaviruses: SARS-CoV (which causes SARS) and SARS-CoV-2 (which causes Covid-19). The samples were taken between January and April 2020 from 17 countries. **The researchers observed the sequence of the microRNAs that appeared to be attacking the virus, then used computer simulation to figure out that 848 microRNAs target the SARS genome, and 873 microRNAs target the SARS-CoV-2 genome (558 of these targets both viruses).** Correlating with existing literature, the researchers found that many of the microRNAs targeting SARS-CoV-2 are known to become **dysregulated and/or diminish in number with age and with underlying medical conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease.** This is a likely factor in the increased disease presentation and death rates seen in these individuals, they said. **The researchers have a longer-term goal of identifying the most significant microRNAs and replenishing those. Cocktails of multiple key microRNA might help restore sufficient levels of the key virus fighters, the researchers said.**



Can Dogs Be Trained to Sniff Out COVID-19?

- The UK government has allocated a sum of over £500,000 to a specialist team of researchers who will work on finding out if dogs can detect COVID-19. The aim is to see if dogs can be trained to identify humans with the novel coronavirus before symptoms appear. **“Bio-detection dogs already detect specific cancers,”**.

Dogs and COVID-19: The Trial

In the first phase of the trial, researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in collaboration with Medical Detection Dogs and Durham University will determine if dogs are able to detect the disease in humans from their odour, even in cases where the infection is asymptomatic. Six dogs, a mixture of labradors and cocker spaniels, will be trained to identify the infection from samples collected from coronavirus patients by NHS staff in London hospitals. **If the trial gathers enough evidence, trained dogs will be used to carry out rapid screening of people coming to the UK from abroad.**

But Why Dogs?

Dogs are already used in detecting the presence of bombs, drugs and explosives in places such as airports. Dogs' highly sensitive canine olfactory sensory system can detect some target substances at concentrations that are as low as parts per trillion, which is, “three orders of magnitude more sensitive than available instruments which reliably identify substances at concentrations of parts per million or billion.” **Dogs' sense of smell is elevated due to the complex structure of their nose, which contains over 300 million scent receptors compared to over 5 million in humans.** Further, **it is possible that as much as 30 per cent of a dogs brain is dedicated to analysing odour.** Further, considering **different diseases have unique odours,** specialist dogs can be trained to detect them in humans. Over 10 years of research gathered by Medical Detection Dogs shows that **dogs can screen up to 250 people per hour and can be trained to detect disease odours,** which is equivalent to the dilution of one teaspoon of sugar in two Olympic-sized swimming pools. Therefore, for a highly infectious disease such as COVID-19, training dogs to detect the disease can screen scores of individuals with rapidity. “Our previous work has shown that malaria has a distinctive odour, and with Medical Detection Dogs, we successfully trained dogs to accurately detect malaria. This, combined with the knowledge that respiratory disease can change body odour, makes us hopeful that the dogs can also detect COVID-19.”

How Do Dogs Detect Odours?

Tissues infected with pathogens release unique volatile biomarkers that become a part of a disease's volatile organic compounds (VOCs) signature. These VOCs that are emitted from the human body in exhaled **breath, urine, sweat or faeces** may reflect the metabolic condition of the individual. When infected by an infectious or metabolic disease, this odour changes, which trained dogs may be able to detect. According to a review published in the Journal of Biochemistry, **disease-specific VOCs can be used as diagnostic olfactory biomarkers of infectious diseases, metabolic diseases, genetic disorders and other kinds of diseases.** Therefore, dogs can be trained to detect these biomarkers using their olfactory sensory system. According to the aforementioned 2015 paper, **in some cases, dogs have been able to detect diseases from exhaled breath, which has the lowest known VOC concentrations.**

Which Other Diseases Can Dogs Detect?

Past research has established that dogs can be used to detect diseases such as **malaria, prostate cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's disease and breast cancer.** Medical Detection Dogs is



working with researchers from the Imperial College London to detect the odour of specific bacteria. In the case of Parkinson's disease, UK researchers are working on a study to determine if dogs can detect the disease, possibly years before the onset.

China Tests Drug That Aims to Stop Pandemic Sans Vaccine

- A drug being tested by scientists at China's prestigious Peking University could not only shorten the recovery time for those infected, but even offer short-term immunity from the virus, researchers said. The drug has been successful at the animal testing stage. "When we injected neutralising antibodies into infected mice, after five days the viral load was reduced by a factor of 2,500," said Mr. Xie. "That means this potential drug has (a) therapeutic effect." **The drug uses neutralising antibodies – produced by the human immune system to prevent the virus infecting cells – which Mr. Xie's team isolated from the blood of 60 recovered patients.** A study on their research, published in the journal Cell, suggests that using the antibodies provides a potential "cure" for the disease and shortens recovery time. "Our expertise is single-cell genomics rather than immunology or virology. When we realised that the single-cell genomic approach can effectively find the neutralising antibody we were thrilled."

Why You Must Not Use Sanitizers on Fruits and Vegetables

- How can we ensure vegetables and fruit are safe? This virus is generally likely to remain active on fruit and vegetables for 6-8 hours, but for less than four hours if the fruit and vegetables are exposed to heat. As a general rule, try to not handle vegetables and fruit immediately after you bring them in – rather, keep them aside within the packets that you bring them in, for at least four hours. (This obviously means planning a little ahead for your shopping.) After this time, dispose of the packets and soak the vegetables and fruit in warm water for a while. For complete safety, wash them in warm water and a little baking soda. Some people have been spraying vegetables and fruit with sanitiser. **Sanitisers are absolutely not recommended for vegetables and fruit. There is no evidence that the sanitisers can kill the virus on the surface of vegetables and fruit; besides many vegetables and fruits have wrinkles and depressions on their surfaces that sprays cannot reach. Sanitisers are useful only for our hands, body, and metal or steel surfaces.** They have chemicals that can be harmful if ingested. Warm water is sufficient to wash vegetables and fruit. You can add a drop of potassium permanganate in the water and dip the vegetables and fruit in it. It is the safest, and does not cost much. **If potassium permanganate is not available, baking soda, as mentioned above, can be used in warm water.** Wear a mask while washing the vegetables and fruit. There are many companies that have launched "vegetable sanitisers". I am not aware of the composition of these sanitisers. If these have potassium permanganate, then they may be fit for use, otherwise not.

And What About Things Like Cheese, Butter and Milk That Cannot Be Kept Outside for Four Hours?

Yes, it is hot and some items do spoil quickly, so use your common sense. If cheese and milk are packed, wash them with soapy water and immediately dispose of the outer packet in a way that no one in the family can be exposed to them. **In case the packaging is plastic or metal, such as cold drink cans, the virus may remain on the surface for 24-48 hours.** Such items should not be refrigerated immediately, but kept at room temperature at a place where there is no human exposure. Wear your mask all through.



Is Cooked Food Ordered from Outside Safe? What About Cooked or Baked Food Packed in Boxes?

There is no problem with the food itself. If the cooking process is thorough, the virus will not survive it. What is of concern is its handling — multiple people would have cooked, packed, and delivered it, and you have no control over their actions. If that makes you nervous, you should perhaps avoid ordering in. **But if you do order, make sure you discard the packaging, such as a pizza or cake box, safely and immediately. There is no evidence that sanitisers are effective on cardboard surfaces, and it is not advisable to use them.**

How to Sanitize Medicine Strips?

Again, there is no evidence that spraying them with sanitisers work. Just keep them in a closed box at room temperature for some hours. One should not get exposed to them immediately after buying them, as they too would have changed hands several times. Ensure that you do not put medicines in direct sunlight, as that would affect their efficacy.

What About Other Things Like Cash, Stationery, Clothes or Shoes?

The virus cannot survive or remain stable on paper, cash, or books for long. Try to keep them outside for 2-3 hours before using them. Sanitisers may be of no use on these. Plastic or metal items like a pen or pencil box can be sanitised, as there is evidence that sanitisers work on them. One should make sure that the shoes worn outside are not used inside the house, as there is a possibility that one could have stepped on an infected person's spit or similar contaminated surface, while outside. In case of purchase of new garments or shoes, they should be kept in the verandah or balcony for 48 hours. It is recommended that one should wash the new garments before wearing it. Items delivered by courier or post, if packed in paper or cardboard, should also be kept in sunlight for 3-4 hours before being accessed. If the packaging is plastic or metal, you may disinfect it. Use your own pen to sign delivery vouchers, receipts, notices sent by housing societies, etc, rather than asking the delivery man for one.

As Offices Begin to Open, And People Start to Go Out, Any Specific Do's and Don'ts?

As one steps out to go to office, one's bag must contain:

- Your own cutlery, cup, or glass/bottle. Avoid using utensils from the pantry or canteen at your workplace, which may have been touched by multiple people.
- Carry your own charger or power bank, so that you do not have to borrow someone else's.
- Carry your own pen and notepad. The virus can survive on the surface of a pen for 24-48 hours.
- Carry a bottle of hand sanitiser with the recommended alcohol content. Carry sanitised wipes, and wipe down the surface of your desk, keyboards etc before starting work.
- Wear your face mask at all times. Do not touch your face with your hands. Maintain social distancing at work.
- Avoid touching railings of staircases, lift buttons, door handles, and other commonly used surfaces. If you do, sanitise or wash your hands with soap immediately.
- On coming home, ensure that you remove your shoes outside, sanitise your specs, goggles, pen and mobile phone surface. Remove clothes and put them in detergent water and change before interacting with the family. Make sure the room and washroom you change in is not used by anyone else for at least 6-8 hours.



How Far Can Weather Impact Covid Reproduction Number?

→ A new study by Harvard University has estimated the impact of weather on transmission of Covid-19 infections and found a negative relationship between temperatures above 25°C and estimated reproduction number, with each degree Celsius associated with a 3.1% reduction in the reproduction number. The study found that higher levels of relative humidity strengthen the negative effect of temperature above 25°C. But the findings suggest that weather alone will not be enough to fully contain transmission, even though it may help with efforts to contain the pandemic and build response capacity. The study, entitled 'Weather Conditions and COVID-19 Transmission: Estimates and Projections', has not yet been peer-reviewed and is currently uploaded on a pre-print server. It found that would need a reduction of reproduction number by more than 70% to contain the risk of transmission, while that reduction factor rarely goes below 50% globally. In the case of Delhi, the reduction in reproduction number due to weather is projected to vary between 47% and 16% till August; for Mumbai, between 43% and 23%; for Ahmedabad, between 43% and 26%; for Indore, between 36% and 8%. The study found significant positive effects for wind speed, precipitation, and diurnal temperature on reproduction number. The study shows how it is impacted by weather in each location, captured in the 'Relative COVID-19 Risk due to Weather (CRW)'. CRW compares the relative changes in reproduction number for the disease due to weather factors, such as average and diurnal temperature, humidity, pressure, precipitation, snowfall, and sun hour. CRW scores only give relative risks due to weather, assuming all else is equal, across locations or within a location over time. A CRW of 0.5 thus reflects a 50% reduction in reproduction number, and a shift over a season in CRW from 1 to 0.7 in a given location points to a 30% reduction in reproduction number over that period due to weather, assuming everything else is constant. Although the study suggests that warmer and more humid times of the year, in some of the locations, may offer a modest reduction in reproduction number, its results show that CRW must go below 0.3 to contain the epidemic based on weather factors alone. However, the study also shows that CRW numbers rarely drop below 0.5, indicating that the upcoming changes in weather alone will not be enough to fully contain the transmission of Covid-19.

Preparing for A Syndemic (Chirantan Chatterjee - Faculty Member at IIM

Ahmedabad And Visiting Fellow at Hoover Institution, Stanford University)

→ The World Health Organization has announced that COVID-19 will likely never go away. Experts warn that there will be a second wave of infections. Meanwhile, some people have also raised the alarm about diseases like dengue and malaria emerging with the upcoming monsoon season in tropical South Asia. Therefore, going forward, could COVID-19 become even more problematic by becoming a syndemic? A syndemic is a situation when two or more epidemics interact synergistically to produce an increased burden of disease in a population, a situation first described by medical anthropologist Merrill Singer in the mid-1990s. Stephanie Shau and co-authors published a peer-reviewed journal article last month documenting this as a distinct possibility in people living with HIV.

Increased Burden of Disease

The 1957 Asian influenza pandemic, for example, showed that deaths then could be not only due to the primary viral infection, but also due to secondary bacterial infections among influenza patients; in short, they were caused by a viral/bacterial syndemic. Meanwhile, researchers have shown that in Kisumu, Kenya, 5% of HIV infections are due to higher HIV infectiousness of malaria-infected HIV patients. Some also say that we need to watch out for secondary bacterial infection in those with weakened immunity due to COVID-19. Given that



antibiotics resistance across the world is already a problem, the medical community needs to be aware of co-morbidities, especially if COVID-19 deepens as a syndemic in populations with antibiotic resistance. If that happens, along with large-scale population testing, societies around the world will also have to consider innovations in population health surveillance technology and develop creative business models at a scale potentially unheard of in recent times. MIT alumnus Inder Singh's startup, Kinsa, makes smart thermometers that are already making waves in the U.S. Many argue that Kinsa thermometers could be the key to constantly monitoring temperatures. Another solution is to monitor oxygen levels in the brain daily through a pulse oximeter. It turns out that COVID-19 is causing happy hypoxia, where lack of oxygen in the brain is going undetected till things become too late. However, some say that this should not crowd out other important strategies like aggressive population-level PCR and antibody testing.

With India's ongoing migrant crisis, we cannot rule out COVID-19 becoming syndemic given large-scale urban-to-rural chaotic migration. Added to this is the complexity of the upcoming dengue and malaria season. Closing State borders, discriminating against migrants returning to their home States, and quarantining them in public locations may not be a viable option going forward if India is peaking on the COVID-19 curve. India recorded the largest single day spike just a few days ago. The time has come to look at testing/tracing/isolating as well as ideas to deploy population health surveillance technologies like smart thermometers and oximeters. Are the policymakers listening?

Traditional Belief and Today's Science

- A fortnight ago, the union minister in charge of the National Mission for Clean Ganga approached the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) to conduct research on the use of Ganga river water (Ganga Jal) as a cure to the COVID-19 virus infection. The ICMR pointed out that the data available on this work are not strong enough to start any clinical trials, and politely declined – touché.

"Assessment of Ganga River Ecosystem at Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India, with reference to Water Quality Index" in the journal Applied Water Science, 6, 107-118 (2016), which is not at all a happy reading. And the most recent contamination study of river Ganga water has appeared in the December 23, 2019 issue of the New York Times. This study summarises the ongoing analysis (by a group of researchers at the IIT Delhi) of the pollution, and the presence of dangerous bacteria in the water, which are resistant to the currently used antibiotic drugs. In other words, right where it starts to flow into the country, Ganga Jal is harmful for human and animal health. As it flows downstream, industrial wastes from factories are further dumped, making its water quality and safety even worse.

Learn from Dolphins, Gharials

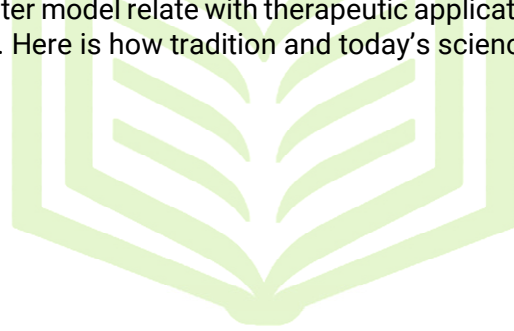
Getting back to science, given this abundance of poisonous germs (and harmful chemical wastes), one wonders how the 140 fish species, 90 amphibians, reptiles, birds, and the famous Ganges river dolphins and the gharials (fish eating crocodiles) cope with the conditions in the water, particularly, since it is also polluted now by COVID-19. Do they have special immunity, and do they generate antibodies to fight against such pathogens? This is an issue that needs to be studied with care and adapted for human defence against coronaviruses. Some interesting insights have come about from some recent immunity studies displayed by unusual animals such as llamas, camels and sharks. Mitch Leslie writes in the May 1, 2020 issue of Science: "Biologists invent a new way to fight viruses with llama blood and molecular superglue". Miniature antibodies are seen to be pumped out by the immune cells of llamas, camels and sharks, which are about half the size of standard antibodies. The main message here is that these animals generate mini-antibodies, which can be easily synthesised in biology



labs and used as weapons to win over viral infection. A detailed paper on how this can be done has just been published in the journal Cell. More relevant to the dolphins is a paper by C. Centellege and coworkers, "Insights into dolphins' immunology: Immuno-phenotypic study on Mediterranean and Atlantic stranded cetaceans". The Mediterranean Sea is highly polluted while the waters in Canary Islands are purer. I believe we can take a lesson from these studies, research on the Ganges river dolphins and the gharyals, identify their mini-antibodies, synthesise them in the lab, and adapt them for human use against COVID-19 and other such coronaviruses. The DBT laboratory, National Institute of Animal Biotechnology (NIAB) at Hyderabad might be a possible centre to initiate this.

Where the Twain Do Meet

In stark contrast to the above minister, is a request from **the minister in charge of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy)** to conduct a randomised controlled clinical trial to assess the efficacy of Ashwagandha, Yashtimadhu, giloy and a polyherbal formulation (called Ayush 64), as prophylactic interventions against COVID-19. This should be conducted since there is sufficient evidence that molecules in traditional herbs and plants have therapeutic properties, and their active molecules discovered, synthesised and used by drug companies. And the polymath M S Valiathan has spent the last two decades, collaborating with Ayurvedic practitioners, biochemists, cell biologists, geneticists and nanotechnologists to evaluate the effects of traditional formulations using today's scientific methods. One such example is: "In vivo effects of traditional Ayurvedic formulations in Drosophila melanogaster model relate with therapeutic applications", by V. Dwivedi et al., PLoS One, 2012; 7(5):23711. Here is how tradition and today's science meet and merge.



DreamIAS