



## Current Affairs, 31<sup>st</sup> May to 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2020

### International

#### Trump Cuts Ties with WHO As COVID-19 Grips Latin America

- President Donald Trump said he is severing ties with the World Health Organization (WHO) over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the death toll from the disease spiked again in the U.S. and Brazil. The virus, which has killed more than 3,64,000 people and devastated the global economy, is progressing at different speeds across the globe, with Europe continuing to open up from lockdown after seeing its number of infections steadily fall. Italy's iconic Leaning Tower of Pisa reopened, while Parisians flocked to parks open for the first time in months. But countries in Latin America are bracing for difficult weeks ahead, especially Brazil, where there was a record number of new infections. The unprecedented challenge of the pandemic has put pressure on the WHO, and Mr. Trump's decision to end hundreds of millions of dollars in funding comes when the UN agency needs it most. Mr. Trump initially suspended funding to the WHO last month, accusing it of not doing enough to curb the early spread of the virus and being too lenient with China, where the virus emerged late last year. On Friday, he made that decision permanent in a major blow for the agency's finances, as the U.S. is by far its biggest contributor, pumping in \$400 million last year. The President told reporters the U.S. would be redirecting WHO funds "to other worldwide and deserving urgent global public health needs".

#### 'U.S. Turns Rogue'

The move sparked a fierce backlash, with German Health Minister Jens Spahn saying the "disappointing" decision was a setback for global health. Richard Horton, editor of The Lancet medical journal, said it was "madness and terrifying both at the same time". "The U.S. government has gone rogue at a time of humanitarian emergency," he tweeted. Nearly six million people have been confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 across the world, and a vaccine remains elusive. As the disease spreads across South America, the poor have been hit hard in countries like Brazil, which now has the second highest number of cases in the world after the U.S. "In 26 years, I've never seen so many people living in fear, so many people going hungry," said Alcione Albanesi, founder of charity Amigos do Bem, which distributes supplies to communities in the impoverished Sertao region of Brazil's northeast. Chile also logged another record number of deaths on Friday, pushing its total to almost 1,000.

#### Positive Signs

In European countries that seem on the other side of their outbreak peak, there has been pressure to lift crippling lockdowns despite experts warning of a possible second wave of infections. Tourism-dependent Greece said it will restart its two main airports for arrivals from 29 countries from June 15. But some European nations hard hit by the virus are not on the list, including France, Spain, Britain and Italy. In Austria, hotels and cinemas were allowed to take in customers again on Friday under special guidelines, provided masks are worn. Hotels and shopping centres in Ukraine's capital Kiev also reopened on Saturday. Turkey too has moved ahead with easing its restrictions as mosques opened for the first time in months. And



Denmark said it would reopen its border to visitors from Germany, Norway and Iceland from June 15, although Britain and the rest of the EU will have to wait a few more months.

## Zuckerberg Backs FB's Trump Policy

- Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg has defended his decision not to interfere with posts by U.S. President Donald Trump, U.S. media reported, after the social media giant's hands-off policy sparked outrage and prompted some employees to quit. Social media platforms have faced calls to moderate the President's comments, most recently because of the unrest gripping America in the wake of an unarmed black man's death during arrest as a white policeman knelt on his neck. The row began last week when **Mr. Zuckerberg said Facebook would not remove or flag Mr. Trump's posts that appeared to encourage violence against those protesting police racism, even as the social media titan Twitter put warning labels on some of the President's tweets over accuracy issues or the glorification of violence.** Mr. Zuckerberg told employees in a video conference he talked to Trump on the phone after the decision, and that he "used that opportunity to make him know I felt this post was inflammatory and harmful, and let him know where we stood on it. The CEO was referring to a post by the President that said **"when the looting starts, the shooting starts"** – **the same comment on Twitter was still visible but behind a warning label.** Facebook's move prompted intense scrutiny and dissent from employees, and it was a "tough decision" over content that had upset him personally, Mr. Zuckerberg told around 25,000 staff who had tuned in, according to the tech website Recode. But Mr. Zuckerberg said that Facebook was exploring whether it should amend the policy on such content or find other options to mark it instead of outright removal, according to one person on the call cited by Bloomberg.

## Why George Floyd's Death Has Sparked Violent Protests in the US

- US President Donald Trump threatened the use of force in dealing with protests against the death of George Floyd, referring to participants as "thugs" on Twitter. **"Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts," the president said Friday. Within hours, Twitter flagged the post for "glorifying violence" but let it remain visible in the public's interest "to remain accessible."** Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, died in Minneapolis on Monday while he was being restrained by the police. Video footage of the incident, which was broadcast by the media and went viral on social media platforms, showed an officer kneeling on Floyd's neck as he gasped for breath. Four policemen have since been fired, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has been called in to conduct a federal civil rights probe. The officer who pinned him to the ground, Derek Chauvin, has been charged with third degree murder. The death has triggered violent unrest in Minneapolis, leading to a state of peacetime emergency being declared in Minnesota state as well as the activation of its National Guard. Protests have also taken place in other parts of the US, including in California, New York, Ohio and Colorado. The incident once again brought to the fore concerns over the law enforcement's bias against the African American minority, with Floyd's death being cited as the most recent incident of racially-driven police brutality.

### George Floyd's Death

Floyd, a Minnesota resident, was arrested after he was accused of using a counterfeit \$20 note at a local deli. According to the police, Floyd "physically resisted" the arrest after he was told to exit his car, a claim that was belied by mobile phone footage recorded by several passers-by. White police officer then went on to restrain Floyd, and knelt on his neck for at least seven minutes despite the 46-year-old gasping for breath and repeatedly saying "I can't breathe". The officer remained in that position even after Floyd became unconscious. His



unresponsive body was then taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) called the incident “public lynching without a rope.”

## George Floyd’s America In Black & White

→ Data by statista.com reveals a skewed pattern of African American killings by police. Of 1,000 fatal shootings by police in 2019, more than 23 per cent of the victims were blacks, a high proportion given that they made up less than 14 per cent of the population. At the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865), said Hasset-Walker, **of the 34 states then, 15 were slave states, which created patrols to nip slave revolts and escapes.** “The state of South Carolina was the first to create slave patrols in 1704. By the end of the 1700s, every American slave state had slave patrols. They lasted for about 150 years, ending with the South’s loss in the Civil War and the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which outlawed slavery. After that, the former southern **slave patrols morphed into police departments** that technically were different from slave patrols, but were basically still charged with controlling the freed former slaves,” she said.

### Civil Rights Movement

**About 20 years after the end of the Civil War, America saw the passage of the Jim Crow laws, which dictated a policy of segregation, enforced by police, and which persisted as recently as 1964.** It was during this period of segregation that in 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till from Chicago, visiting relatives in Mississippi, was accused of making a flirtatious remark to a white woman at a grocery store. Three days later, Till was kidnapped and killed, his body thrown in the river. The accused – the woman’s husband and his half-brother– were later acquitted by an all-white jury. The civil rights movement gathered steam after this. Montgomery saw a city-wide bus boycott when, on December 1, an African American woman, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat for a white man and was arrested for it. The Montgomery Improvement Association, led by a young Luther King Jr, called a boycott of the city’s municipal bus company. It was eventually called off on December 20, 1956, after the segregation seating policy was held unconstitutional. The years that followed were a time of great turbulence in America, as riots swept city after city. The Watts riots in 1965 in Los Angeles (that started after Marquette Frye, an African American, was pulled over for suspected drunk-driving and roughed up by the police), the Detroit and Newark riots the same year and the unrest in a number of cities following King’s assassination in 1968, were all fuelled in large part by economic and social disparity, prejudiced policing and general disaffection, that continues today.

### Rodney King, LA Riots

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, a black motorist, was beaten by LAPD officers after a high-speed chase. A man called George Holliday, who witnessed the beating from his balcony, videotaped the incident and gave it to a local TV station. From then on, it went, what we would now call, viral. On April 29, 1992, the four LAPD officers were acquitted, sparking outrage and triggering one of the worst race riots in LA, that lasted six days and left over 50 dead, 2,300 injured. “King was certainly not the first black man to be beaten up by the police, but it was the first time that someone video-recorded the beating. That video validated what many African Americans knew at that time – that Los Angeles police were very brutal towards black people,” said Hasset-Walker.

### Troy Davis, Central Park 5

More than 15 years after the LA riots, came a moment in American history that many had dreamt of but few had imagined. Barack Obama winning the presidential election in November



2008 was a moment that was both a rupture and a healing. But did it fundamentally change anything for the community? For many, it was the execution of Troy Davis that showed that nothing had changed. Davis was a black man on death row in Georgia, who many believed had been wrongfully convicted for the murder of a police officer. Wrong convictions haven't been rare. In 2002, convictions against the Central Park Five – teenagers (four blacks and one Latino), accused of raping and grievously assaulting a jogger in Central Park in 1989 – were vacated and the charges withdrawn after over 10 years. The Central Park case – many would remember it from the Netflix series *When They See Us* – had made national news with the current President Donald Trump buying full-page ads in New York newspapers calling for the state to bring back the death penalty. Even after they were exonerated, Trump insisted they were guilty. For Davis, thousands rallied, appealing to the country's first Black President to stay the execution. Davis was executed on September 21, 2011, and the night after as protestors filed into Union Square in Manhattan, they merged with another group – Occupy Wall Street. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote in *The Guardian*, the convergence of the two groups underlined the economic disparity in America and showed the connections between racism and black poverty.

### [Birth of Black Lives Matter](#)

But it was the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American high-school student in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012 that started another round of conversation around racial profiling, prompting even President Obama to say, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon". George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch volunteer who claimed he had shot Trayvon in self-defence, was acquitted a year later. The prosecution had contended that Zimmermann had followed the hoodie-clad boy because he assumed, he was a criminal but the six-women jury rejected it. It was Zimmerman's acquittal that gave rise to a hashtag and a movement. #BlackLivesMatter, started in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, has now grown into a global network whose members "organise and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on black communities by the state and vigilantes." The BLM movement has been at the forefront of subsequent street demonstrations, most notably following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson near St Louis and of Eric Garner in New York City. Cornel West, a public intellectual and a fearless voice in left-wing politics, traces the current unrest to the failures of Obama. West, who had once shared the stage with Obama, is now one of the most vocal critics of many of his policies. In a recent interview to CNN, he said, "The Black Lives Matter movement emerged under a black president, black attorney general, and black homeland security and they couldn't deliver." Black faces in high places, he said, succumbed to the "capitalist economy" and "militarised nation-state".

### [Tamir Rice and Later](#)

The shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in 2014 by a police officer (Rice was carrying a replica toy Airsoft gun), of Ahmaud Aubrey, who was tagged and killed by armed white residents while jogging in his Georgia neighbourhood and of Breonna Taylor in Louisville this March by plainclothes policemen, who barged into her apartment looking for someone else, all brought about a cycle of debate and protests. Could the current uprising be a crack, however slight, that will let in the light? In the early days of the Floyd protests, Trump had tweeted in support of using military force to quell the riots. "Law-and-order demagogues seek to discredit black rebellion as a mindless orgy of violence committed by thugs and criminals, encouraged by radical agitators and spineless, liberal officials," said Letwin. But there are signs that this time things could be different: "For one, street protests appear much more diverse, with a higher participation of whites and Hispanics alongside African Americans. The unrest is no longer so confined as it once was to black neighbourhoods. Certainly, **the ease with which acts of police violence can be recorded and publicised has changed the picture as well.**" Hasset-Walker, too,



pointed at a crucial difference. “What is different about the murder of George Floyd is how quickly the police officer, Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd’s neck, was charged with third degree murder.” The former Minneapolis Police officer was charged with a fresh count of second-degree murder, and the three other officers with him were charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder. “Whether he will ultimately be convicted, we’ll see. But the swift arrest and issuing of a charge – that’s important, and unusual,” she said.

## What Is Antifa, The Group That Trump Wants to Declare A Terrorist Organisation

→ As massive protests following the death of George Floyd continued to rock the United States, President Donald Trump announced that the **far-left group Antifa would be designated as a terrorist organisation by his government**. Even in the past, Trump has described Antifa as a terrorist group. Other right-wing politicians have also criticised the group, including Texas Senator Ted Cruz. **The group made headlines in June last year when its members clashed with those of a far-right group called Proud Boys in Portland, Oregon**. The violence left members of both sides injured, including a journalist with a conservative-leaning publication. Antifa has been around for several decades, though accounts vary on its exact beginnings. **The Merriam-Webster dates the term as far back as Nazi Germany, describing the etymology of ‘antifa’ as “borrowed from German Antifa, short for antifaschistische ‘anti-fascist’, in Antifaschistische Aktion (multiparty front initiated by the German Communist Party in 1932 to counter Nazism) and in other collocations”**. While the movement has had a presence in several European countries and has come into focus in the United States in recent years, Antifa does not have a formal organisational structure. The New York Times said it draws its members from other movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Occupy movement. The movement has been known to have a presence in the US in the 1980s. It shot into prominence following the election of President Trump in 2016, with violence marking some of its protests and demonstrations. **Antifa members typically dress in black and often wear a mask at their demonstrations, and follow far-left ideologies such as anti-capitalism. They take up causes such as LGBTQ and indigenous rights**. What makes them stand out is the violence. Criticising mainstream liberal politicians for not doing enough, Antifa members have often physically confronted their conservative opponents on the streets, although the group also participates in non-violent protests. Apart from public counter-protests, Antifa members run websites that track white extremist and ultra-right groups.

### Recent Activities

The current group of Antifa members, according to media reports, appears to be a loose affiliation of activists opposing right-wing groups and white supremacists. Antifa groups do not have a uniform presence in the US, with their activity most prominent in the states of Oregon (which includes Portland), California, Texas, and Pennsylvania. Antifa members engaged in street clashes in Charlottesville (Virginia) in 2017, following a large demonstration by right-wing radicals. The same year, Antifa members were accused of disrupting a conference by a conservative leader at the University of California at Berkeley. In 2016, a member of the group had punched a right-wing leader on camera, The New York Times reported. **Because of Antifa’s repeated involvement in violence, many liberal figures have criticised the group for bringing disrepute to existing anti-fascism movements in the country**. Antifa’s activities, they note, allow right-wing organisations to portray organisers of peaceful events, too, as extremists. **Writer and social commentator Noam Chomsky has been quoted as calling the Antifa “a major gift to the right”**. Many have pointed out that major substantive reforms, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the ending of formal racial segregation, were achieved after years of non-violent disobedience.



## The National Guard, Activated Amid Protests Over George Floyd's Death

- Georgia's Governor Tim Walz declared a state of emergency to activate the state's National Guard to "provide security and restore safety" amid violence in Atlanta. US President Donald Trump had tweeted, "The National Guard has arrived on the scene. They are in Minneapolis and fully prepared. George Floyd will not have died in vain. Respect his memory!"

### What is The National Guard?

Comprising the Army National Guard and Air National Guard, it is a reserve component of the US Army and provides trained units to states, territories and the District of Columbia to protect life and property. The force supports combat missions, domestic emergencies, humanitarian efforts and homeland security operations among others. The organisation of the National Guard dates back to 1636, when on December 13 the first militia regiments in North America were organised in Massachusetts. Largely, members of the forces are soldiers with civilian jobs who live at home, have a drill commitment one weekend per month and are required to attend one two-week training each year, The Guardian reported. To join the force without prior service, one must be a US citizen or permanent resident between the ages of 17 and 35 and have a high school diploma, among other requirements.

## George Floyd's Death: Can Trump Send the US Military to Quell Violence at Protests?

- US President Donald Trump suggested he would use federal troops to end unrest that has erupted following the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed in police custody last week. The demonstrations have been largely peaceful, but police in some cities have used force against journalists and protesters, and protesters have clashed with police. Many US cities have set curfews. To deploy the armed forces, Trump would need to formally invoke a group of statutes known as the Insurrection Act.

### What Is the Insurrection Act?

Under the US Constitution, governors generally have the authority to maintain order within state borders. This principle is reflected in a law called the Posse Comitatus Act, which generally bars the federal military from participating in domestic law enforcement. **The Insurrection Act, which dates to the early 1800s, creates an exception to the Posse Comitatus Act. It permits the president to send in US forces to suppress a domestic insurrection that has hindered the normal enforcement of US law.**

### Can Trump Send in Troops Without A Governor's Approval?

Yes. The law lays out a scenario in which the president is required to have approval from a state's governor or legislature, and also instances where such approval is not necessary.

### Has It Been Invoked Before?

Yes. The Insurrection Act has been invoked on dozens of occasions through US history. Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, its use has become "exceedingly rare," according to a report by the Congressional Research Service. **The Insurrection Act was last used in 1992, when the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King led to deadly riots.**



### Can A Court Strike Down Trump's Application of The Law?

Chesney said a successful legal challenge to Trump's use of the law was "very unlikely." Courts have historically been very reluctant to second-guess a president's military declarations, he said. "The law, for all practical purposes, leaves this to the president with very little judicial review with any teeth," Chesney said.

### The White House Bunker Where Trump Took Shelter Amid George Floyd Protests

- ➔ Amid violent protests over the death of George Floyd across US cities, President Donald Trump spent nearly an hour in an underground bunker at the White House Friday night, when hundreds of protesters gathered outside the mansion, the Associated Press (AP) reported. **The bunker, also known as the Presidential Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC), has been used on rare occasions to secure US Presidents in times of peril.** The US Secret Service, a federal agency tasked with safeguarding the country's top leaders, follows protocols set to protect the President when the White House building is under threat.

### The Presidential Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC)

The PEOC, which is the primary bunker of the 132-room White House, was built during World War II for protecting then President Franklin D. Roosevelt. A 2008 book review in NPR, however, attributes its origin to the Cold War era during the terms of Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower. As per a Town & Country magazine report, the publicly acknowledged bunker is believed to be located underneath or adjacent to White House's East Wing, and consists of offices and a conference room. The bunker is staffed by the White House Military Office (WHMO), which also looks after other key areas such as Camp David, the Presidential Airlift Group, and the White House Medical Unit. **The PEOC was most notably used during the September 11, 2001 attacks, after former Vice-President Dick Cheney was brought here for his safety.** President George W. Bush, who was in Florida when the attacks occurred, was rushed to the PEOC later that night after a false alarm of another plane attack, The New York Times had reported. President Bush also used the PEOC to meet with senior administration officials after the terror attack. First Lady Laura Bush was also escorted to the bunker, and described it in her 2010 book 'Spoken from the Heart' as a "command centre during emergencies, with televisions, phones, and communications facilities". **After the 9/11 attacks, the PEOC was upgraded to withstand the force of a plane crashing into the White House, but was probably never used until Trump checked in on Friday,** the NYT report said.

### Other Hideout Chambers Under the White House

The White House, which has a number of offices and even a bowling alley below the surface level, is equipped with multiple measures to safeguard the president. The mansion is reported to have a five-storeyed underground chamber that is much larger than the PEOC. This facility was built under the North Lawn after the September 11 attacks, after national security experts recommended stronger measures to protect the president than the existing ones, an expert told The Washington Post. The new structure, which doubles as a command centre and living quarters, was designed to protect the First Family and White House staff from biological or radiological attacks, the report said. It also has a self-contained air supply and is stocked with food that would last for months. Apart from bunkers, the White House also has tunnels underneath, two of which are known to leave the premises entirely, the Post said. One of these leads to the headquarters of the US Treasury Department, and the other to H street, locations proximate to the White House building in Washington, DC.



## The Reverse Journey of The United States

→ 'Be like us,' was the basic argument that the U.S. made to the rest of the world. The use of force by America, at home or abroad, was only for the protection of liberty, it claimed. There was merit in that argument, as it expanded freedoms for its own people through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1963, when Alabama's Democrat Governor George Wallace – who had vowed "segregation forever" – resisted desegregation orders of the Supreme Court, President John F. Kennedy deployed the National Guard to enforce it. President Donald Trump's threat to use the U.S. military to "dominate" people who erupted in protest after the killing of an unarmed African American by the police is history coming full circle. The video footage of a police officer pinning down George Floyd by his neck until he died could not have come at a worse time for the U.S. whose reputation was already at stake in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, **there was a moral defence that the U.S. was a free society that does not coerce its members. There was also a convenient contrast to make** – with China, which under Xi Jinping has offered its model of development as an alternative to liberalism. The Trump administration, and a section of the commentators, focused on **whistle-blower doctor Li Wenliang in Wuhan, who noticed the novel coronavirus in the early days of the outbreak. He was silenced by the local government, though posthumously declared a martyr by Beijing.** Two U.S. Senators wanted to rename the street in Washington DC where the Chinese Embassy is located after him. **Because of the Chinese fetters on freedom of expression, information regarding the pandemic was suppressed and the outbreak went out of control, the mainstream American argument went.** U.S. also confronted China on a range of questions, from technology and trade to the Hong Kong uprising. Then came the brutal images from Minnesota.

### Holes in The Story

It is not that holes in the American story were not visible earlier. **Edward Snowden**, born two years after Reagan became President, is today living in Russia in asylum, accused of espionage and theft in the U.S. Many American liberals argue that he crossed a line by revealing national security secrets; and no mainstream American politician hails him as a martyr for free speech. How much force is legitimate in law enforcement might depend on the context and place, but the **U.S. ranks number one in the world in terms of incarceration – there are 2.2 million people in its prisons, a five-fold increase in the last four decades. America has 655 per lakh of population as opposed 118 in China, which ranks eighth as per 2018 numbers.** African Americans are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population, but that is no reason to overlook the whites. Police targeted reporters and photographers in several cities over the past week in the U.S. There used to be an argument that globalisation would gradually turn China democratic. **China imbibed American style consumerism, but as for democracy and freedoms, a reverse osmosis appears to have taken place.** As Senator Bernie Sanders repeatedly points out, the police resemble invading armies in local communities. It is not a coincidence that the growing challenges the U.S. democracy is facing corresponds with its economic entanglement with China over past 40 years.

### 'It's About Society'

**U.S. ranks 26<sup>th</sup> among OECD countries in voter turnout, at 55.7% in 2016. In India, 67% voted in 2019.** The poorer whites had the option of voting their favourite candidate to victory; the blacks are battling it out in the streets. The 2008 victory of Barack Obama, the first African American to become President, was a democratic surge which was soon overcome by the reaction. Richard Nixon came a few years after John F. Kennedy; Mr. Trump came after Mr. Obama. Still, 20<sup>th</sup> century made gains for democracy in the U.S. that are being eroded in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>. **Tyranny, not democracy, appears to have gone global.** The question,





hence, is whether American elites will consider the current turmoil a wake-up call and respond accordingly.

## [A Chill in U.S.-China Relations \(Vijay Gokhale Is A Former Foreign Secretary of India And A Former Ambassador to China\)](#)

- A slew of recent announcements on China by U.S. President Donald Trump is a clear indication that the competition between the U.S. and China is likely to sharpen in the post-COVID world. On May 29, the Trump administration said it would **revoke Hong Kong's special trade status under U.S. law**. The administration also passed an order **limiting the entry of certain Chinese graduate students and researchers who may have ties to the People's Liberation Army**. The U.S. President has also ordered **financial regulators to closely examine Chinese firms listed in U.S. stock markets, and warned those that do not comply with U.S. laws could be delisted**.

### [Complicit in China's Rise](#)

Americans have had a strange fascination for China ever since the early 1900s when Protestant missionaries decided that it was God's work to bring salvation to the Chinese. Books like *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck and *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow in the 1930s romanticised the country. **Even after the Chinese communists seized power, the Americans hoped to cohabit with Mao Zedong in a world under U.S. hegemony. The Chinese allowed them to believe this and extracted their price. U.S. President Richard Nixon gave China the international acceptability it craved in return for being admitted to Mao's presence in 1972; President Jimmy Carter terminated diplomatic relations with Taiwan in order to normalise relations with China in 1978; President George H.W. Bush washed away the sins of Tiananmen in 1989 for ephemeral geopolitical gain; and Bill Clinton, who as a presidential candidate had criticised Bush for indulging the Chinese, proceeded as President to usher the country into the World Trade Organization at the expense of American business. All American administrations since the 1960s have been complicit in China's rise in the unrealised hope that it will become a 'responsible stakeholder' under Pax Americana.**

### [Disguising Its Real Purpose](#)

The Chinese are hard-nosed and unsentimental about the U.S. They have always pursued America with a selfish purpose, albeit couched in high principle. They have spoken words that the Americans wanted to hear – anti-Soviet rhetoric during the Cold War and market principles thereafter – to disguise their real purpose of thwarting U.S. hegemony. Ever since Cold Warrior John Foster Dulles spoke in 1958 of weaning China and other “satellites” away from the Soviets through regime change, known as “peaceful evolution”, every Chinese leader from Chairman Mao to President Xi Jinping has been clear-eyed that the U.S. represents an existential threat to the continued supremacy of the communist regime. Mao put it best, when he told high-ranking leaders in November 1959, that the “U.S. is attempting to carry out its aggression and expansion with a much more deceptive tactic... In other words, it wants to keep its order and change our system.” The collapse of the Soviet Union only reinforced this view and strengthened China's resolve to resist by creating its own parallel universe. China is building an alternate trading system (the **Belt and Road Initiative**); a multilateral banking system under its control (**Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, New Development Bank**); its own global positioning system (**BeiDou**); digital payment platforms (WeChat Pay and Alipay); a world-class digital network (**Huawei 5G**); cutting-edge technological processes in sunrise industries; and a modern military force. It is doing this under the noses of the Americans and some of it with the financial and technological resources of the West. Voices of caution have been few and far between, among them political scientist John Mearsheimer, who wrote in



2005 that the rise of China would not be peaceful at all, but the world chose to believe General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Hu Jintao's assurances about "peaceful rise". When satellite evidence showed that China was building military installations in the South China Sea, China's Southeast Asian neighbours and the U.S. preferred to believe assurances to the contrary given by Mr. Xi on the lawns of the White House in 2015. It is only under Mr. Trump that the Americans are finally acknowledging the uneasy fact that the Chinese are not graven in their image. He has called China out on trade practices. He has called China out on 5G. **It was Mr. Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy document that, perhaps for the first time, clubbed China along with Russia as a challenge to American power, influence and interests.** His recent China-specific restrictions on trade and legal migration are, possibly, only the beginning of a serious re-adjustment. A full-spectrum debate on China is now raging across the U.S. Former White House Chief of Staff Steve Bannon declared that the U.S. is already at war with China. Others like diplomat Richard Haass and former president of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick, warn that a new Cold War will be a mistake. Scholar Julian Gewirtz, in his brilliant essay, 'The Chinese Reassessment of Interdependence', talks about a similar process under way in Beijing. **Both sides are acutely aware how closely their economies are tied together: from farm to factory, the U.S. is heavily dependent on supply chains in China and the Chinese have been unable to break free of the dollar. If Mr. Trump's wish is to disentangle China's supply chains, Mr. Xi is equally determined to escape from the U.S. 'chokehold' on technology. To what extent the de-coupling is possible is yet to be determined, but one thing is inevitable, India will become part of the collateral damage.**

### [The Dimming of a Chinese Strongman's Aura \(Sujan R. Chinoy, A China Specialist And Former Ambassador, Is Currently The Director General Of The Manohar Parrikar Institute For Defence Studies And Analyses, New Delhi\)](#)

- ➔ To the outside world, China seeks to project a picture of monolithic unity behind President Xi Jinping's highly centralised leadership. However, media tropes point to a greater scrutiny of his role and leadership style, especially during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. Reports have surfaced alleging delays in reporting facts, conflicting instructions and tight censorship. Observers have drawn parallels between Mr. Xi and his powerful predecessors, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, perhaps a tad unfairly to both the iconic architects of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

#### [A Timeline of Change](#)

Mao presided over the founding of the PRC in 1949. He consolidated his leadership during the Long March in the mid-1930s. Despite his many detractors, he remained the undisputed leader of China until his death on September 9, 1976 even if, towards the end, it was the Gang of Four, led by his wife Jiang Qing, which had usurped power in his name. Mao banished his adversaries frequently, whether it was Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, or even Deng Xiaoping. Mao's reign after the founding of the PRC lasted 27 years. By comparison, the 67-year-old Xi Jinping has been at the helm for just under eight years. Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader who never held the posts of either Head of State or Head of Government, changed China's economic destiny with bold and far-sighted policy shifts, ushering in the Four Modernisations of agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology. The open-door policy, beginning the late 1970s, enabled China to emerge as the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment and a trade behemoth. Deng generally favoured a collegial form of decision-making in consultation with a clutch of senior leaders – the Party's "Eight Elders". Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, both successive General Secretaries of the CPC, were for long Deng's "left and right hands", but when they were perceived as deviating from the CPC's line, they were



packed off ignominiously by the party elders led by Deng. From 1990 until his death in 1997, Deng's only title was that of the Honorary Chairman of the Bridge Association of China. Yet, he remained the unquestioned leader, wielding great power even in his dotage, long after his successor Jiang Zemin had assumed the top posts.

### Spotlight on Xi

The history of the CPC suggests that Mr. Xi wields less power than either Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. He perhaps evokes more fear than respect on account of his ruthless anti-graft campaign that has brought down even high-ranking People's Liberation Army (PLA) generals and Politburo members. In the consensus-driven system of the CPC developed after the Cultural Revolution, it was not uncommon to target the gofers of rivals, but top Party and PLA leaders were generally considered inviolable to avoid retribution when fortunes changed. In contrast, Mr. Xi has put behind bars "tigers" such as PLA Generals Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, political heavyweights such as Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang and Sun Zhengcai, besides thousands of "flies" – venal lower-ranking cadres. The question is not whether but when disgruntled forces might challenge Mr. Xi's leadership. Since reigning in the pandemic in China, the Chinese economy has had a head start, but it is clearly not out of the woods. Economic hardship could spark off public dissent and harsher security measures. Moreover, a military confrontation with the United States leading to a "loss of face", however limited the engagement, is a risk that Mr. Xi can ill afford. Indignation could lead the Chinese people, nurtured on hubris, to quickly direct their ire against a leader who has abandoned Deng Xiaoping's advice, so well captured in the abbreviated aphorism, "hide our capacities and bide our time". Having steered through a constitutional revision in early 2018 that permits him to stay on in power beyond two terms, no doubt Mr. Xi would wish to preside over not just the centenary celebrations of the CPC in 2021 but also the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the PLA in 2027.

### Trouble Areas

The run-up to the PLA's centenary harbours potential for instability and conflict, especially in relation to China's avowed goal of reunification with Taiwan. Any use of force by China could drag the U.S., and perhaps its allies too, into the maelstrom, a view supported by the recent passage of the **Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act by the U.S.** which seeks to inter alia strengthen Taiwan's de facto independence. Contrary to tradition, Mr. Xi has no anointed successor. When he assumes the mantle again beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress in 2022, he will thwart the ambitions of an entire "sixth generation" leadership. The only leader after Deng to have an extended stint was Jiang Zemin who was General Secretary from 1989-2002, President from 1993-2003 and Chairman of the CPC's Central Military Commission (CMC) from 1989-2004. Jiang had clung on to the CMC post well after the baton had been passed to Hu Jintao as General Secretary of the CPC and President of the PRC. He survived after loosening his grip on power perhaps because he did not ride roughshod over other influential power centres. By comparison, **Mr. Xi is "riding a tiger"**. A recently leaked internal report of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think-tank affiliated to the Ministry of State Security in Beijing, purportedly warns China's top leadership of a rising tide of anti-China sentiment in the wake of the novel coronavirus outbreak, the worst since the Tiananmen incident of June 1989. The leak may point to internal churning or it could well be meant to convey that China remains undaunted. The analogy is also reminiscent of China's short-lived isolation after Tiananmen. The hope, that an economically rich and prosperous China would gradually become liberal and democratic, has been belied. Whether the current U.S. pressure on China for its controversial policies towards Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan will induce change remains to be seen. For now, the face-off continues and demands for accountability for the outbreak are mounting, testing Mr. Xi's leadership. **The alienation by China of a sizeable section of the**



international community and public criticism of Mr. Xi, including in the Chinese social media, suggest that the sun may have reached its zenith.

## Why China Is Opposing THAAD Defence Systems in South Korea

- China has issued a statement reiterating its long-standing objections to the presence of the US THAAD missile defence system in South Korea. Its opposition came following reports of an overnight operation to bring in new, replacement interceptor missiles to the US base in South Korea. China has been objecting to the defence system since it was first deployed in South Korea three year ago, causing a deterioration in ties between the two countries.

### What is THAAD?

THAAD is an acronym for **Terminal High Altitude Area Defence**, a **transportable, ground-based missile defence system**. "THAAD is coupled with space-based and ground-based surveillance stations, which transfer data about the incoming missile and informs the THAAD interceptor missile of the threat type classification. THAAD is alarmed about incoming missiles by space-based satellites with infrared sensors." This anti-ballistic missile defence system has been designed and manufactured by the US company Lockheed Martin. **South Korea is not the only country with the THAAD missile defence system. It has been previously deployed in the UAE, Guam, Israel and Romania.**

### What Is This South Korea-China Controversy Over THAAD About?

In South Korea, the THAAD missile defence system is operated by the US army stationed in the country. The US had previously announced that the deployment of this missile defence system was a **countermeasure against potential attacks by North Korea**, particularly after the country had engaged in testing ballistic missiles. In 2017, matters escalated in the Korean Peninsula **after North Korea test fired a few missiles in the direction of US bases in Japan. Following this incident, the US amended its plans and moved the systems to its army base in Osan, South Korea while the final deployment site was being prepared.** These moves by the US and by extension, South Korea, particularly angered China. For a while the dispute has temporarily subsided, if not resolved. However, with the latest developments, it appears the controversy has resurfaced.

### Why Is China Opposing THAAD In South Korea?

**According to The Washington Post, China's opposition has little to do with the missiles itself and is more about the system's inbuilt advanced radar systems that could track China's actions.** The controversy also has much to do with the geo-politics and complex conflicts in East Asia, with the US having a presence in the region particularly through its many military bases in Japan and South Korea. According to some observers of East Asia, China believes the US exerts influence over South Korea and Japan and may interfere with Beijing's long-term military, diplomatic and economic interests in the region. Following the deployment of replacement missiles Friday, Reuters reported that China had issued a statement urging the US not to harm bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul. South Korea's Yonhap news agency added that China warned the US not to interfere in its "national interests". The US and South Korea have consistently maintained that these missiles are only to counter potential threats by North Korea. South Korea also issued a statement saying the number of missiles had not increased, but had only been replaced with newer versions.



### China's Response to THAAD In the Past

When the controversy first arose in 2017, China had hit South Korea economically. South Korean businesses, including large conglomerates like LG, Lotte and Samsung, found their diversified operations hampered. These included the shutting down of institutions and enterprises that had little to do with the defence and military, like golf courses and shopping malls. Post this development in 2017, tourism from China to South Korea fell drastically. Many Chinese tourists who are fans of Korean entertainment travel to South Korea – the tourism industry contributes significantly to South Korea's economy. South Korea's entertainment industry witnessed concerts, shows and other commercial ventures in China by K-pop stars being forced to cancel as a result of this controversy. South Korean cosmetics and beauty products that are extremely popular in China also witnessed their sales being impacted, due to calls on social media to boycott South Korean products. Hence, the impact of the controversy was not limited to a diplomatic level, but had far-reaching consequences. Three years on, it is yet to be seen if the latest development will have a similar effect on relations between the countries.

### What Is the UK's Latest Offer for Hong Kong's British Passport Holders?

- The UK may offer **British National (Overseas) passport holders in Hong Kong a path to live and work in the UK soon**. A press release issued by the UK government on May 29 said that if China follows through with its new national security law, the government will explore options to allow BN(O)s to apply for leave to stay in the UK, for an extendable period of up to 12 months if eligible. Currently, Hong Kong citizens with BN(O)s have the right to enter the UK for six months as a visitor. "If China imposes its national security law, the British government will change its immigration rules and allow any holder of these passports from Hong Kong to come to the UK for a renewable period of 12 months and be given further immigration rights including the right to work which would place them on the route to citizenship." Last week, the Chinese legislature approved a national security law that proposes to ban seditious activities targeting mainland Chinese rule. Under this law, Hong Kong could be brought under the full control of mainland Chinese rule.

### Why an Oil Spill in Russia's Arctic Region Has Become A Cause for Worry

- Russia declared a state of emergency, five days after a power plant fuel leak in its Arctic region caused 20,000 tonnes of diesel oil to escape into a local river, turning its surface crimson red. The **Ambarnaya river**, into which the oil has been discharged, is part of a network that flows into the environmentally sensitive Arctic Ocean. The state-owned TASS news agency reported that the emergency measures were announced within Russia's Krasnoyarsk Region, located in the vast and sparsely populated Siberian peninsula. The power plant is located near the Region's Norilsk city, around 3000 km northeast of Moscow.

### How Did the Leak Happen?

The thermoelectric power plant at Norilsk is built on permafrost, which has weakened over the years owing to climate change. This caused the pillars that supported the plant's fuel tank to sink., leading to a loss of containment on May 29. Reports said that around 20,000 tonnes of diesel oil were released into the Ambarnaya river, which has since drifted 12 km on its surface. **Norilsk Nickel**, the Russian mining giant that owns the plant, said it had reported the leak in a "timely and proper" way and that the pillars had held the tank in its place "for 30 years without difficulty". **The conglomerate, which is the world's leading nickel and palladium producer**, has also been blamed for another leak in 2016, when pollutants from its plant leaked into another



river in the region. As per an AP report, its factories have made Norilsk one of the most heavily polluted places on Earth.

### What Has Russia Done So Far?

Putin, who appeared irate, ordered a probe into the incident. Boom obstacles were placed in the river, but they were unable to contain the oil because of shallow waters. So far, three criminal proceedings have been launched, and the head of the power plant has been detained, the TASS report said. The state of emergency declared on Wednesday would bring in extra forces and federal resources for the clean-up efforts, the Moscow Times reported.

### What Is the Extent of The Damage?

Environmentalists have said the river would be difficult to clean, given its shallow waters and remote location, as well as the magnitude of the spill. A World Wildlife Fund speaking to the AFP news agency described this as the **second-largest known oil leak in modern Russia's history in terms of volume**. The Russian chapter of activist group Greenpeace said damages to the Arctic waterways could be at least 6 billion rubles (over \$76 million), and has compared the incident to **Alaska's 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster**. Its estimate does not include atmospheric damage due to greenhouse gases and soil pollution. In a statement, the NGO said, "The installed buoys will only help collect a small part of the pollution, leading us to say that nearly all the diesel fuel will remain in the environment." An environmental oversight agency of the Russian government pegged the overall damage at "several dozen, perhaps hundreds of billions of rubles", as did a federal fishing agency, the Moscow Times reported.

### What Are the Clean-Up Measures Being Suggested?

During the video conference with Putin, the Russian minister of natural resources opposed setting the vast quantity of oil afire and recommended diluting the layer with reagents. An expert told the BBC that the **clean-up effort could take between 5-10 years**.

### What's Behind the Ethiopia-Sudan Border Row?

- Amid heightened tension along its border with Ethiopia, Sudan swore in a new defence minister. Major General Yassin Ibrahim Yassin was recalled from retirement to fill the position following the death of General Gamal al-Din Omar. **Yassin's swearing-in came after an alleged Ethiopian cross-border attack which left at least one Sudanese soldier and a child dead**. Three Sudanese civilians and a soldier were also wounded. **The attack, which took place in the eastern province of al-Qadarif, started after an Ethiopian militia group penetrated Sudan's border to fetch water at the Atbara river**. "It is not clear exactly what triggered a flare-up of this long-standing border dispute. Sources suggest that Sudanese security forces may have responded to incursions by Ethiopian farmers, which in turn brought in Ethiopian security forces," The border clashes flared up as Ethiopia and Sudan were preparing to meet in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, for a second round of talks aimed at resolving the border dispute. "There have been negotiations and they reached an understanding that most or all of this contested land can be under Sudan," Tronvoll said. "The interesting aspect is why there is new violence now and possibly also at a higher level than before." According to Sudan's military, tensions along the border between the two countries have recently heated up amid increasing attacks on Sudanese troops. Following the incident, Sudan summoned Ethiopia's envoy and urged the Ethiopian government to do all it can to end such border clashes.



### Ethiopia's Call for Diplomacy

Ethiopia offered its "deep sympathy and condolences to the families of the victims of the conflict along the Ethiopia and Sudan border." Addis Ababa urged the two countries to pursue diplomacy as a means of resolving the border dispute saying there was no need for the countries to "descend into hostility". Last month, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent General Adam Mohamed Mahmoud, the country's military chief to Khartoum in a bid to ease the tensions. For Tronvoll, solving the dispute via diplomatic means is reasonable and should be encouraged. However, he said there could be more to the clashes. "There are various actors and processes within the region, and this is an opportune moment for some to ignite some tension between Sudan and Ethiopia," Tronvoll said. "Hopefully, the two sides can sit at the negotiating table and come to a conclusion."

### Root of Ethiopia-Sudan Border Dispute

Sudan and Ethiopia share a common boundary that stretches over 1,600 kilometres (994 miles). The border was drawn following a series of treaties between Ethiopia and the colonial powers of Britain and Italy. However, to date, this boundary lacks clear demarcation lines. Sudan's al-Fashqa region which covers approximately 600 km, is a rich fertile land conducive for agriculture. For decades, Ethiopia has allowed its farmers to plant crops there. Former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir largely turned a blind eye to his country's territorial incursion. However, Sudan's transitional authorities, who took over after popular protests which eventually led to the ousting of al-Bashir, have initiated talks with Ethiopia in a bid to have to Ethiopian farmers withdraw.

### More Sudanese Boots at The Ethiopian Border

For the first time in nearly 25 years, Sudan deployed its troops along the al-Fashqa border strip at the end March. This came after an attack which prompted a top security team to visit the area. "There are old problems. Herders have lost their livestock and farmers have lost their lands," Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, Chairman of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, said in an interview with the national network, Sudan TV, after touring the border region. Al-Burhan defended the troop deployment saying the armed forces were left with no choice but to protect their territory because the Ethiopians had imposed their presence. Sudan's military has vowed that it is willing and ready to protect its citizens and territory.

### Sudan's About-Turn in Ethiopia's Mega Dam Project

The border dispute could complicate Ethiopia's plan to construct the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). On Wednesday, Sudan wrote to the UN Security Council calling on it to urge Ethiopia and Egypt, not to take unilateral action on the dam. Sudan had initially backed Ethiopia's project but later refused to sign on an initial agreement which would have paved the way for Ethiopia to begin filling the dam. For Ethiopia analyst Davison, the border dispute has little to do with GERD. "Ethiopia and Sudan are holding regular discussions to prepare the ground for the resumption of trilateral GERD talks, so the process is restarting rather than stalled," Davison said. Sudan and Ethiopia need to ramp up their existing discussions over the borderlands in order to come to an understanding that will lead to a final resolution of the issue.

### Philippines' U-turn on U.S. Pact

- ➔ Security issues in the disputed South China Sea helped convince the Philippines to delay quitting a key U.S. military pact, the nation's envoy to Washington said on Wednesday. The government of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced on Tuesday it had suspended



plans to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a deal that is important to Washington's moves to counter Beijing's rising regional power. Mr. Duterte has cosied up to China in search of trade and investment, sparking U.S. concern that its long-time ally and former colony would change sides in a strategic boost to Beijing. Since taking power in 2016, Mr. Duterte has moved closer to Beijing, but has faced push back from the Philippine public and concern in the military wary of its territorial ambitions in the disputed South China Sea.

## Foreign Affairs

### Line of Actual Control: Where It Is Located, And Where India And China Differ

→ As tensions continue between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a look at what the line means on the ground and the disagreements over it:

#### What Is the Line of Actual Control?

The LAC is the demarcation that separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory. India considers the LAC to be 3,488 km long, while the Chinese consider it to be only around 2,000 km. It is divided into three sectors: the eastern sector which spans Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the middle sector in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and the western sector in Ladakh.

#### What Is the Disagreement?

The alignment of the LAC in the eastern sector is along the 1914 McMahon Line, and there are minor disputes about the positions on the ground as per the principle of the high Himalayan watershed. This pertains to India's international boundary as well, but for certain areas such as Longju and Asaphila. The line in the middle sector is the least controversial but for the precise alignment to be followed in the Barahoti plains. The major disagreements are in the western sector where the LAC emerged from two letters written by Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai to PM Jawaharlal Nehru in 1959, after he had first mentioned such a 'line' in 1956. In his letter, Zhou said the LAC consisted of "the so-called McMahon Line in the east and the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west". Shivshankar Menon has explained in his book Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy that the LAC was "described only in general terms on maps not to scale" by the Chinese. After the 1962 War, the Chinese claimed they had withdrawn to 20 km behind the LAC of November 1959. Zhou clarified the LAC again after the war in another letter to Nehru: "To put it concretely, in the eastern sector it coincides in the main with the so-called McMahon Line, and in the western and middle sectors it coincides in the main with the traditional customary line which has consistently been pointed out by China". During the Doklam crisis in 2017, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson urged India to abide by the "1959 LAC".

#### What Was India's Response to China's Designation of the LAC?

India rejected the concept of LAC in both 1959 and 1962. Even during the war, Nehru was unequivocal: "There is no sense or meaning in the Chinese offer to withdraw twenty kilometres from what they call 'line of actual control'. What is this 'line of control'? Is this the line they have created by aggression since the beginning of September?" India's objection, as described by Menon, was that the Chinese line "was a disconnected series of points on a map that could be joined up in many ways; the line should omit gains from aggression in 1962 and therefore should be based on the actual position on September 8, 1962 before the Chinese attack; and





the vagueness of the Chinese definition left it open for China to continue its creeping attempt to change facts on the ground by military force”.

### **When Did India Accept The LAC?**

Shyam Saran has disclosed in his book How India Sees the World that the LAC was discussed during Chinese Premier Li Peng’s 1991 visit to India, where PM P V Narasimha Rao and Li reached an understanding to maintain peace and tranquillity at the LAC. India formally accepted the concept of the LAC when Rao paid a return visit to Beijing in 1993 and the two sides signed the Agreement to Maintain Peace and Tranquillity at the LAC. The reference to the LAC was unqualified to make it clear that it was not referring to the LAC of 1959 or 1962 but to the LAC at the time when the agreement was signed. To reconcile the differences about some areas, the two countries agreed that the Joint Working Group on the border issue would take up the task of clarifying the alignment of the LAC.

### **Why Did India Change Its Stance on The Line of Actual Control?**

As per Menon, it was needed because Indian and Chinese patrols were coming in more frequent contact during the mid-1980s, after the government formed a China Study Group in 1976 which revised the patrolling limits, rules of engagement and pattern of Indian presence along the border. In the backdrop of the Sumdorongchu standoff, when PM Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988, Menon notes that the two sides agreed to negotiate a border settlement, and pending that, they would maintain peace and tranquillity along the border.

### **Have India And China Exchanged Their Maps of the LAC?**

Only for the middle sector. Maps were “shared” for the western sector but never formally exchanged, and the process of clarifying the LAC has effectively stalled since 2002. As an aside, there is no publicly available map depicting India’s version of the LAC. During his visit to China in May 2015, PM Narendra Modi’s proposal to clarify the LAC was rejected by the Chinese. Deputy Director General of the Asian Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, Huang Xilian later told Indian journalists that “We tried to clarify some years ago but it encountered some difficulties, which led to even complex situation. That is why whatever we do we should make it more conducive to peace and tranquillity for making things easier and not to make them complicated.”

### **Is the LAC Also the Claim Line for Both Countries?**

Not for India. India’s claim line is the line seen in the official boundary marked on the maps as released by the Survey of India, including both Aksai Chin and Gilgit-Baltistan. In China’s case, it corresponds mostly to its claim line, but in the eastern sector, it claims entire Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet. However, the claim lines come into question when a discussion on the final international boundaries takes place, and not when the conversation is about a working border, say the LAC.

### **But Why Are These Claim Lines Controversial in Ladakh?**

Independent India was transferred the treaties from the British, and while the Shimla Agreement on the McMahon Line was signed by British India, Aksai Chin in Ladakh province of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was not part of British India, although it was a part of the British Empire. Thus, the eastern boundary was well defined in 1914 but in the west in Ladakh, it was not. A G Noorani writes in India-China Boundary Problem 1846-1947 that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’s Ministry of States published two White Papers on Indian states. The first, in July 1948, had two maps: one had no boundary shown in the western sector, only a partial colour wash; the second one extended the colour wash in yellow to the entire state of



J&K, but mentioned “boundary undefined”. The second White Paper was published in February 1950 after India became a Republic, where the map again had boundaries which were undefined. In July 1954, Nehru issued a directive that “all our old maps dealing with this frontier should be carefully examined and, where necessary, withdrawn. New maps should be printed showing our Northern and North Eastern frontier without any reference to any ‘line’. The new maps should also be sent to our embassies abroad and should be introduced to the public generally and be used in our schools, colleges, etc”. This map, as is officially used till date, formed the basis of dealings with China, eventually leading to the 1962 War.

### How Is the LAC Different from The Line of Control with Pakistan?

The LoC emerged from the 1948 ceasefire line negotiated by the UN after the Kashmir War. It was designated as the LoC in 1972, following the Shimla Agreement between the two countries. It is delineated on a map signed by DGMOs of both armies and has the international sanctity of a legal agreement. The LAC, in contrast, is only a concept – it is not agreed upon by the two countries, neither delineated on a map or demarcated on the ground.

### A Phantom Called the Line of Actual Control

→ At the heart of India’s and China’s continued inability to make meaningful progress on the boundary issue are **four agreements – signed in September 1993, November 1996, April 2005 and October 2013 – between the two countries**. Ironically, India and China keep referring to these agreements as the bedrock of the vision of progress on the boundary question. Unfortunately, these are deeply flawed agreements and make the quest for settlement of the boundary question at best a strategic illusion and at worst a cynical diplomatic parlour trick. Here’s how. According to the 1993 agreement (on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China border areas), **“pending an ultimate solution”, “the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the LAC between the two sides... No activities of either side shall overstep the LAC.”** Further, both the 1993 and the 1996 agreement (on confidence-building measures in the military field along the LAC) say they “will reduce or limit their respective military forces within mutually agreed geographical zones along the LAC.” This was to apply to major categories of armaments and cover various other aspects as well, including air intrusions “within ten kilometres along the LAC”.

### No Bearing on Ground Reality

The specification of this phantom LAC as the starting point and the central focus has made several key stipulations and articles of the four agreements effectively inoperable for more than a quarter of a century. In fact, many of the articles have no bearing on the ground reality. Article XII of the 1996 agreement, for instance, says, “This agreement is subject to ratification and shall enter into force on the date of exchange of instruments of ratification.” It is not clear if and when that happened. Astonishingly, **nowhere in the 1993 agreement is there the provision to recognise the existing lines of deployment of the respective armies, as they were in 1993**. The agreement does not reflect any attempt to have each side recognise the other’s line of deployment of troops at the time it was signed. That would have been the logical starting point. If both armies are to respect the LAC, where is the line? The ambiguity over the LAC has brought a prolonged sense of unease and uncertainty and thus exponentially contributed to the military build-up in those areas. **The absence of a definition of this line allows ever new and surreptitious advances on the ground. Had the wordsmiths of the 1993 agreement begun the exercise with the phrase “pending an ultimate solution, each side shall strictly respect and observe the line of existing control/deployment” instead of the “LAC”, it would have been more possible to keep the peace.** In such a case there would have been two existing lines of control on the map – one for the physical deployment of the Chinese troops



and the other for the physical deployment of the Indian troops. This would have rendered the areas between the two lines no man's land, and would have ensured that the two armies were frozen in their positions. In effect, **in the eastern sector, where the Chinese have not accepted the loosely defined McMahon line which follows the principle of watershed, and the western sector, which is witnessing another episodic stand-off, the LAC is two hypothetical lines.** The first is what Indian troops consider the extent to which they can dominate through patrols, which is well beyond the point where they are actually deployed and present. The second is what the Chinese think they effectively control, which is well south of the line they were positioned at in 1993. Now consider para 4 in Article II of the 2013 agreement (on border defence cooperation). It enjoins the parties to "work with the other side in combating natural disasters or infectious diseases that may affect or spread to the other side". Given this serious intent, how do we read the latest round of fisticuffs and intense physical scrimmage between Chinese and Indian soldiers that left at least 70 Indian soldiers injured and hospitalised in Ladakh? It could have exposed some of the Indian soldiers to a local Chinese mutation of COVID-19. Forget physical distancing, were they even wearing masks?

### Perceptions of LAC

It is in this theatre of the militarily absurd that we should look at the outcome of the attempted exchange of maps in the western sector where this round of confrontation continues between India and China. This came after the exchange of maps in the middle sector where divergences were the least, i.e., the existing line and the Chinese and Indian idea of the LAC were more or less the same (in 2002). **Kanwal Sibal, who was the Foreign Secretary then, and Wang Yi, the head of the Chinese delegation, met in New Delhi in 2003 for this purpose. It had been agreed that both sides would exchange maps to an agreed scale on each side's perceptions of the location of the LAC in the western sector.** The idea was to superimpose the maps to see where the perceptions converged and, crucially, where they diverged. Due to the contentious nature of the sector, it would provide a starting point, not the end point, to discuss how to reconcile divergences presumed to be significant, given Chinese military behaviour on the ground there. **Each side handed over its map to the other. Mr. Wang took the map, gave it a long, hard look, and wordlessly returned it. He provided no reason for his action. The meeting effectively ended there. Had he been instructed not to accept any map the Indian side provided? Or did he make a spur-of-the-moment decision that this exchange was not in China's interests? In hindsight, it is obvious that Mr. Wang didn't think the map was in Chinese interests, because if he had, the Chinese would have with them, officially, New Delhi's claim with regard to the LAC in the western sector where they wanted the most territory. That meant that their hands would have been tied because New Delhi could subsequently say that the Chinese were intruding into India's LAC. By disregarding the map, China is not bound in any way by New Delhi's perception of the LAC, and therefore does not have to limit liberty of action.** This was evident then and is especially evident now. Because the nature of the terrain, deployment, and infrastructure and connectivity asymmetries in the border areas continue to be so starkly in China's favour that it is clear that the Chinese are in no hurry to settle the boundary question. They see that the cost to India in keeping this question open suits them more than settling the issue.

[In Himalayan Staredown, The Dilemmas for Delhi \(Happymon Jacob Teaches National Security at The School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi\)](#)

- ➔ The growing number of reports about Chinese troops crossing the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India in the Ladakh region – neither acknowledged nor denied by the Indian government as yet – indicate a new age of Chinese territorial aggression against India. While

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



there are around 400 transgressions/faceoffs each year on an average along the LAC, the recent spate of territorial transgressions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is unprecedented in its scope and manner. Even as independent accounts point out that Chinese troops are yet to withdraw from the transgressed territories, traditionally considered by both sides to be on the Indian side of the LAC, and restore status quo ante, Chinese officials have gone ahead and stated that the "Situation in China-India border is overall stable & controllable". Is all well between the two nuclear-armed adversaries? If the mounting evidence of China's territorial aggression against India is even partly accurate, and there is no reason to believe they are not, the **Narendra Modi government is left with two basic choices: accept territorial loss as a fait accompli or force or negotiate a reversal to status quo ante, unless of course the PLA unilaterally withdraws.** Either way, **China's growing territorial aggression on the LAC signals the end of Beijing's peaceful rise and its traditional desire to maintain regional status quo with India.** China under its President, Xi Jinping, unequivocally seeks to demonstrate that it is the preponderant power in the region.

### Explaining the Aggression

New Delhi's terse statements about Aksai Chin following the Jammu and Kashmir reorganisation in August last year had not gone down well with Beijing. While not many in India believe that New Delhi was serious about getting back Aksai Chin from Chinese control, Beijing may have viewed it as India upping the ante. More pertinently, in a clear departure from the past, New Delhi has been carrying out the construction of infrastructural projects along the LAC – a long overdue activity – which is something that seems to have made China uneasy. The Chinese angle to the J&K conundrum deserves more attention here. **Home Minister Amit Shah's statement about Aksai Chin in August 2019 might have triggered some anxiety in Beijing about its plans for the larger erstwhile princely State of J&K a part of which China is in possession of.** China's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connectivity to Pakistan through the Karakoram and New Delhi's criticism of it, the reported presence of PLA troops in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), India's new-found activism on Aksai Chin, and the PLA's incursions into areas in eastern Ladakh must be viewed in the broader context of a long-term geopolitical world view China has for the region. It is equally important to appreciate the larger Chinese strategic calculations behind its recent spate of aggressions. Having given up its traditional slogan of 'peaceful rise', China, under Mr. Xi, is beginning to assert itself as the next superpower. Over the years, Beijing has perhaps realised that India is not keen on toeing the Chinese line in the region. So, this is **Beijing sending a message to New Delhi to fall in line, a message that will not go unnoticed in the smaller capitals around China – from Colombo to Kathmandu to Hanoi.** There is more subtle political messaging in Beijing's LAC aggression. Given that China is currently engaged in what many analysts are describing as a new cold war with the United States, in the middle of a crackdown in Hong Kong along with fighting COVID-19 at home, one would not have expected the Chinese leadership to open another front. And yet, **by opening a limited military front with India on the LAC, China is signalling the U.S. that it can handle pressure, and telling India that it has the political and military wherewithal to put pressure on New Delhi notwithstanding its other preoccupations.**

### Doklam Redux?

The 2017 standoff between India and China at the Doklam trijunction was the first major military standoff between the two sides in a long time in which New Delhi demonstrated it was not a military pushover despite China's conventional superiority over India. Since Doklam, however, there have been several reports that China has continued with its construction activities in and around Doklam. The 2020 transgressions in Sikkim and Ladakh are perhaps Beijing's way of responding to India consistently and militarily. **China's limited scope military expeditions on the long-contested border is cost effective for the PLA given the ever-growing**



conventional military superiority that it enjoys with India. Moreover, because limited fights or smaller land grabs may not provoke an all-out confrontation or nuclear use, the side with conventional superiority and more border infrastructure would likely carry the day. Let me unpack this argument. Picking a direct fight with India which might lead to an undesirable military escalation with India does not suit Beijing's interests, but carrying out minor military expeditions with the objective of inflicting small-scale military defeats on India is precisely what would suit the Chinese political and military leadership; they are cost effective, less escalatory, and the message gets conveyed. More so, India's military response would depend a great deal on how far the regime in New Delhi is willing to acknowledge such territorial losses due to domestic political constraints: if New Delhi acknowledges loss of territory, it would have to regain it, but doing so vis-à-vis a conventionally superior power would not be easy. Put differently, growing conventional imbalance and domestic political calculations could prompt New Delhi to overlook minor territorial losses on the LAC, the manner in which Pakistan refused to acknowledge the 2016 surgical strikes carried out by India. But let us be clear: **The Newer Delhi overlooks them; the more Beijing would be tempted to repeat them.** These considerations lie at the heart of India's China dilemma.

### Limits of Adventurism

And yet, there are limits to China's LAC adventurism. **There are several places along the several thousand-kilometre-long LAC where the PLA is militarily weak, the Indian Army has the upper hand, and, therefore, a tit-for-tat military campaign could be undertaken by New Delhi.** Second, while China enjoys continental superiority over India, **maritime domain is China's weak spot**, in particular Beijing's commercial and energy interest to which the maritime space is crucial. Finally, and most importantly, would Beijing want to seriously damage the close to \$100 billion trade with India with its military adventurism on the LAC? In any case, for India, the age of pussyfooting around Chinese intimidation strategies is over. The time has come to checkmate Beijing's military aggression even as we maintain a robust economic relationship with our eastern neighbour. It is also a reminder for us to get more serious about finalising a border agreement with China: **the bigger the power differential between India and China, the more concessions Beijing would demand from New Delhi to settle the dispute.** There is little doubt that China is our neighbour and that we have to live next to the larger and more powerful China. However, India should not accept Beijing's attempts at land grabs, or military intimidation. That China is a rising superpower located next door to us is a reality, but how we deal with that reality is a choice we must make as a nation.

### Six Years Ago, How A Standoff in Ladakh Ended After Discussion

- Nearly six years ago, the last major standoff between the Indian and Chinese armies in Ladakh was resolved peacefully through military and diplomatic talks. As is happening now, the talks at the military level were held in Ladakh while the diplomatic discussion took place in Beijing. The crisis erupted in the most dramatic fashion in September 2014 during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Ahmedabad with the then newly elected Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. As the two leaders sat on a swing at the Sabarmati riverfront, more than a thousand Chinese soldiers began pushing their way into Indian territory in Chumar, the southern-most portion of Ladakh's boundary with Tibet. Like most other places on the LAC in Ladakh, Chumar is marked by rugged mountains at an altitude of around 16,000 to 18,000 feet, with low temperatures and harsh icy winds. It is one of those areas where India has a road right up to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), then there is a sharp cut across a big nala (rivulet) marked on the map as 30R – a sudden relative height of 30 metres. On the other side of the nala is the Chinese road, but the sharp cutting does not allow their soldiers to come in vehicles up to their "perception" of the LAC, which lies further to the north of the Indian LAC. The Chinese soldiers come up to 30R



in vehicles, then dismount and patrol on either horses or on foot, providing Indian soldiers enough warning time to stop their patrols and force them to return after the banner drill. This had led to an increase in Chinese transgressions in the area in 2013 and 2014. As tensions mounted, the Chinese brought in some dozers and construction equipment in the second week of September, digging the area of 30R to make a road. The local Indian company commander reacted promptly, physically stopping the Chinese and it escalated the crisis. The Chinese agreed to stop the construction of their road across 30R, and the local military commanders agreed to a moratorium on patrolling by both sides in the disputed area for a few weeks. The two armies withdrew over the next two weeks. The living shelter for Indian soldiers stayed in Chumar, and the unofficial moratorium on patrolling by both armies in Chumar continued for a couple of years.

### Uneasy Frontier Robs Ladakh's Herders of Pastures

- The Chinese Army's intrusion in Chumur and Demchok since January has left Ladakh's nomadic herding **Changpa community** cut off from large parts of summer pastures. **The People's Liberation Army has taken over 16 kanals (two acres) of cultivable land in Chumur and advanced around 15 km inside Demchok, taking over traditional grazing pastures and cultivable lowlands. This has destabilised the movement of over 2,000 members of the nomadic community.** In a cascading effect, this has resulted in a **sharp rise in deaths of young Pashmina goats this year** in the Korzok-Chumur belt of Changthang plateau in Ladakh. "Over 16 kanals of cultivatable land in Chumur's Chabiji pasture has been inaccessible since January this year due to the aggression and incursions of Chinese Army there, destabilising the annual seasonal migration of our livestock's, including yaks and Pashmina goats (also known as Cashmere). Timely migration is essential for their survival,". **The much-valued wool from the Ladakh herds is essential for the prized Pashmina shawls woven in Kashmir and famous for their intricate hand work.**

### Military Bonding Beyond Borders

- **Massachusetts-born General of the East India Company, David Ochterlony, was the force behind the induction of the Gurkhas in the military. The Gurkhas had fought in the Gurkha-Sikh War, Anglo-Sikh wars, and the Afghan wars. During the 1971 Indo-Pak war, a Gurkha battalion pioneered amphibious operation in independent India.** The blow-back from remarks by the Army chief, Manoj Naravane, implying that Nepal was raising imaginary border claims with India at China's behest could hit a **vital pillar of India's national security** — the **seven prized Gurkha regiments comprising battle-hardened troops, with a proven record of loyalty and valour.** The General's remarks raised a firestorm in Nepal, where tensions with India were already high following Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's inauguration of an 80-km stretch of a "pilgrim" road earlier in May. Mount Kailash is about 96 km away from the Pass. Following the road inauguration, the India-Nepal dispute over the status of Lipulekh has flared. Indian maps have shown Lipulekh as an Indian territory, with the area to the east of the Pass, belonging to Nepal. Nepal, on the contrary, claims that the Lipulekh Pass is part of its territory, located in its Dharchula district of Sudurpashchim Pradesh. Nepal PM K.P. Sharma Oli stoked the fires of nationalism to a new high, by delivering a defiant speech in Parliament, slamming India not only over territorial claims, but also for spiralling COVID-19 infections in his country.

### Growing Bitterness

Amid the growing bitterness, the **Nepalese Army, which has historically enjoyed unique and privileged ties with India, has refrained from reacting to Gen. Naravane's statement.** Spokesperson of the Nepal Army, Brig. General Bigyan Dev Pandey, refusing to respond to



General Naravane's comments, spotlighted that the controversy fell in the "political" and not the military domain. But, on the contrary, Nepal's Defence Minister Ishwor Pokhrel, who is also Deputy Prime Minister, has slammed the Indian Army chief's utterance. Gen. Naravane's comments, he said, had hurt the sentiments of Nepalese Gurkhas, who have a long tradition of sacrifice for India, he said on May 25. He added the Nepal Army "would definitely play its role in the right time, as per the directives of the government based on our Constitution... If needed, it will fight". Amid the cross-fire between the Army Chief and the Nepalese political leadership lies the danger that the **controversy may breed alienation among segments of at least 40 Gurkha battalions**, mainly comprising Nepali soldiers who are the Indian Army's pride. That would be a major Indian concern as New Delhi cannot afford any dissonance in the strong and reliable relationship with Gurkha troops, which has been tested and forged in the line of fire, for more than two centuries.

### Recruited by The British

Ties between British-India and Nepali Gurkhas, who originate from the mountainous region of Gurkha, go deep, and can be traced to the famous Treaty of Sugauli, signed at the end of the Anglo-Nepalese war. That was in 1816, when troops of the **British East India Company discovered that despite losing the war, the Nepali Gurkhas had fought with exceptional valour and grit, worthy of recruitment in the British-Indian forces**. Consequently, the first battalion of the Gurkha Regiment was raised. The gamble of the Massachusetts-born General of the East India Company, David Ochterlony, the force behind the induction of the Gurkhas in the military, paid off, as the **recruits from Nepal played a significant role in the consolidation of the British Empire in India**. Gurkhas had engaged in combat during the Gurkha-Sikh War, Anglo-Sikh wars, and the Afghan wars. **By the time the First World War began, 10 Gurkha regiments had already been raised in the British Indian Army**. Unsurprisingly, they distinguished themselves in major combat theatres across the globe, ranging from Monte Cassino – a rocky hill about 130 km southeast of Rome – in the West, to tropical Rangoon in the East. **The German Afrika Korps, the German expeditionary force in Africa during the Second World War led by Gen. Erwin Rommel, went on record to acknowledge the ferocity of these khukri-wielding fighters**. Gurkhas have fought in the Falklands war and served the British in Hong Kong, Cyprus, Sierra Leone and East Timor.

### Ties with Indian Army

**After India gained Independence, six Gurkha regiments were transferred from the British to the Indian Army as part of a tripartite agreement between Nepal, India and Britain. A seventh regiment was raised after Independence**. Currently, there roughly are **32,000 Gurkhas who make up the 40 battalions serving in the seven regiments in the Indian Army**. There is not a single military campaign launched by independent India, where the battalions have not left their indelible mark. In recent decades, many retired Indian Army officers would recall the sheer tenacity, courage and combat skills of Gurkha troops at the dizzy heights of the Siachen Glacier in Ladakh. Resolutely defending Bilafond La, one of the "gates" leading to the glacier, the third battalion of the fourth Gurkha Rifles regiment blunted repeated assaults by the Pakistani troops, all at a height of 20,000 feet. In the battle fought on September 20-24, 1987, 13 Gurkha troops were killed and 23 wounded. For their bravery, the unit earned 3 Maha Vir Chakras (MVC) and 5 Vir Chakras. During the 1971 Indo-Pak war, a Gurkha battalion pioneered amphibious operations. Amid the Indian Peace Keeping Force operations in Sri Lanka, two Gurkha battalions participated in combat with distinction, but Lt. Colonel Inder Bal Singh Bawa, one of the battalion commanders, was injured and later died, along with many of the unit's officers and troops. Col. Bawa was later decorated with an MVC. **Speaking of the Gurkhas, Sam Manekshaw, India's first field Marshall, who himself belonged to the eighth Gurkha Rifles**



regiment, once famously said: "If anyone tells you he is never afraid, he is a liar or he is a Gurkha."

### Nepali Congress Backs Oli Govt. In Vote on New Map

- The government of Nepal secured crucial support of the main opposition party, the Nepali Congress (NC) to grant constitutional status to the updated map of the country that claims the disputed territory of Kalapani. A leading figure of the NC confirmed that the party has decided to back the move of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and help in passing the amendment next week. Earlier reports had suggested that NC would support the government while urging it to resolve differences with India through diplomatic means. Several groups from among the Madhesi community of the Terai region, however, maintained that they were unlikely to support the amendment as it includes only the agenda of the revised map and does not address the issues relevant to people living in the plains of Nepal bordering Indian States of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, **Madhesi opposition is unlikely to significantly alter the outcome as the Nepal Communist Party of Prime Minister Oli can get the amendment passed easily with the support of the NC**, led by former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. The map once constitutionally guaranteed will also figure in textbooks and other state symbols and official documents, currency notes. Experts said **parliament's stamp for the new map will alter the status quo from the Nepalese side and make a future solution difficult**. Nepal has accused India of unilateral actions like building roads in the disputed Kalapani territory. Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali has urged India to withdraw troops from Kalapani-Lipulekh region and restore status quo.

### India, China and Fortifying the Africa Outreach (Harsh V. Pant - Director, Studies at The Observer Research Foundation (ORF) And Professor of International Relations at King's College London. Abhishek Mishra - Junior Fellow At ORF, New Delhi)

- The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great leveller across the world. But its effects stand to be devastating particularly in Africa, where economic and public health conditions are extremely vulnerable. Although African countries moved quickly to curb the initial spread, they are still woefully ill-equipped to cope with a public health emergency of such magnitude due to shortages of masks, ventilators, and even basic necessities such as soap and water. Such conditions have meant that Africa's cycle of chronic external aid dependence continues. Africa needs medical protective equipment and gear to support its front-line public health workers. As Asia's two largest economies and long-standing partners of Africa, India and China have increased their outreach to Africa through medical assistance. Their efforts are directed to fill a part of the growing African need at a time when not many others have stepped in to help.

### Beijing's Donation Diplomacy

China, being Africa's largest trading partner, was quick to signal its intent to help Africa cope with the pandemic. It despatched medical protective equipment, testing kits, ventilators, and medical masks to several African countries. **The primary motive of such donations has been to raise Beijing's profile as a leading provider of humanitarian assistance and "public goods" in the global public health sector**. China's billionaire philanthropy was also in full display when tech founder Jack Ma donated three rounds of anti-coronavirus supplies. These consignments were transported mostly by Ethiopian aircraft. Chinese embassies across Africa have taken the lead by coordinating both public and private donations to local stakeholders and have also embarked on a donation blitz of cash even as the sub-optimal quality of China's medical





supplies and its deputing of medical experts have been a major cause for concern. Beijing's 'donation diplomacy' in Africa aims to achieve three immediate objectives: shift the focus away from talking about the origins of the virus in Wuhan, build goodwill overseas, and establish an image makeover. For the most part, it succeeded in achieving these ends until China faced widespread backlash over the ill-treatment of African nationals in Guangzhou city. The issue quickly grew into a full-blown political crisis for Beijing. But for the most part, China has been successful in controlling the Guangzhou narrative due to the depth of its political influence in Africa. It is no secret that China relies heavily on diplomatic support and cooperation from African countries on key issues in multilateral fora. For example, Beijing used African support for securing a win for Chinese candidates as the head of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and in the World Health Organization (WHO). On Africa's part, the problem lies in the deep disjuncture and credibility gap between Africa's governing class, the people, the media and civil society. Even when criticisms have been levelled against Chinese indiscretions, it has hardly ever surfaced at the elite level. Overall, China's donation diplomacy towards Africa during COVID-19 has received mixed reactions, but Beijing's advantage lies in its economic heft and political influence in Africa.

### New Delhi's Focus

For India, the pandemic presents an opportunity to demonstrate its willingness and capacity to shoulder more responsibility. The fact that even with limited resources, India can fight the virus at home while reaching out to developing countries in need is testament to India's status as a responsible and reliable global stakeholder. Nowhere has India's developmental outreach been more evident than in Africa with the continent occupying a central place in Indian government's foreign and economic policy in the last six years. Africa has been the focus of India's development assistance and also diplomatic outreach, as evident in plans to open 18 new embassies. These efforts have been supplemented by an improved record of Indian project implementation in Africa. India's role as 'the pharmacy of the world', as the supplier of low-cost, generic medicines is widely acknowledged. Pharmaceutical products along with refined petroleum products account for 40% of India's total exports to African markets. India is sending consignments of essential medicines, including hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and paracetamol, to 25 African countries in addition to doctors and paramedics at a total cost of around ₹600 million (\$7.9 million) on a commercial and grant basis. The initial beneficiaries were the African Indian Ocean island nations of Mauritius, the Seychelles, Comoros, and Madagascar under India's 'Mission Sagar'. While transportation and logistics remain a concern, most of the consignments have already reached various African states. A timely initiative has been the e-ITEC COVID-19 management strategies training webinars exclusively aimed at training health-care professionals from Africa and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations and sharing of best practices by Indian health experts. Nigeria, Kenya, Mauritius, and Namibia have been beneficiaries. Across Africa, there is a keen interest to understand the developments and best practices in India because the two share similar socioeconomic and developmental challenges. There is also growing interest in research and development in drugs and vaccines. A few African countries such as Mauritius are pushing for health-care partnerships in traditional medicines and Ayurveda for boosting immunity. The Indian community, especially in East African countries, has also been playing a crucial role in helping spread awareness. Prominent Indian businessmen and companies in Nigeria and Kenya have donated money to the respective national emergency response funds. Country-specific chapters of gurdwaras and temples have fed thousands of families by setting up community kitchens, helplines for seniors and distributing disinfectants and sanitisers.



### The Contrasts

Both India and China, through their respective health and donation diplomacy, are vying to carve a space and position for themselves as reliable partners of Africa in its time of need. Burnishing their credentials as humanitarian champions is the name of the game. But there are significant differences in the approaches. For China, three aspects are critical: money, political influence and elite level wealth creation; strong state-to-state relations as opposed to people-to-people ties; and hard-infrastructure projects and resource extraction. India's approach on the other hand is one that focuses on building local capacities and an equal partnership with Africans and not merely with African elites concerned. As these two powers rise in Africa, their two distinct models will come under even greater scrutiny. And both New Delhi and Beijing might find that they need to adapt to the rising aspirations of the African continent.

### India Slams Defacement of Rock Carvings in Gilgit-Baltistan

- India has reacted strongly to reports of vandalism and defacement of ancient Buddhist rock carvings in Gilgit-Baltistan under Pakistan's control. Official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, Anurag Srivastava, said the incidents, which happened in an area known for its Buddhist carvings, shows Pakistan is dismantling the "invaluable Indian Buddhist heritage" there. "It is a grave concern that the Buddhist symbols are being destroyed and the religious and cultural rights and freedoms are being trampled with impunity in the Indian territories under illegal occupation of Pakistan," said Mr. Srivastava. The statement has brought into focus the rich Buddhist heritage of the region found in the rock carvings and engravings, especially in areas like Hunza, which were part of the Buddhist circle covering Ladakh and Tibet. The engravings have been in news recently also because of the Diamar-Bhasha hydro power project that the Chinese and the Pakistani companies will construct nearby, as locals have opposed it, claiming it may endanger the heritage.

### What's The G-7 Group, In Which Trump Says He Wants to Include India

- Calling the existing Group of Seven (G-7) club a "very outdated group of countries", US President Donald Trump said on Saturday that he wanted to include India, Russia, South Korea, and Australia in the group; although it was unclear whether he wanted the expansion to be permanent. Trump has also deferred this year's summit, the 46<sup>th</sup> G-7, saying, "I'm postponing it because I don't feel that as a G7 it properly represents what's going on in the world." The summit was scheduled to be held through June 10-12 at Camp David in the US. Last year, the G-7 summit was held on August 24-26 at Biarritz in southwestern France, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was invited to attend as a special guest of French President Emmanuel Macron.

### The Group Of 7

The G-7 or 'Group of Seven' are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It is an intergovernmental organisation that was formed in 1975 by the top economies of the time as an informal forum to discuss pressing world issues. Canada joined the group in 1976, and the European Union began attending in 1977. Initially formed as an effort by the US and its allies to discuss economic issues, the G-7 forum has deliberated about several challenges over the decades, such as the oil crashes of the 1970s, the economic changeover of ex-Soviet bloc nations, and many pressing issues such as financial crises, terrorism, arms control, and drug trafficking. The G-7 was known as the 'G-8' for several years after the original seven were joined by Russia in 1997. The Group returned to being called G-7 after Russia was expelled as a member in 2014 following the latter's annexation of the Crimea



region of Ukraine. Since his election in 2016, President Trump has suggested on several occasions that Russia be added again, given what he described as Moscow's global strategic importance. The G-7 does not have a formal constitution or a fixed headquarters. The decisions taken by leaders during annual summits are non-binding. The rise of India, China, and Brazil over the past few decades has reduced the G-7's relevance, whose share in global GDP has now fallen to around 40%.

### How The G-7 Summit Works

The G-7 nations meet at annual summits that are presided over by leaders of member countries on a rotational basis. The summit is an informal gathering that lasts two days, in which leaders of member countries discuss a wide range of global issues. The host country typically gets to invite dignitaries from outside the G-7 to attend the Summit. The groundwork for the summit, including matters to be discussed and follow-up meetings, is done by the "sherpas", who are generally personal representatives or members of diplomatic staff such as ambassadors. The sherpa for Prime Minister Modi at last year's summit was former Union Minister Suresh Prabhu.

### G-7 And G-20

The G-20 is a larger group of countries, which also includes G7 members. The G-20 was formed in 1999, in response to a felt need to bring more countries on board to address global economic concerns. Apart from the G-7 countries, the G-20 comprises Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey. Together, the G-20 countries make up around 80% of the world's economy. As opposed to the G-7, which discusses a broad range of issues, deliberations at the G-20 are confined to those concerning the global economy and financial markets. India is slated to host a G-20 summit in 2022.

- The postponement was welcomed by Mr. Modi, who commended Mr. Trump for his "creative and far-sighted" decision to expand the format of the grouping to keep up with the new realities of the "post-COVID world". Australia and South Korea have also welcomed the invitation, while Russia, that lost its membership of the grouping in 2014 over its annexation of Crimea, said President Putin would attend "if treated as an equal". Notable by its absence in the proposed grouping is China, which had earlier, along with India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, been invited regularly to G-8 summits as an outreach by the developed world to the five emerging economies (called the G-8+5). U.S.-China tensions, particularly over coronavirus issues, clearly played a part in Mr. Trump's decision to leave Chinese President Xi Jinping off his summit guest list. A White House spokesperson even explained that the G-11 would be a way for the U.S. to bring together its "traditional allies to talk about how to deal with the future of China". Predictably, Beijing has lashed out at the G-11 idea, as one that would be "doomed to fail".
- The proposed G-11 grouping would recognise India's place amongst the world's richest nations, and acknowledge its global voice. However, the government must weigh the benefits proposed along with some of the factors that are still unclear. As host, Mr. Trump can invite any country as a G-7 special invitee, but changing its composition will require the approval of the other members. Already, there are some concerns over Russia, which could derail the entire G-11 plan, making any concrete decision by New Delhi on the issue premature. It is unclear when the summit will actually be held, given the November polls in the U.S., although Mr. Trump has indicated that he could hold it close to the UN General Assembly session in September. Despite its border tensions with Beijing, India must also consider its objectives in attending a grouping that appears aimed at fuelling a new Cold War between the U.S. and China. Finally, an evaluation of the G-7's effectiveness as a multilateral forum thus far is needed, given deep member differences on issues including climate change, security



contributions, Iran, etc. In France, last year, the grouping was unable to issue a joint communiqué due to these differences – a first in its 45-year-old history.

## Nation

### Killing Gajah

- An outpouring of grief has followed the death of a pregnant elephant in Kerala, the treacherous use of a food bomb causing widespread revulsion and anger. Scores of elephants are killed every year in India as their paths cross those of humans, but the image of a mortally wounded animal standing impassively in a river in Palakkad as life ebbed out of it will remain imprinted on the mind. Whether the booby-trapped pineapple that took its life was intended for elephants or other animals matters little, because such traps litter the troubled landscapes that surround forests across the country. The tragic fate that befell this creature, however, is a ghastly reminder of the rising conflicts between humans and animals that are only destined to grow as commercial pressures eat into already diminished habitat. The perpetrators may be prosecuted for the elephant's death, but that can do little to mitigate the larger issue of lost ranges and blocked corridors for these wandering giants. India has thousands of elephants – just under 30,000 according to available counts – but no strong science-imbued policy that encourages soft landscapes and migrating passages that will reduce conflict. Ironically, **Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar invoked Indian culture to deplore what happened in Kerala, but it is the lack of a scientific culture and the readiness to spare forested lands from commercial exploitation that is eviscerating nature.** Even during the lockdown in April, the Ministry convened video conference meetings of the National Board for Wildlife and the Expert Appraisal Committee to clear disruptive projects in protected areas. Shrinking ranges and feeding grounds for elephants cause serious worry, because the animals look for soft landscapes adjoining forests such as coffee, tea and cardamom estates, and in the absence of these, wander into food-rich farms falling in their movement pathways. Research in Karnataka showed that 60% of elephant distribution was encountered outside protected areas. In Kerala, such movement along human-dominated landscapes routinely produces conflict. Unsurprisingly, **politicians of many hues in the State were opposed to the Madhav Gadgil Committee Report calling for the entire Western Ghats to be classified as ecologically sensitive and spared of destructive development.** With such fundamental philosophical disagreement, and a vision of verdant landscapes as nothing more than a resource to be exploited for minerals and cash crops, elephants and other creatures have little chance of escaping deadly conflict. A sensible course open to conservation-minded governments is to end all intrusion into the 5% of protected habitat in India, and draw up better compensation schemes for farmers who lose crops to animals. A culture shift to protect, rather than prospect, would genuinely enrich people and save biodiversity.



## A Week in Which A Reporter and The Solicitor General Failed

→ On May 28, during the Supreme Court hearing of the *Suo motu* case regarding the plight of migrant labourers, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta referred to journalists as “vultures”, “prophets of doom”, and “armchair intellectuals”. Apart from making these stunning observations, he also gave a terribly skewed picture of the celebrated photojournalist, Kevin Carter. Carter documented Apartheid excesses in South Africa and the famine in different parts of the continent, among other things. Instead of looking at credible sources of information to understand Carter’s contributions to journalism, his moral and ethical dilemmas, and his trauma of covering tragedy after tragedy in Africa, Mr. Mehta chose to borrow from a WhatsApp forward about the photojournalist. Fact-checking organisations such as AltNews exposed how the Solicitor General cited a false WhatsApp forward as a fact in the apex court. Mr. Mehta should know that journalism has three inalienable components: bearing witness, empathy or humanity, and holding power to account. Photojournalism is one of the finest tools to bear witness because it brings home the cruel nature of our reality, shakes a society out of its deep slumber, and forces those in power to act and redeem themselves. In fact, the *Suo motu* case regarding the plight of India’s migrant workers would not have happened if photojournalists were not witness to their long and painful journey.



→ Mr. Mehta’s aspersion pales in comparison to Gen. (Retd) V.K. Singh’s ‘presstitute’ disparagement. Yet, again, it is not the personal inclination of a law officer or a cabinet minister that should detain us for too long; rather, it is the collective sentiment of the regime he represents that needs to be scrutinised by every democratic soul. Let there be no mistake. A cultivated mindset is at work. It seeks legitimacy for itself from the paraphernalia of an elective democracy but uses the democratic mandate to chisel away at the core of democratic arrangement. It is simply loathing to give answers or explanations of any kind to anyone.

### Blunted Institutions

It is hardly a secret that these last six years, the Modi regime has quietly but diligently and systematically made dysfunctional – without dismantling – all the established institutions designed to prevent abuse of authority. Offices such as the Central Vigilance Commission, the Lokpal, the Central Information Commission, the National Human Rights Commission, India, the Election Commission of India, etc. have been rendered less than paper tigers. With considerable finesse and with admirable street-smartness, the regime has seen to it that no Vinod Rai would be allowed to strike out on his/her own. The Modi crowd believes, sincerely and righteously, in the correctness of its chosen path; it mesmerises itself with the notions of integrity and commitment of its personnel and leaders and their infinite wisdom. It resents democratic opposition. Not surprisingly, such a regime sees no need to lend an ear to the ‘vultures’ in the media or the non-governmental organisations.

### The Migrant Issue

In its determined preference to strike continuously a pose of decisiveness and bold leadership, the incumbent regime not only failed to anticipate the consequences of its sudden, abrupt and panicky lockdown decision; it also refused to see the millions of half-starved citizens trekking



back to the safety and security of their villages. It was perhaps with a clear conscience that the Solicitor General could tell the top court that the government had the migrant issue well under its competent hands. Here is a law officer who had secured from the apex court a kind of carte blanche for his client to carry on with its confused nostrums. Perhaps the Court had felt that given the enormity of the COVID-19 challenge, the government was entitled to make its mistakes and blunders as also to its insensitivity and cynicism. Thanks to persuasive arguments from the Solicitor General, the Hon'ble judges probably felt that it was not their business to take note of immense hardship inflicted on millions of our own citizens. Mr. Mehta had secured for his client a free hand to carry on with its hit and trial experimentations. A tragedy could easily be foretold. A regime which has chosen to deprive itself of genuine sources of information finds itself left high and dry when human misery on an unprecedented scale grips vast swathes of our citizens. Because the regime has developed a considered contempt for the free and independent media, it simply refused to see the images of millions and millions of hapless citizens migrating back to their villages. Confronted with an unexpected crisis of unknown dimensions, the regime righteously resented anyone who pointed out the limits of its sloganized approach to governance.

### When the Court Acted

Then, much to the regime's consternation, suddenly the Supreme Court had allowed itself to be goaded to seek answers from the government for its bureaucratic insensitivity, for its political arrogance, for its policy confusion and its administrative clumsiness. It was this volte-face that probably produced the Solicitor General's famous outburst. It is possible to suggest that Mr. Mehta's anger was directed not so much against the vultures among the journalists as it was an expression of impatience with the highest court. Unspoken resentment was that the Supreme Court was seeking an explanation from the government after lending its ear to those who have no knowledge of the 'ground situation'. But the government would not share information about the 'ground' with anyone. The other day, three professional associations of epidemiologists, public health practitioners and social medicine experts have called out the clumsy and confused decision-making practised by the Leader-driven power structure. Millions have paid a heavy price for the regime's arrogance and incompetence. Yet, the government would not countenance any discussion of its mistakes and missteps. Over the years the regime has used a heavy-handed approach to put its critics in their place. It has brought to bear overwhelming resources, power, prestige and skills to fix its critics, however small or scattered. Neither a Sudha Bhardwaj nor a Gautam Navlakha nor the Pinjra Tod activists in northeast Delhi will be allowed to mobilise dissent and disagreement against the regime. It is this groupthink of intolerance and impatience that was on display in the Supreme Court on May 26. Unlike in the vastly popular Hindi TV-serial, 'Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah', Solicitor General Mehta can be very much said to be using a custom-made pair of spectacles, prescribed by the regime's in-house optometrists.

### Jessica Lall murder case: takeaways from acquittal, conviction and release

- Manu Sharma, now 43, who was serving a life sentence for the 1999 murder of model Jessica Lall, walked out of jail following the Delhi Lieutenant Governor's approval for his premature release, as per recommendations by the Sentence Review Board. A look back at the murder, and the twists and turns during a trial that caught the public imagination:

### Murder & Arrests

Jessica Lall was murdered on April 29, 1999, at a party at Once Upon a Time Restaurant, owned by socialite Bina Ramani, in Delhi's Qutub Colonnade. Lall and Shayan Munshi, an actor, were serving liquor. Manu Sharma, son of former Union Minister and Haryana Congress leader



Vinod Sharma, who was attending the party with friends, asked for two drinks at 2 am. As the party was over, he was refused. Following an argument, he took out his pistol and fired one shot at the roof and another at Lall, which hit her near the left eye, and fled. Lall was declared dead in hospital in the early hours of April 30. Mehrauli police station had registered a FIR at 4 am, after recording Munshi's statement. The police seized two empty cartridges and found that a black Tata Safari was missing from the party. The Tata Safari was seized from UP police on May 2. Three days later, the police arrested Amardeep Singh aka Tony Gill and Alok Khanna. Following their statements, police reached out to Sharma's lawyer; on June 6, Sharma surrendered. The police arrested 10 others including a UP politician's son, Vikas Yadav.

- Sharma is already out on parole since the first week of April, as part of measures to decongest jails to ensure social distancing among prisoners. The Delhi government's sentence review board was learnt to have recommended Sharma's premature release on May 11. His case had come up for review multiple times since 2017, only to be rejected. The board is chaired by the Delhi Home Minister, and committee members include Director General (Prisons), Principal Secretary (Home), Principal Secretary (Law), Joint Commissioner of Police (Crime), the government's chief probation officer and a district judge. **An application for remission is considered only when a life convict has spent 14 years in jail.** The board takes into account **several factors, such as the conduct of the prisoner in jail, whether the crime was premeditated or a spur of the moment act, nature and gravity of the crime, propensity for committing the crime, prospects of post-release rehabilitation etc.**

In April 2018, Jessica Lall's sister Sabrina said she had forgiven Sharma and wouldn't object to his release from Tihar jail, where he had been serving life term since 2006. In a letter to the welfare office of Tihar jail, Sabrina had mentioned that she had no objection to the release of Siddharth Vashishta alias Manu Sharma, as he had spent 15 years in prison.

### What Is Inner Line Permit, What Is Its CAA Context?

- The Supreme Court declined to stay the operation of a Presidential order which petitioners claimed deprived Assam of the powers to implement the Inner Line system in its districts and limit the applicability of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

#### What Is Inner Line?

A concept drawn by colonial rulers; the Inner Line separated the tribal-populated hill areas in the Northeast from the plains. To enter and stay for any period in these areas, Indian citizens from other areas need an Inner Line Permit (ILP). **Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram are protected by the Inner Line, and lately Manipur was added.** The concept originates from the **Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act (BEFR), 1873.** "The policy of exclusion first came about as a response to the reckless expansion of British entrepreneurs into new lands which threatened British political relations with the hill tribes," wrote the political scientist Sanjib Baruah in his book *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. The BEFR prohibits an outsider's — "British subject or foreign citizen" — entry into the area beyond the Inner Line without a pass and his purchase of land there. On the other hand, **the Inner Line also protects the commercial interests of the British from the tribal communities.** After Independence, the Indian government replaced "British subjects" with "Citizen of India". In 2013, the Home Ministry told Rajya Saha, "The main aim of ILP system is to prevent settlement of other Indian nationals in the States where ILP regime is prevalent, in order to protect the indigenous/tribal population."



### How Is It Connected to The Citizenship Amendment Act?

The CAA, which relaxes eligibility criteria for certain categories of migrants from three countries seeking Indian citizenship, exempts certain categories of areas, including those protected by the Inner Line system. Amid protests against the Act, the Adaptation of Laws (Amendment) Order, 2019, issued by the President, amended the BEFR, 1873, extending it to Manipur and parts of Nagaland that were not earlier protected by ILP.

### What Is the Petition?

The influential Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) and All Tai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU) petitioned the Supreme Court against the Presidential order. Noting that **the original BEFR included the then Assam districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong (now Nagaon), Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, and Cachar, the petition said the order took away the Assam government's permissive power to implement the ILP. This could have made the CAA inapplicable in these areas**, the petition said. Groups such as the AJYCP have long been campaigning for long for implementation of the ILP in Assam. The CAA has given fresh legs to the demand. Lurinjoyoti Gogoi, general secretary of the All Assam Students' Union, says protests against the CAA in Assam will continue.

### What Does the SC Order Imply?

The petition had sought a stay on the Presidential order, which the Supreme Court did not grant. The court said it will have to hear what the other side (government) has to say on the matter. It will hear the matter again in two weeks.

### PM CARES Not Within the Ambit of RTI Act

- The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has refused to disclose details on the creation and operation of the PM CARES Fund, telling an RTI applicant that the fund is **"not a public authority"** within the ambit of the RTI Act, 2005. The Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund accepts donations and provides relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, and other similar emergencies. Sri Harsha Kandukuri, a law student, filed an RTI request on April 1, asking the PMO to provide the Fund's trust deed and all government orders, notifications and circulars relating to its creation and operation. "PM CARES Fund is not a Public Authority under the ambit of Section 2(h) of the RTI Act, 2005. However, relevant information in respect of PM CARES Fund may be seen on the Website [pmcares.gov.in](http://pmcares.gov.in)," the reply said. Another RTI request on the issue, filed by activist Vikrant Togad, had also been refused in April citing a Supreme Court (SC) observation that "indiscriminate and impractical demands under RTI Act for disclosure of all and sundry information would be counterproductive".

### India's Parliament Is Missing in Action (M.R. Madhavan - President of The PRS

#### Legislative Research, New Delhi)

- Parliaments in democracies around the world are meeting and questioning their governments on their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Canadian Parliament had its first lockdown meeting towards the end of April, with roughly 280 of the 338 Members of Parliament attending through video conference and questioning the government for three hours. The British Parliament has adopted a hybrid model of in-person and video attendance. Several other countries have held sessions either with physical distancing (fewer MPs attend with agreement across parties) or video conferencing or a combination of the two. These include France, Italy, Argentina, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand. Many others are convening their





committees through video-conferencing. The Inter Parliamentary Union has documented the processes used by various national parliaments to meet during the pandemic. India's Parliament, which prides itself as the apex representative body of the world's largest democracy, is a notable absentee from this list. Parliament has a central role in our system of governance. First and foremost, **it is the institution that checks and challenges the government of the day**. While introducing the draft Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar explained why the drafting committee had preferred a parliamentary form over the presidential system of governance. **The reasoning was that while the presidential system provides a higher level of stability, the parliamentary system is better at holding the government to account on a daily basis through questions, motions and debates**. Over the decades, our Parliament has evolved procedures of accountability including hearings of committees. The fact that Parliament and its committees have not met for over two months indicates the absence of scrutiny of government actions. National laws are made by Parliament. The current steps by the central government are being taken under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, which was not designed to handle epidemics. The reasoning is that the central government had no choice as there was no other law that provide it with powers to impose a lockdown across the country, which was needed to arrest the spread of the disease. This misses the point that Parliament, which was meeting till a day before the national lockdown was announced, could have passed an appropriate Act. This is what many other countries have done – an Act with suitable checks and an expiry date, which could be renewed by Parliament, if required. The Constitution requires all expenditure by the government to be approved by Parliament. The government has announced a series of measures to address the economic crisis sparked by the health crisis and the lockdown. These have not been subject to parliamentary scrutiny or approval.

### The Pressing Issues

MPs have a duty to shape policy and guide the government in national interest. They represent the concerns of people by raising issues in Parliament. The country is facing serious challenges on many fronts as a consequence of the pandemic. These include addressing questions on how to stall the epidemic from spreading, how to treat people who are infected, and how to minimise the loss of life to the virus. There is also the question of how the economy is impacted, both from the supply side due to the lockdown, and from the demand side as incomes and spending contract. Then there is the large humanitarian question of mitigating the impact on the most vulnerable sections of the population, both the urban poor and in rural areas. There have been several news reports of migrants being mistreated, not provided transport, being harassed by the police – and being stripped of their dignity, even in cases where they have been provided with food and shelter. There needs to be concerted action to alleviate the distress. Parliament is the forum where such issues should be discussed and a plan of action agreed upon. **Our Constitution does not prohibit meetings that may require maintenance of physical distancing or remote meetings. It states that the President may summon Parliament "to meet at such time and place as he thinks fit". The Rules of Procedure of both Houses require the Secretary-General to issue summons to each member specifying the "date and place for a session" of the House. These enabling clauses can be used to hold hybrid meetings or remote meetings. The Rules require parliamentary committees to sit within the "precincts" of the House but the Speaker may permit meetings to be held outside; indeed, subcommittees often go on study tours outside Delhi.** Thus, there is no prior parliamentary action required to permit meetings through video-conferencing.

### Secure Connectivity

The question of security and secrecy may come up. The meetings of the Houses are usually telecast live, and there is no issue of confidentiality. Committee meetings, on the other hand, may require secure remote working tools. Given that large global corporations as well as



parliamentary committees of several other countries seem to have solved this problem, there is no reason that the Indian Parliament cannot adapt these solutions. All district headquarters are linked with fibre optic lines, so even if there is a problem of connecting the constituency office of MPs, they could use such government facilities. The question boils down to how our parliamentarians view themselves. If they think that they are sentinels of the people, they should find a way to perform their constitutional duties. Over the last three months, central and State governments have issued over 5,000 notifications to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The appropriateness of these circulars needs to be examined by Parliament and its committees. In ordinary times, Parliament would have its next session in the second half of July. In today's extraordinary circumstances, Parliament should meet sooner, perhaps within a couple of weeks. India prides itself on being the world's largest democracy as well as the information technology provider to the world. It is imperative that Parliament harnesses the country's IT strengths to buttress our credentials as a performing democracy.

- The Rajya Sabha Secretariat has denied permission for members of the Standing Committee on Home Affairs to join a meeting of the panel through videoconference. The same was conveyed to committee chairperson and Congress leader Anand Sharma by the office of House Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu. The meeting, scheduled for June 3, is slated to discuss the "situation arising out of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 outbreak and its handling by the Ministry". Mr. Sharma told The Hindu, "It is most unfortunate. If the Prime Minister of India can have summits with leader of other countries, with Chief Ministers via videoconference, if the Rajasthan Assembly could have a virtual session, then why not allow the Indian Parliamentarians to use it? After all we are supposed to be an IT [information Technology] super power." DMK MP and former IT Minister Dayanidhi Maran, a member of the panel, has written a letter to Mr. Sharma expressing concern over members being asked to travel to Delhi to attend the meeting. "If I travel to Delhi, not only would I be exposing myself to the COVID-19 virus, but I would also be forced to enter into quarantine or isolation for a 14-day period on return to Chennai as per the current SOP, which would affect my parliamentary duties in my constituency," he wrote. A call will be taken, after speaking to all the members, whether to hold a meeting as scheduled or not, Mr. Sharma said. Sources said both Houses were exploring the possibility of using videoconference. The rules dictated that parliamentary committee meetings were confidential. The reason videoconference meetings were not being allowed was because it violated the principle of confidentiality, as there was no guarantee of a member sitting alone at such events, the sources said.

### Monumental Hurry

- The Narendra Modi government is so possessed by its plan to redevelop the **Central Vista**, the **3-km long stretch from Rashtrapati Bhavan to India Gate**, that even a devastating pandemic is no distraction from it. In fact, amid the nation's chaotic battle against COVID-19, the Centre has been rushing ahead, ignoring pleas to pause it for further **deliberations**. **The plan is also to construct a new Parliament building by March 2022 and a common central secretariat by March 2024 along with new residences for the Prime Minister and the Vice President near South and North Blocks which will be repurposed as museums. There will be a new building for the PMO.** A draft master plan by a private firm contracted by the government has proposed a triangular-shaped Parliament building next to the existing heritage structure, and office buildings all along Rajpath, after demolishing existing buildings. Till date, the government has not publicly stated the project's estimated cost. The construction of the new parliament building, according to the CPWD application for environmental clearance for the project on March 12, is estimated to cost ₹922 crore. **The Centre has given a range of reasons behind the redevelopment plan, from the structural safety of the Parliament building and the North and South Blocks, which came up between 1911 and 1931, and once delimitation is done and the**



number of seats increase, to the need for more space to seat MPs and office space for all of them. For the post-Independence buildings such as Shastri Bhawan and Krishi Bhawan, it has cited the need for modern workspaces.

The decision on redevelopment was taken in a hurry and without adequate consultations. The utility of such a massive redevelopment is not easily defensible but the Modi government is evidently eager to recondition the capital's landscape as its monumental legacy. The Opposition, environmentalists, architects and citizens have raised a range of concerns even before the pandemic brought in additional issues. But far from pausing, several key approvals for the proposed Parliament building have been pushed during the lockdown, leading to allegations of a lack of transparency. Independent expert members of the Central Vista Committee could not attend the meeting where it was passed without much discussion, as per the minutes of the meeting. The process for change of land use by the Delhi Development Authority was completed just before the lockdown began on March 25. **Activists and architects have questioned the lack of studies to ascertain the need for the project and its impact on the environment, traffic and pollution.** There were enough reasons to be circumspect about this grand idea from the very beginning. In the situation created by the pandemic, it must be deferred and the idea revisited later.

### Jammu, The Pawn on The Kashmir Chessboard (Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal - Executive Editor, Kashmir Times)

- Much of Jammu may not share Kashmir's anxieties of a demographic change. However, Jammu's youth are worried that they may lose their jobs and educational seats to the new 'domiciles'. **With the Agrarian Reforms Act abolished – it defined land ownership and fixed the ceiling area at 121/2 standard acres – the doors have been opened for all Indian citizens triggering worries of the entry of real estate sharks and investments by companies with deep pockets, thereby upsetting the existing economy of Jammu and damaging the ecology.** While business investments from outside could boost employment, the existing units operating on a temporary lease basis do not instil confidence as they have offered limited jobs for locals, most often on contractual basis. The exact number of people who are likely to benefit from the new domicile law in terms of jobs is unknown. According to the domicile law, anyone who has resided in J&K for 15 years or has studied there for seven years will get the domicile right. The benefits would also be extended to children of all central government employees who have served for "a total of ten years", not necessarily a continuous period. Jammu's anxieties are more pronounced. First, most settlers who could gain immediate benefits are based there. These include about two lakh West Pakistan refugees, over 300 families of sanitation workers, and, more importantly 29 lakh migrant workers, many living in J&K for decades. **Higher wages and free school education made J&K an attractive hub for them. Jammu's geographical, cultural and religious proximity with the Indian heartland also makes it a more lucrative destination for those who would like to avail themselves of the domicile rights or make investments.** Third, the absence of a violent conflict offers a salubrious climate for settlement, unlike in the Valley. Jammu's high potential for prospective settlers engenders fears of a large-scale scavenger hunt for business opportunities, land purchase and jobs by outsiders.

### Triple Impact

A hub of trade, Jammu's business has flourished in the last seven decades due to pilgrimage tourism and interdependence with the Kashmir region. While the latter will receive a major setback due to the economic slump in the Valley as well as the embitterment of Kashmir's business circles with the political positioning of Jammu's traders, investments from outside do not quite induce the confidence of employment or inclusiveness.



Another fear is of Dogra culture facing extinction. Jammu's Hindu belt, despite its brush with Hindutva politics, has been the most cosmopolitan part of J&K. Its greatest strength has been the ability to assimilate many cultures and the influx of people from other parts of the State due to economic reasons and conflict. But that appears to have reached a saturation point, and threats to the Dogra identity are not unfounded. Politically, Jammu is unlikely to gain. **If a delimitation of electoral constituencies is done on the basis of area, and not population alone, and the 25 Assembly segments reserved for Pakistan Administered Kashmir (PAK), laying vacant since the 1950s, are filled up with PAK refugees as is being speculated, Jammu's fattened share at the expense of the Kashmir Valley is a possibility. That may enhance the likelihood of J&K getting its first Hindu Chief Minister. The BJP's integration project may spring an unpleasant surprise for the people of Jammu if the likely choice for the post turns out to be an outsider. At best, more constituencies and a Hindu Chief Minister could make it a symbolic victory for Jammu.** Jammu has long suffered in terms of a political vacuum, which has also deepened the sense of discrimination. Its political significance in national politics has been only to serve as a prop in the hands of New Delhi to counter the Kashmir narrative or to strengthen integrationist politics. Now, with the administrative project of integration achieved and Kashmir's politics stepping down into virtual servitude, Jammu's political worth has further diminished.

## Deccan Queen: Why Pune Celebrates A Train's Birthday

- The historic Deccan Queen train between Mumbai and Pune completed 90 years on June 1. Probably the only train to have its birthday celebrated, the Deccan Queen's 'fans' and commuters in Pune marked the occasion in absentia, as the train continues to be stranded in Mumbai due to the ongoing lockdown. **This train holds many a record, including that of being India's first superfast train, first long-distance electric-hauled train, first vestibule train, the first train to have a 'women-only' car, and the first train to feature a dining car.** The train's commuters celebrate its birthday on June 1 every year at Pune railway station.

### The Deccan Queen

As per a Ministry of Railways press release from March, the **Deccan Queen was introduced between Mumbai and Pune on June 1, 1930 by the Great Indian Peninsula Railway (GIPR), the forerunner of the Central Railway.** This was the first deluxe train introduced to serve the two important cities of the region, and was **named after Pune – also known as the "Queen of Deccan" ("Dakkhan ki Rani" in Hindi).** The Deccan Queen in its starting years operated only over the weekends, and became a daily train between the two cities in the 1940s, according to the book 'Indian Railways: The Weaving of a National Tapestry' by Bibek Debroy, Sanjay Chadha, Vidya Krishnamurthy. **It is among the rare Indian trains that has never been hauled using steam traction, and was always electric-powered; on rare instances running on diesel.** The train became popular as a faster alternative to the Poona Mail, which required 6 hours to complete the Mumbai-Pune journey. The GIPR in the 1940s would run Race Special trains for Mumbai's horse racing enthusiasts who would come to Pune on weekends and race days. Initially, the train was introduced with two rakes of seven coaches each, painted in silver with scarlet mouldings, and the other with royal blue with gold lines. The under frames of the coaches of the original rakes were built in England while the coach bodies were built in the Matunga Workshop of the GIPR. The coaches of the original rakes were replaced in 1966 by anti-telescopic steel-bodied integral coaches built by Integral Coach Factory, Perambur. The new coaches incorporated improved bogie design for better riding comfort as well as improvements in the interior furnishings and fittings. The number of coaches in the rake was also increased to 12 from the original seven. In 1995, the rake was changed, further increasing the seating capacity and improving the pantry facilities. Over the years, the number of coaches



in the train has been increased to the present level of 17 coaches – 4 AC chair cars, one buffet Car, ten second class chair cars and two second class cum brake vans. In March this year, the Central Railway decided to give the train a makeover by upgrading its coaches to German-made LHB coaches, which have better safety features, better suspension system and better riding comfort.

## Why Is the Locust Surge Posing A Threat to Agriculture in India?

- Experts have warned of huge crop losses if the swarms are not stopped by June when the monsoons will lead to a new season of sowing rice, sugarcane, cotton and other crops.

### When Was the Last Big Outbreak?

The last big infestation was in 2010. There were 13 locust plagues between 1964 and 1997. From 1997 to 2010, there were five outbreaks that were controlled. From 2010 to 2018, there were no major swarms or breeding reported, according to the Locust Warning Organization (LWO), in Jodhpur. In 2019, Gujarat and Rajasthan reported a significant surge in locust infestations. Nearly 3.5 lakh hectares of cumin, rapeseed and mustard were damaged and officials had then said that it was the worst attack since 1993. This was partly due to an unusually long monsoon but also because pest-control operations were inadequate; therefore, nascent populations of the insect had not been wiped out.

### Who Keeps an Eye on The Locusts?

As a result of the 1926-1931/1932 locust plague, India, under the British Raj at the time, began research into the desert locust, beginning in 1931. It then led to the establishment, in 1939, of a permanent Locust Warning Organization (LWO), with a station in Karachi (undivided India). Its main job was to keep an eye for a specific sub-species of the insect, the desert locust, that sprang into the region from the Thar desert. There is a wealth of scientific and newspaper reports that point to locust attacks being a major scourge to the colonial administration and hence the references to it as a “plague” which is how they continue to be recorded to the present. There were serious outbreaks in 1812, 1821, 1843-44, 1863-67, 1869-73, 1876-81, 1889-98, 1900-1907, 1912-1920. A particularly bad season in 1926-1931 prompted the imperial administration to establish the Karachi warning centre and after Independence, India established its own centre at Jodhpur, Rajasthan, as a part of the Directorate of Plant Protection Quarantine and Storage, under the Ministry of Agriculture.

### What Is the Climate Link to The Infestation?

A pattern of warming in the Indian Ocean may be a trigger. A phenomenon called the Indian Ocean Dipole, in which the western and eastern parts of the ocean, warm differentially, tend to have an outsized impact in bringing excessive rains to India and West Asia. A ‘positive’ dipole is when the western part is hotter by a degree or more than the eastern. Last year saw one of the strongest positive dipoles in the Indian neighbourhood which brought on a difference of more than two degrees. The Indian Ocean Dipole was so strong that it over-rode concerns of a drought in India last June and brought torrential rainfall – the most India has seen in decades. It also lasted nearly a month more than what is normal. This extended rainfall continued in several parts of West Asia, Oman, Yemen and in the Horn of Africa – Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya – so much so that that the dry sand became heavily moisture laden, facilitating the formation of several locust swarms. While this dipole was beginning to take shape by late 2018 – and locust outbreaks were growing in Africa – it increased last year. Due to favourable winds, it helped swarms to fly and breed in traditional grounds in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a specialised agency of the United Nations has been sending alerts on developing swarms. Somalia announced a national state



of emergency due to the outbreak in February 2020, while Pakistan declared a national emergency for the second time this year, in April. The unusually mild summer this year, which saw several bouts of rainfall over north and western India from March to May, also helped the insects breed. The normal locust season in India spans June-November and coincides with the kharif season. So far swarms have been recorded in nearly 50,000 hectares in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and if they continue to thrive as the monsoon arrives, it could cause serious agricultural damage.

### How Are Locust Invasions Dealt With?

A locust attack has to be dealt with by spraying pest control and plant protection chemicals. According to the FAO's locust situation bulletin of May 27, adult locusts were forming groups and small swarms in spring breeding areas in Baluchistan, Indus Valley (Pakistan) and southern coast and parts of Sistan-Baluchistan. These infestations are likely to move to the summer breeding areas along India-Pakistan from Cholistan to Tharparkar. In India, existing groups of swarms have continued to move east and to the central States of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Much of these movements were associated with the **strong westerly winds of Cyclone Amphan**. Several successive waves of invasions are likely until July in Rajasthan, with eastward surges across northern India as far as Bihar and Odisha followed by westward movements and a return to Rajasthan on the changing winds associated with the monsoon. **These movements will cease as swarms begin to become less mobile. The swarms are less likely to reach Nepal, and Bangladesh and south India, according to experts.**

### Is Adequate Action Being Taken?

Indian officials, last year and this year too, have blamed Pakistan for not spraying adequate pesticide to stem the nascent population. It has been part of the protocol for many years, for entomologists from India and Pakistan to conduct border meetings and divide pest control responsibilities. While the lack of funds and inadequate monitoring have been a problem for many years, as the FAO has frequently pointed out, the novel coronavirus pandemic this year has caused unusual focus on natural disasters such as cyclones as well as locust attacks. While locusts are unlikely to be a threat in urban centres as they do not have much to feed on, the national lockdown has made the availability of pesticide as well as its transportation difficult. With labour also not being available easily due to the lockdown, this could affect spraying operations and, as a result, allow locusts to cause significant damage. **Experience shows that a locust plague usually follows a one to two-year cycle after which there is a lull for eight to nine years. However, strong Indian Ocean Dipoles are expected to become more frequent whetted by an overall trend of warming oceans. This phenomenon could trigger regular locust infestations.**

### Bengal's Grand Old Buildings Bear the Brunt of Amphan

- When super cyclone Amphan swept through south Bengal, it not only flattened thousands of houses, but also severely damaged some of its centuries-old heritage structures. **Serampore College, founded 200 years back by William Carey**, a cultural anthropologist who played a significant role in the spread of western education, is one of the damaged buildings. **The Dupleix Palace at Chandannagar, built by French Governor-General Joseph Francois Dupleix, also suffered severe damage.** Another damage listed by the INTACH members is that to the **Hooghly Imambara** constructed between 1841 and 1861. The main structure of an early medieval brick temple, **Jatar Deul, dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE (Current Era) in Namkhana of South 24 Parganas** "has not suffered major damage but the compound and boundary walls have been destroyed," Mr. Majumder said.



### Narrow Escape

In Kolkata, the newly restored Metcalfe Hall has suffered some structural damage, while the Currency Building in city's central business area narrowly escaped when a tree fell a few metres away from the main structure. The **iconic St. Andrew's Church nearby, which dates back to 1818**, also sustained severe damage.

### The Sorrow of Fallen Trees

- There are places that one associates with Calcutta – or Kolkata – but in reality, they are not situated in the city. Take Howrah Station, for example. The red-brick train terminus lies across the River Hooghly in the district of Howrah, and is connected to the city by the iconic Howrah Bridge. Then there is the historic **botanical garden – named after Jagadish Chandra Bose** as recently as in 2009 – which also lies across the river in Howrah. The garden dates back to the time when the British were still traders in India. It was **set up in 1787 – thirty years after Robert Clive won the Battle of Plassey and consolidated East India Company's hold over Bengal – by Robert Kyd, a lieutenant-colonel in the British Army who was known to have a personal interest in horticulture**. In creating the garden, he was driven not so much by nature as by the idea of commercial gain: he wanted to grow plants that would bring money to the company.

### A Botanist's Delight

Kyd died in 1793, aged 47. He had wanted the garden, which had over 4,000 plants by now, to be his final resting place but he was instead buried in Calcutta, at the South Park Street Cemetery. Over the years, the garden grew into a botanist's delight with trees from all corners of the world taking root here. Today, the botanical garden is counting 'dead bodies. On May 20, Cyclone Amphan tore through its 273-acre spread – containing 15,000 plants belonging to 1,300 species – felling hundreds of trees.

Had the cyclone been slightly longer in duration and stronger in force, it would also have wiped out the garden's biggest asset: **The Great Banyan, which predates the establishment of the garden. It survived two cyclones in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in 1925, its decayed main trunk was removed, but it continued to grow**. According to Dr. Das, 15 to 20% of the tree was damaged by Amphan. **Like the African baobab, brought from Madagascar. The tree has a lifespan of 6,000 years and can hold up to 500 litres of water. Then the numerous mahogany trees, some of them brought from the West Indies in 1795 by William Roxburgh, the botanist who, after Kyd's death, moved from Madras to take charge of the garden as its first full-time superintendent. The mahogany trees, when they fell, also crushed several species of bamboo. Amphan's other victims include the 'mad tree', whose leaves were differently shaped from one another, and a mountain rose from Venezuela.**

The garden, which comes under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, is short of staff at the moment because the area around it has been declared a containment zone due to the spread of COVID-19.

It's like the botanical equivalent of the Taj Mahal being wiped off the face of earth. For it to look the way it did until May 20, it could take another 200 years.

### Cyclone Nisarga: How Big Is the Threat on West Coast?

- Less than two weeks after a powerful cyclone passed through West Bengal on its way to Bangladesh, India is bracing to face another cyclone, this time on its western coast. In strength and intensity, this would be much weaker than Cyclone Amphan that struck on May 20. In fact, it is not even a full-fledged cyclone right now, just a 'depression' that is likely to intensify into a 'deep depression' by Tuesday morning, and eventually into a cyclone, after which it would be called Nisarga.



### Where Is It Headed?

It is headed towards the coastline of north Maharashtra and south Gujarat. It is likely to hit the coastline on Wednesday, between Harihareshwar in Raigad district, just south of Mumbai, and Daman, just below Gujarat coast. By that time, it is likely to evolve into a Severe Cyclonic Storm, which, roughly stated, is of strength 2 on a 1-to-5 of strength of cyclones that arise in the Indian Ocean.

### What Does That Mean?

The strength of the cyclones is measured by the wind speeds they generate. At its strongest, Nisarga would be associated with wind speeds in the range 95-105 km per hour. Amphan, on the other hand, was classified as a super-cyclone, of category 5, though it had weakened to category 4, 'Extremely Severe Cyclonic Storm', ahead of its landfall, at which time the wind speeds were in excess of 180 kph. **Cyclones formed in the Bay of Bengal side of the north Indian Ocean are more frequent and stronger than those on the Arabian Sea side. Meteorologists suggest the relatively cold waters of the Arabian Sea discourage the kind of very strong cyclones that are formed on the Bay of Bengal side; Odisha and Andhra Pradesh face the brunt of these cyclones every year. Last year, however, was slightly unusual as the Arabian Sea saw the most frequent and intense cyclonic activity in more than 100 years, according to India Meteorological Department. Five cyclones originated in the area in 2019 – Vayu, Hikka, Kyarr, Maha and Pavan – when normally only one or two are formed.**

### Monsoon Bounty

- ➔ The monsoon has finally set in over Kerala in keeping with the textbook date of June 1. In May, the IMD had forecast a four-day delay in the onset over Kerala. This was premised on a relatively mild summer, in early May, in north India and several spells of Western Disturbances, which are rains from the Mediterranean, as well as the impact of super cyclone Amphan in the Bay of Bengal. A private meteorological company had, however, forecast an early monsoon arrival – on May 28 – because its models seem to suggest diminished impact of Amphan. But the IMD updated its onset forecast to say that 'favourable conditions' for the monsoon onset were likely on June 1.
- ➔ The IMD says there are three major conditions to declare the onset. The first is if after May 10, 60% of the 14 weather stations – Minicoy, Amini, Thiruvananthapuram, Punalur, Kollam, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Kochi, Thrissur, Kozhikode, Thalassery, Kannur, Kudulu and Mangalore – report rainfall of 2.5 mm or more for two consecutive days, the onset over Kerala will be declared on the second day. The second is the 30-40 kmph westerlies with depth should be maintained up to 600 hectopascals (hPa) and the third is the outwave longwave radiation (OLR) should be below 200 watt per square metre (wm<sup>-2</sup>).
- ➔ Heavy rains over Kerala alone do not determine onset, the IMD has been at pains to emphasise. However, it is also true that usually it was the only agency with the equipment to measure windspeeds and radiation at higher elevations, along with multiple weather stations. It therefore has a monopoly of declaring onset.

While the IMD is a primarily scientific organisation, it faces competition from domestic and international companies in providing weather-related services. **This year, save for India's northeast, the IMD has forecast above normal rains in other areas, especially the northwest, the central parts and the southern peninsula. Though reassuring, it is worth remembering that just last year the IMD failed to communicate that 2019 would turn out to be the wettest in two decades. However, every year of normal monsoon has brought with it both torrential floods and long dry spells. The complexity of climate change is now such that excess rains in a year seem to have long-ranging impact with reports of a second consecutive year of a locust plague in India on the horizon which can affect the kharif crop. It is therefore time that along with**





improved science and forecasting, the IMD works on disseminating more precise localised weather forecasts. While its public interface and technology adoption is improving, particularly in cyclone forecasts, the organisation has a long way to go in communicating these improvements to a wider population.

## Why the Telangana HC Compared Covid-19 To A Trojan Horse

- The Telangana High Court pulled up the state government over its low rate of coronavirus testing. It directed health authorities to test the deceased for Covid-19 before releasing the bodies. It also asked the government why tests were not being conducted in high-risk zones. “Not testing in large numbers is almost like inviting the Trojan horse. Why is the Telangana government under testing? Financial constraints cannot be cited as a reason as human lives are most important,” the bench said. Used as a metaphor, the term “Trojan horse” refers to any person or thing that deceives or misleads a target in order to attack it from the inside. It is derived from the ancient Greek story of the Trojan War – an epic that has for centuries influenced western poetry, art and literature. Part of Greek mythology, the Trojan legend was most notably recounted by the famed **Greek author Homer in his epics, Iliad and Odyssey, both believed to have been written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.**

### The Trojan War

As described in the classics, the war was fought after the ancient **Greek state of Sparta invaded Troy, a kingdom located on the western shores of modern-day Turkey, after the Spartan queen Helen eloped with the Trojan prince Paris. According to some versions, Helen was abducted by the Trojans.** Distraught, Helen’s husband, the Spartan king Menelaus marched with his brother Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae (another Greek state), to rescue Helen. **The Greek side was supported by other powerful allies, and included the fabled warriors Achilles, Odysseus, Nestor, and Ajax.** The Greeks crossed the Aegean Sea and laid siege to Troy demanding Helen’s return. A bloody battle raged for more than 10 years, after which the Greeks made a show of retreating from their positions, while leaving a large wooden horse inside which some of their soldiers hid at the gates of Troy. **To their great misfortune, the unsuspecting Trojan people decided to haul the wooden horse that they ostensibly took to be a gift, into their city. At night-time, the Greek soldiers led by Odysseus emerged from the horse and opened the city gates from inside, through which a larger force entered, leaving Troy to ruin.** As per Homeric classic *Odyssey*, Helen returned to Sparta with Menelaus.

### What HC’s Reference to Trojan Horse Means

The High Court was comparing asymptomatic coronavirus carriers to the Trojan horse. Similar to the story of Troy, we could be interacting with asymptomatic carriers, talking to them, inviting them over, while suspecting nothing, and before we know it, the virus would have transmitted to us. Since a person has no symptoms, it is not possible to know if they are coronavirus carriers unless they are tested.

### The Ruins of Troy

The classical story, which contains episodes of divine miracles and superhuman achievements, was for years debunked as a work of fiction. However, archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began looking for clues pointing towards such a war. In 1870, the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann conducted major excavations at what was believed to be the site of the historic Troy, and ended up finding layers of debris, precious artifacts, and a small citadel mound. Over the years, researchers discovered nine layers of inhabitation built upon each other from 3000 BC until the abandoning of the site in 1350 AD – proving that Troy was a major city during the Bronze Age. The seventh layer, dated to around 1180 BC, is now

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



believed to be the city which may have been destroyed during the Trojan War. In 1998, UNESCO designated the Trojan remains at Hisarlik in Turkey as a World Heritage Site. "In scientific terms, its extensive remains are the most significant demonstration of the first contact between the civilizations of Anatolia and the Mediterranean world. Moreover, the siege of Troy by Spartan and Achaean warriors from Greece in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C., immortalised by Homer in the Iliad, has inspired great creative artists throughout the world ever since," the UNESCO website says.

## Visiting Malls, Restaurants, Places of Worship from June 8: Here Is A List of Do's and Don'ts

- ➔ In the gradual reopening of the nationwide lockdown, the Health Ministry has released five fresh sets of SOPs for businesses and religious places to follow. These SOPs come into effect from Monday, June 8. Offices, shopping malls, restaurants, religious places, and hotels will only open in non-containment zones. Across businesses, those above 65 years and other immuno-compromised individuals are advised to stay home. Building entrances must have hand hygiene and thermal screening. The buildings must also maintain air conditioner temperature between 24 degrees and 30 degrees C, and humidity between 40 per cent and 70 per cent.

### SOPs for Offices

- ❖ Only asymptomatic people are allowed to come in.
- ❖ Employers should stagger office hours and lunch breaks.
- ❖ Buildings should preferably have separate entry and exit.

### SOPs for Religious Places of Worship

- ❖ Touching of statues, idols, and holy books is not allowed
- ❖ Shoes should be taken off in own vehicle
- ❖ Choirs or singing groups are not allowed; recorded devotional music should be played instead
- ❖ Public should bring their own mats
- ❖ No physical offerings, Prasad, or holy water allowed
- ❖ Avoid physical contact when greeting

### SOPs for Shopping Malls

- ❖ Mall management shall deploy adequate manpower to ensure social distancing norms
- ❖ The number of customers inside a shop is to be kept at a minimum
- ❖ Only 50% of seating capacity is allowed in food areas
- ❖ On escalators, persons on alternate steps is encouraged
- ❖ Gaming arcades, children's play areas, and cinema halls inside shopping malls shall remain closed

### SOPs for Restaurants

- ❖ Not more than 50% of seating capacity is to be permitted
- ❖ Takeaways instead of dine-in is encouraged
- ❖ Delivery persons should leave food packet at the door instead of handing the food packet to the customer
- ❖ Digital payments are encouraged
- ❖ Masks must be worn inside restaurants at all times
- ❖ Restaurants should stagger patrons if possible



- ❖ Disposable menus and paper napkins are advised, tables should be sanitised after every customer leaves.

### SOPs for Hotels

- ❖ Guests must provide travel history, medical condition, self-declaration form, and ID to check in
- ❖ Establishments must have contactless processes as an option for check-in and check-out

### If There Is A Suspected Case in An Office:

- ❖ The office should isolate the person and inform medical facility or helpline. The authority will assess risk and advise further.
- ❖ If there are many contacts of a pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic case, then contacts in close proximity should be quarantined for 14 days while low-risk contacts can continue to go to work.
- ❖ If there are two or fewer cases, only disinfect their area. If there is a larger outbreak, the whole building shall be closed for 48 hours of disinfection.

### In A Suspected Case Occurs in Restaurants, Hotels, Shopping Malls, Or Religious Places:

- ❖ Establishments must isolate the person and inform the medical facility or helpline. The risk assessment from the authority will determine further actions.
- ❖ If the person is positive, the establishment must disinfect the premises.

### Why Has the Lockdown Been Extended for A Month?

This is actually not an extension of the full lockdown. The guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs say that the lockdown is being extended until June 30 only in containment zones. These containment zones will be demarcated by states, depending upon the severity of the coronavirus outbreak in an area. For areas outside of containment zones, this is the lifting of the lockdown in a phased manner.

The Indian Railways have already announced that 100 pairs of trains will start running from Monday (June 1). Bookings for these trains are open, and you can book your seat/berth up to 30 days in advance. These 100 pairs of trains are in addition to the "Rajdhani type" trains that were started earlier.

### OK, So What All Is Prohibited, Then?

International flights, Metro trains, cinema halls, gymnasiums, swimming pools, entertainment parks, theatres, bars and auditoriums, assembly halls and similar places shall remain out of bounds for now. Religious, political, and all other such congregations shall remain prohibited. This means that while you can go to the temple, you cannot join a religious procession in a festival. This, however, will be eased in Phase III of this unlocking, after due consultations with stakeholders.

### So, From June 8 Onwards, We Can All Go Mall-Hopping?

No, not necessarily. States have been given the right to decide that. If the government of the state that you live in feels that allowing any activity will jeopardise its efforts to contain the Covid-19 epidemic, it may restrict such activity. This also means that while the Centre has allowed the free movement of people and goods across inter-state borders, states can still choose to seal their borders and not allow people from other states to enter.



### What About The 7 Pm To 7 Am “Night Curfew”?

The night curfew shall continue to remain in place. However, its timing has been relaxed. The night curfew will now be observed from 9 pm to 5 am.

### Delhi Corona App: How to Check Availability of Beds, Ventilators in National Capital

- Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal launched a mobile app for information on availability of beds and ventilators in the city’s Covid-19 designated hospitals. Kejriwal said the app, developed in-house, will help plug the prevailing “information gap”, manifesting itself in the form of patients and family members running from pillar to post to secure admission in hospitals. However, the CM appealed to people to not press for hospitalisation in cases where doctor’s advice home quarantine.

### How to Download Delhi Corona?

The app, ‘Delhi Corona’, can be downloaded from Google Play Store. It is currently available only for Android users. The app is not available for Apple users as of now.

### How Do You Operate Delhi Corona?

The bi-lingual app – providing information in Hindi and English – has a very simple user interface. The home screen has two options to choose from – Covid-19 beds and Covid-19 ventilators.

### What Information Is Being Made Available?

On tapping on either of the two options, a user will get details on occupancy and vacancy. For example, tapping on Covid-19 beds will lead to a new page where hospital wise break up on total beds, occupied beds and vacant beds for coronavirus patients are available. Likewise, the option on ventilators provides a hospital wise break up on total, occupied and unoccupied ventilators.

### What Is the Current Status of Beds and Ventilators in Delhi?

The app, last updated at 10 am this morning, says out of the 6,731 beds designated for Covid patients, across 65 health facilities which includes government hospitals, private hospitals and nursing homes, 2,819 are occupied and 3,912 vacant. In terms of ventilators, which are needed for serious patients, 92 are being used and 210 unused. There are 13 hospitals with ventilator facilities.

### What About Those Unable to Access the Delhi Corona App?

The same information has been made available on the portal [coronabeds.jantasamvad.org/](http://coronabeds.jantasamvad.org/). The information will also be shared via SMS with those dialling the helpline number 1031, Kejriwal said. He also issued the WhatsApp number (8800007722) for this purpose. “If you are denied admission in any hospital despite the app saying beds are available, call up 1031 to lodge your grievance and the special secretary of the Health Department will ensure beds are made available to you,” the CM said.

### Delhi Not Only State Non-Transparent with Tally

- India Coronavirus (Covid-19) Cases: For the second consecutive day, Delhi reported more than 1,000 new cases on Friday. It also added 82 deaths to its tally, only 13 of whom had died on Friday. The remaining deaths had happened earlier and so far, had not been counted. Delhi now has 17,386 confirmed cases of Coronavirus infections, more than 7,800 of whom have



already recovered. The city has seen the deaths of 398 people so far, including the 82 who were added on Friday. The number of infected people who have died could be even more since Delhi has added only those cases where the “primary cause of death” has been determined to be COVID-19 by a Death Audit Committee. Earlier this month, a big discrepancy was noticed in the death numbers being put out by the Delhi government and the information available from the hospitals. After an initial attempt to explain the discrepancy as a result of the information gap between the different agencies, Delhi has been adjusting the previously unaccounted deaths in its tally. But Delhi is not the only state which has been less than transparent in reporting COVID-19 numbers. **Almost every other state has seemed reluctant in sharing information, especially those relating to the dead.** West Bengal has already been in this situation earlier, having been forced to add deaths that were not being included in the tally.

**Only three states, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, routinely provide details of death cases in their states.** Others have progressively restricted the information they were sharing earlier. The latest to do so has been Gujarat. Not too long ago, the state was putting out one of the most transparent and informative bulletins. Over the last few days, however, it has stopped any information about the dead, and the daily bulletins have also become muddled. Its otherwise informative online dashboard does not contain any details about the dead, just like the dashboards of any other state. Maharashtra, the state with the maximum number of deaths, regularly bunches together deaths happened over several days, sometimes over two-week periods, in its daily bulletins. There is an attempt to restrict other, apparently ‘inconvenient’, information as well. **Telangana, for example, is the only state that does not reveal its testing numbers.** The state has one of the poorest records on testing, and has since then been pulled up by the state High Court on this matter. A direct result of the states’ desire to ‘improve’ their numbers has been the **nearly 5000 positive cases that are currently classified as ‘unassigned’.** **These are infected people who no state wants to include in their records.** In another unusual development on Friday, Maharashtra added 8,381 cases to the number of people who had recovered from the disease. More than 7,300 of these recoveries happened in Mumbai alone. Again, these numbers were bunched together from several days.

## [Bihar Needs A State-Specific Stimulus \(Shaibal Gupta - Member Secretary, Asian Development Research Institute \(ADRI\), Patna\)](#)

- The massive stimulus given to the economy in the wake of COVID-19 is largely a supply side management measure, expecting the outcome that growth will resurface. Even if it is real, and not a hollow promise, it may not create adequate demand, strengthening the economy. **Here we ought to ask what is the difference between Nehru’s clarion call for ‘self-sufficiency’ and Modi’s ‘Atmanirbharta’ agenda.** Nehru’s agenda was the culmination of economic empowerment from below, as envisioned during the freedom struggle. In contrast, Modi’s agenda is more individualistic, covering select industrialists and ‘start-ups’. Thus, the advantage of the present stimulus, if any, will accrue only to the southern and western Indian States which are industrially advanced. This obviously raises the question: Why are other regions of India, particularly the Hindi heartland States, likely to miss the advantage of the stimulus.

### [Rent-Seeking Tendency](#)

A couple of years ago, during my chance meeting with the then Finance Secretary of Jharkhand, he had confided that Ministers in the State are generally eager to quickly transfer the entire allotment of their respective departments into their personal account. This is essentially a ‘rent-seeking’ behaviour and it is not limited to Bihar and Jharkhand alone; it is widespread in other Hindi heartland States too. **Such ‘rent-seeking’ behaviour is mainly limited**



to States where the East India Company had introduced the agrarian system of 'permanent settlement' (intermediaries between the state and the tenant), mainly in eastern India. These States have generally failed to register adequate development after Independence. In contrast, the States with 'ryotwari' agrarian system, where there were no intermediaries between the tenant and the state, mainly in southern and western India, have leapfrogged in the realm of economic development. The feudal grip was relatively weaker in those States, allowing for substantial social movement (for example, the anti-Brahmin movement) which acted as a lubricant to develop a law-enforcing civil society and sub-national identity. Thus, accumulation in those States, either through agriculture or trade, led to productive investment. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the Kammas used their agricultural surplus to invest first in tobacco, then in films, and still later in the knowledge industry. This was initially limited to the Kammas, but later began including other castes like the Reddys and the Kappus, many of them displaying enormous entrepreneurial skills. Similarly, the Chettiers, the Nadars and others in Tamil Nadu accumulated wealth through productive investment in trade, commerce and industry. The same story was repeated in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Iconic in this realm were the Maharaja of Mysore in Karnataka, Laxman Rao Kirloskar in Maharashtra, and Ambalal Sarabhai in Gujarat.

### Development in Ryotwari States

The ryotwari States contributed in their own manner, promoting development and creating their own organisational vision. For example, Five Year Plan of 1925, crafted by M. Visvesvaraya, was patronised by the Wodeyar Dynasty of Mysore. Apart from creating a vision, the States also identified experts to guide their social agenda. To give examples, the Wodeyar promoted M. Visvesvaraya, and Sayajirao Gaekwad III groomed B.R. Ambedkar to become his Finance Minister, by sending him to Columbia University for higher studies. Further, they also promoted financial institutions to ensure success for their projects, like Andhra Bank promoted by B.P. Sitaramayya, Bank of Baroda by Maharaja of Baroda, Syndicate Bank by T.M.A. Pai and others. Their organisational promoters were the regional chambers of commerce which powerfully articulated their class interests. Their lobby was so powerful that they had many Finance Ministers in the Union Cabinet in post-Independence India.

### Poor Governance in Bihar

In contrast, the eastern region of the country recorded poor governance. In spite of giving birth to the 'Swadeshi' movement, the civil society there was devoid of a vision or a development strategy. De-industrialisation by the East India Company had ruined the indigenous entrepreneurs in the region. Even when some people attempted entrepreneurship, they usually failed, because nearly all avenues of investment in the region had already been captured by the Britishers. In the post-Independence period, the policy of freight equalisation killed whatever possibility was there for industrial growth of this mineral resource-rich region. Bihar was lying in the backwaters of the Bengal Presidency during the colonial period. The canvas of social movement was limited here. As such, there were only two identities in the State – caste and national, a sub-national identity being altogether absent. Unlike the social movement in the southern and western parts of India, the peasant movement in Bihar was directed to unsettle the permanent settlement. Bihar also never experienced any meaningful land reforms. Most of the economically successful States had undertaken land reforms immediately after Independence. They followed the British path of 'enclosure' or French path of 'peasant' entrepreneurship, or German model of 'Junker' capitalism, or a combination of all the three. In the absence of a multi-caste social movement and sub-nationalism, rent-seeking was the only agenda of the traditional elite in Bihar. Most of the development work in Bihar was engulfed in input-related corruption, implying that the expected development did not materialise at all. In other States also, there was corruption, but it was turnover-based, where the development



work was duly completed and then the state functionaries extracted direct or indirect payments from the direct beneficiaries of the development. The elite formation was also skewed in Bihar, and a development-oriented civil society could not emerge here. When zamindari was abolished, the rent-seeking tendency of the Bihari elite could be continued only by way of becoming a civil servant. In Bihar, only those civil servants are referred with reverence, who have either accumulated massively or those who have been able to successfully co-opt as many members of their caste group or of their area into the bureaucracy. During the last one-and-a-half decade, efforts have been made to streamline the governance system in Bihar. This in itself is a gigantic task, and Bihar needs a massive State-specific financial and social stimulus to complete the task.

## Business & Economics

### Why Moody's Downgraded India's Rating, What the Implications May Be

- Moody's Investors Service ("Moody's") downgraded the Government of India's foreign-currency and local-currency long-term issuer ratings to "Baa3" from "Baa2". It stated that the outlook remained "negative". The latest downgrade reduces India to the lowest investment grade of ratings and brings Moody's – which is historically the most optimistic about India – ratings for the country in line with the other two main rating agencies in the world – Standard & Poor's (S&P) and Fitch.

#### What Is the Reason for This Downgrade?

There are four main reasons why Moody's has taken the decision.

1. Weak implementation of economic reforms since 2017
2. Relatively low economic growth over a sustained period
3. A significant deterioration in the fiscal position of governments (central and state)
4. And the rising stress in India's financial sector

In November last year, Moody's changed the outlook on India's Baa2 rating to "negative" from "stable" precisely because these risks were increasing. Since many of the apprehensions that it had in November 2019 have come through, Moody's has downgraded the rating to "Baa3" from "Baa2", while maintaining the negative outlook. In its official statement, Moody's said, "The decision to downgrade India's ratings reflects Moody's view that the country's policymaking institutions will be challenged in enacting and implementing policies which effectively mitigate the risks of a sustained period of relatively low growth, significant further deterioration in the general government fiscal position and stress in the financial sector".

#### What Does "Negative" Outlook Mean?

"The negative outlook reflects dominant, mutually-reinforcing, downside risks from deeper stresses in the economy and financial system that could lead to a more severe and prolonged erosion in fiscal strength than Moody's currently projects". In particular, Moody's has highlighted persistent structural challenges to fast economic growth such as "weak infrastructure, rigidities in labour, land and product markets, and rising financial sector risks". In other words, a "negative" implies India could be rated down further.



### Is the Downgrade Because Of Covid-19 Impact?

No. Moody's was categorical that while this downgrade is taking place "in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, it was not driven by the impact of the pandemic". According to Moody's "the pandemic amplifies vulnerabilities in India's credit profile that were present and building prior to the shock, and which motivated the assignment of a negative outlook last year".

### Then Why Did the Downgrade Happen?

More than two years ago, in November 2017, Moody's had upgraded India's rating to "Baa2" with a "stable" outlook. At that time, it expected that "effective implementation of key reforms would strengthen the sovereign's credit profile" through a gradual but persistent improvement in economic, institutional and fiscal strength. But those hopes were belied. Since that upgrade in 2017, implementation of reforms has been "relatively weak and has not resulted in material credit improvements, indicating limited policy effectiveness," according to Moody's. The low effectiveness of policy and the resulting loss of growth momentum is evidenced in the sharp deceleration in India's GDP growth rates. The provisional estimates for 2019-20 were pegged at 4.2% – the lowest annual growth in a decade – and even these estimates are likely to be revised down further. Poor growth has been made worse by worsening government (both Centre and state-level) finances. Each year, the central government has failed to meet its fiscal deficit (essentially the total borrowings from the market) target. This has led to a steady accretion of total government debt. **Total government debt (measured as a percentage of GDP) is nothing but the debt till the last year and the fiscal deficit of the current year.** According to Moody's, even before "the coronavirus outbreak, at an estimated 72% of GDP in fiscal 2019, India's general government (combined central and state governments) debt burden was 30 percentage points larger than the Baa median". In other words, government debt was already quite high. **This already high number is expected to go up to 84% of the GDP just within 2020** – thanks to governments being forced to borrow even more, in a big part because their revenues are likely dry up as the economy contracts.

### What Will Be the Implications of This Downgrade?

As explained above, ratings are based on the overall health of the economy and the state of government finances. **A rating downgrade means that bonds issued by the Indian governments are now "riskier" than before, because weaker economic growth and worsening fiscal health undermine a government's ability to pay back. Lower risk is better because it allows governments and companies of that country to raise debts at a lower rate of interest.** When India's sovereign rating is downgraded, it becomes costlier for the Indian government as well as all Indian companies to raise funds because now the world sees such debt as a riskier proposition.

### What Is Moody's Outlook on Economic Growth, Jobs And Per Capita Income?

Moody's expects India's real GDP to contract by 4.0% in the current financial year. Thereafter it expects a sharp recovery in 2021-22. But over the longer term, it states "growth rates are likely to be materially lower than in the past, due to persistent weak private sector investment, tepid job creation and an impaired financial system". It states that "a prolonged period of slower growth may dampen the pace of improvements in living standards..."





## It's Time for A Universal Basic Income Programme In India (Anil K. Antony - The Convener of INC – Kerala Digital Media, And the National Coordinator of Piindia.Org, A COVID19 Action Group)

- The ongoing crisis is creating changes that could end up dividing society into pre- and post-COVID-19 days. These changes are also likely to exacerbate the novel challenges accompanying the fourth industrial revolution. Today, disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence are ushering in productivity gains that we have never seen before. They are also steadily reducing human capital requirements, making jobs a premium. A microcosm of these trends can be seen in Silicon Valley. The region is home to five of the world's eight most valuable companies. These giants, all technology companies, have a cumulative market cap of over \$4 trillion, yet they together directly employ just 1.2 million people.

### Tool to Eradicate Poverty

Many consider a universal basic income (UBI) programme to be a solution that could mitigate the looming crisis caused by dwindling job opportunities. UBI is also deliberated as an effective poverty-eradication tool. Supporters of this scheme include Economics Nobel Laureates Peter Diamond and Christopher Pissarides, and tech leaders Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. **UBI in its true sense would entail the provision of an unconditional fixed amount to every citizen in a country. Nevertheless, countries across the world, including Kenya, Brazil, Finland, and Switzerland, have bought into this concept and have begun controlled UBI pilots to supplement their population.** India's huge capacity and infrastructure-building requirements will support plenty of hands in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, even before the pandemic, India was struggling to find enough opportunities for more than a million job aspirants who were entering the job market each month. The 2016-17 Economic Survey and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had once proposed quasi-basic income schemes that leave out the well-off top quartile of the population as an effective means of alleviating poverty and hunger. **The fiscal cost of a UBI pegged at ₹7,620, at 75% universality, was 4.9% of the GDP. A UBI on par with the numbers suggested by the Economic Survey could lead to targeted household incomes increasing by almost ₹40,000 per annum, since the average Indian household size is approximately five.** The political will was nonetheless lukewarm because of the costs involved. Requirements to trim some of the existing subsidies to balance the resultant deficit were also difficult political minefields for the then government. So, the proposition was finally shelved. One way to ensure their sustenance throughout these trying times is the introduction of unconditional regular pay checks at maximum universality, at least till the economy normalises. If universal basic income ever had a time, it is now.

## What Is the Essential Commodities Act, And How Will Amending It Help?

- **The Union Cabinet has approved an ordinance to amend The Essential Commodities Act, 1955, to deregulate commodities such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onion and potatoes.** The ordinance, once assented by the President of India and notified in the gazette, will become law. The text of the ordinance has not been made public so far. Here is what we know.

### Essential Commodities Act: What Is the Amendment?

Sources at the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution said that the ordinance has introduced a new subsection (1A) in Section 3 of The Essential Commodities Act, 1955. The amended law provides a mechanism for the "regulation" of agricultural foodstuffs, namely cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, potato, and supplies under



extraordinary circumstances, which include extraordinary price rise, war, famine, and natural calamity of a severe nature.

### What Is the Definition of an 'Essential Commodity'?

There is no specific definition of essential commodities in The EC Act. Section 2(A) of the act states that an "essential commodity" means a commodity specified in the "Schedule" of this Act. The Act gives **powers to the central government to add or remove a commodity in the "Schedule."** The Centre, if it is satisfied that it is necessary to do so in public interest, can notify an item as essential, in consultation with state governments. **At present, the "Schedule" contains 9 commodities – drugs; fertilisers, whether inorganic, organic or mixed; foodstuffs, including edible oils; hank yarn made wholly from cotton; petroleum and petroleum products; raw jute and jute textiles; seeds of food-crops and seeds of fruits and vegetables, seeds of cattle fodder, jute seed, cotton seed; face masks; and hand sanitisers.** The latest items added to this schedule are face masks and hand sanitisers, which were declared essential commodities with effect from March 13, 2020 in the wake of Covid-19 outbreak. **By declaring a commodity as essential, the government can control the production, supply, and distribution of that commodity, and impose a stock limit.**

### How and Under What Circumstances Can the Government Impose Stock Limits?

Under the amended EC Act, agri-food stuffs can only be regulated under extraordinary circumstances such as war, famine, extraordinary price rise, and natural calamity. However, **any action on imposing stock limits will be based on the price trigger.** Thus, in case of horticultural produce, a 100 per cent increase in the retail price of the commodity over the immediately preceding 12 months or the average retail price of the last five years, whichever is lower, will be the trigger for invoking the stock limit for such commodities. **For non-perishable agricultural foodstuffs, the price trigger will be a 50 per cent increase in the retail price of the commodity over the immediately preceding 12 months or the average retail price of the last five years, whichever is lower.** However, exemptions from stock-holding limits will be provided to processors and value chain participants of any agricultural produce, and orders relating to the Public Distribution System, officials said.

### So, Why Was an Amendment Needed in The EC Act?

The EC Act was legislated at a time when the country was facing scarcity of foodstuffs due to persistent abysmal levels of food grain production. **The country was dependent on imports and assistance (such as wheat import from US under PL-480) to feed the population.** In this scenario, to stop the hoarding and black marketing of foodstuffs, The Essential Commodities Act was enacted in 1955. But now the situation has changed. A note prepared by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution shows that production of wheat has increased by 10 times (from less than 10 million tonnes in 1955-56 to more than 100 million tonnes in 2018-19); during the same period, the production of rice has increased more than four times from around 25 million tonnes to 110 million tonnes. The production of pulses has increased by 2.5 times, from 10 million tonnes to 25 million tonnes. In fact, India has now become an exporter of several agricultural products. With these developments, **the EC Act has become anachronistic.**

### What Will Be the Impact of The Amendments?

The amendments will remove commodities such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onion and potatoes from the list of regulated essential commodities. The move is expected to attract private investment in the value chain of these commodities. While the purpose of the Act was originally to protect the interests of consumers by checking illegal trade practices such as



hoarding, it has now become detrimental for investment in the agriculture sector in general, and in post-harvesting activities in particular. **The private sector has so far hesitated investing in cold chains and storage facilities for perishable items as most of these commodities are under the ambit of the EC Act, and can attract sudden stock limits.** But now the situation can change.

## Time to Discontinue Free Power for Farmers

- Exactly 15 years after Manmohan Singh, as Congress Prime Minister, openly spoke against the free power supply scheme for farmers, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government at the Centre is attempting to do away with the much-abused scheme, which has been viewed by political parties as a major vote-catching policy measure. This time, the Centre has prescribed that the free power supply scheme should be replaced with the direct benefits transfer (DBT) as a condition to allow States to increase their borrowing limit. It is not the first time that the Union government has recommended DBT with regard to electricity. But what is new is setting the time frame for implementing it. By December this year, the DBT should be introduced at least in one district of a State and from the next financial year, a full roll-out should be made. Predictably, Tamil Nadu, which was the first State to introduce free power in September 1984, is strongly resisting the Centre's stipulation. Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami has taken a categorical stand against the proposal. Though Chief Ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Punjab, where free power scheme is in vogue, are yet to express their views, it is not difficult to predict their response. After all, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, who had abolished the scheme during his first innings, is now a strong votary of the scheme.

### Power Subsidy Bills

In the last 15 years, Maharashtra has been the only State that scrapped the scheme within a year of introducing it. Karnataka, which has been implementing it since 2008, may become the first southern State to have DBT in power supply, if the hint dropped by Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa in early March is any indication. The power subsidy bills in the four southern States and Punjab are at least ₹33,000 crore, an amount the State governments will struggle to meet due to resource crunch in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. **The financial stress apart, the universal application of the scheme has had deleterious consequences. Primarily, the scheme has led to widespread wastage of water and electricity. It is inherently against incentivising even a conscientious farmer to conserve the two precious resources.** It may be pertinent to point out that **India is the largest user of groundwater at 251 billion cubic meters, exceeding the combined withdrawal by China and the U.S., as pointed out by Bharat Ramaswami of the Indian Statistical Institute last year.** Second, be it parts of the Cauvery delta in Tamil Nadu or Sangrur district of Punjab, the story about the groundwater table is the same – a worrying rate of depletion. There is one more attendant problem. To sustain their activity, farmers need to go for submersible or high-capacity pump sets. Third, the extension of the scheme to different States over the years has only encouraged installation of more pump sets. Karnataka is a classic example, the number of irrigation pump sets, which was around 17 lakhs 12 years ago, is now around 30 lakhs. Fourth, there is misuse of the scheme for which not just a section of farmers but also field officials have to be blamed. And, fifth, **in the absence of meters for these connections or segregation of feeders or metering of distribution transformers, accurate measurement of consumption becomes tricky. Those in charge of power distribution companies find it convenient to reduce their aggregate technical and commercial losses by clubbing a portion of the losses with energy consumption by the farm sector.**



### Argument for Free Power

Proponents of the free power scheme have a couple of valid points in their support. Apart from ensuring food security, free power provides livelihood opportunities to landless workers. When farmers dependent on supplies through canals get water almost free of cost, it is but fair that those not covered by canal irrigation should be given free electricity. Though there is substance in the argument, it is not difficult to arrive at a fair pricing mechanism. Small and marginal farmers and those who are outside the canal supply deserve free power, albeit with restrictions, but there is no justification for continuing with the scheme perpetually to other farmers. However, those enjoying free power need to be told about the need for judicious use of groundwater and how to conserve it. Making use of the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre is trying to make lasting changes in areas where such measures are long overdue. At least in the area of power sector, its attempt can yield meaningful results only if there is a change in the mindset of agriculturists and political parties towards the concept of free power.

### A Right Time to Shift Pharma Gears (Felicitas Holzer Is A Researcher in The Bioethics Center And Bioethics Network Of The World Health Organization At The Social Science Faculty Of FLACSO In Buenos Aires, Argentina. Thomas Pogge Is Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs and Founding Director of The Global Justice Program at Yale)

- Could the rules and practices organising health care around the world have been better suited to this COVID-19 outbreak? Consider the Health Impact Fund as a plausible institutional reform of the current regime for developing and marketing new pharmaceuticals. Medicines are among humanity's greatest achievements. The global market for pharmaceuticals is currently worth ₹110 lakh crore annually, 1.7% of the gross world product. Roughly, 55% of this global pharmaceutical spending, ₹60 lakh crore, is for brand-name products, which are typically under patent. Commercial pharmaceutical research and development (R&D) efforts are encouraged and rewarded through the earnings that innovators derive from sales of their branded products. These earnings largely depend on the 20-year product patents they are entitled to obtain in World Trade Organization member states. Such patents give them a temporary monopoly, enabling them to sell their new products without competition at a price far above manufacture and distribution costs, while still maintaining a substantial sales volume. In the United States, thousand-fold (100000%) mark-ups over production costs are not atypical. In India, the profit-maximising monopoly price of a new medicine is much lower, but similarly unaffordable for most citizens. To be sure, before such huge mark-ups can yield any profits, commercial pharmaceutical innovators must first cover their large R&D costs, currently ₹14 lakh crore a year, including the cost of clinical trials needed to demonstrate safety and efficacy, the cost of capital tied up during the long development process, and the cost of any research efforts that fail somewhere along the way.

### R&D and Concerns

While we should evidently continue funding pharmaceutical R&D, it is worth asking whether our current way of doing so is optimal. There are three main concerns. First, innovators motivated by the prospect of large mark-ups tend to neglect diseases suffered mainly by poor people, who cannot afford expensive medicines. The 20 World Health Organization-listed neglected tropical diseases together afflict over one billion people but attract only 0.35% of the pharmaceutical industry's R&D. Merely 0.12% of this R&D spending is devoted to tuberculosis and malaria, which kill 1.7 lakh people each year. Second, thanks to a large



number of affluent or well-insured patients, the profit-maximising price of a new medicine tends to be quite high. Consequently, most people cannot afford advanced medicines that are still under patent. This is especially vexing because manufacturing costs are generally quite low. Third, rewards for developing and then providing pharmaceutical products are poorly correlated with therapeutic value. Firms earn billions by developing duplicative drugs that add little to our pharmaceutical toolbox – and billions more by cleverly marketing their drugs for patients who will not benefit. To address these problems, we propose a complement to the present regime: The **Health Impact Fund** as an alternative track on which pharmaceutical innovators may choose to be rewarded. Any new medicine registered with the Fund would have to be sold at or below the cost of manufacture and distribution, but would earn ten annual reward payments **based on the health gains achieved** with it.

### On Funding

The Fund could start with as little as ₹20,000 crore per annum and might then attract some 10-12 medicines, with one entering and one exiting in a typical year. Registered products would then earn some ₹17,000-₹20,000 crore, on average, during their first 10 years. Of course, some would earn more than others by having greater therapeutic value or by benefiting more people. Long-term funding for the Fund might come from willing governments – contributing in proportion to their gross national incomes – or from an international tax, perhaps on greenhouse gas emissions or speculative financial transactions. Non-contributing affluent countries would forgo the benefits: the pricing constraint on registered products would not apply to them. This gives innovators more reason to register (they can still sell their product at high prices in some affluent countries) and affluent countries reason to join. The Fund would get pharmaceutical firms interested in certain R&D projects that are unprofitable under the current regime – especially ones expected to produce large health gains among mostly poor people. **Such projects would predominantly address communicable diseases.** With the Fund in place, there would be much deeper and broader knowledge about such diseases, a richer arsenal of effective interventions and greater capacities for developing additional, more targeted responses quickly. **The Fund would make an important difference also by rewarding for health outcomes rather than sales.** For achieving health gains with their product, innovators need new strategies. They need to deliberate holistically about how their drug can work in the context of, or in synergy with, other factors relevant to treatment outcomes; think about therapies and diagnostics together, in order to identify and reach the patients who can benefit most; monitor results in real time to recognise and address possible impediments to uptake or therapeutic success; ensure that high-value patients have affordable access to the drug and are properly instructed and motivated to make optimal use of it with the drug still in prime condition. **A reward mechanism oriented towards health gains rather than high-mark-up sales would lead to a sustainable research-and-marketing system.**

### Issue of State Risk

Participation of commercial pharmaceutical firms is crucial for tackling global pandemics. They are best suited to develop and scale up provision of new vaccines and medications fast. **At present such firms do, however, face discouraging business risks from governments which may as some have done use compulsory licences to divest them of their monopoly rewards.** Health Impact Fund registration would remove this risk as states would have no reason to interfere with innovators whose profit lies in giving real and rapid at-cost access to their new product to all who may need it. Nowhere is this focus on results, which the Health Impact Fund would encourage in innovators, more important than in the domain of communicable diseases. Collaborating with national health systems, international agencies and NGOs, such a firm would seek to build a strong public-health strategy around its product. Its highest goal would be complete eradication. If it succeeds in year seven, it can enjoy the world's gratitude and



collect three additional handsome reward payments for investment in its other research projects. Applying this point to a new disease such as COVID-19 is complicated by the fact that we lack here a well-established baseline representing the harm the disease would have done in the absence of the new medicine to be assessed. Still, despite the roughness of such a modelled baseline, the Fund would give innovators the right incentives. It would guide them to ask not: how can we develop an effective product and then achieve high sales at high mark-ups? But rather: how can we develop an effective product and then deploy it so as to help reduce the overall disease burden as effectively as possible? The pandemic should make us stop and think: which of these two questions should be guiding our pharmaceutical innovators?

## Restarting International Air Travel; The Concept Of 'Air Bridges' And 'Bubbles'

### Have Any Countries Restricted Indian Citizens from Flying into Their Borders?

The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has notified a list of airports located in affected areas with high risk of Covid-19 transmission. This list classifies all airports in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh as ones with high risk of transmission. The list is continuously updated by EASA after consultation with EASA member states, and is based on information from World Health Organisation (WHO), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, and other "reputable public health institutes". This is one of the initial examples of aviation regulators segregating regions according to the rate of occurrence of Covid-19.

### And How Would the Opening Up of International Routes Progress?

While the EASA does not explicitly advise member states to restrict flights from its list of high-risk airports, some countries have taken it upon themselves to do so. For example, **Greece has said it would conduct coronavirus tests on visitors arriving from airports considered to be high-risk by EASA**, when the country opens its airports to tourism traffic on June 15. In case of a negative test report, the passenger will need to quarantine for seven days, while passengers testing positive for the virus will be quarantined under supervision for 14 days. Even as quarantining and testing of passengers are measures that have universal appeal, there is **already talk of "bubbles" or "air bridges" joining jurisdictions that have largely eliminated the virus, and trust in each other's testing and case numbers**. According to The Economist, **Australia and New Zealand could lead the way with a proposed "Covid-safe travel zone", or the trans-Tasman bubble**. Small countries in the Pacific including Fiji and the Cook Islands, which have kept the virus at bay, could join in, with the zone being expanded to other jurisdictions such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. Incidentally, **Taiwan is working with Stanford University, as first reported by the Financial Times, to create a "safe-travel protocol", under which some 500 "human guinea pigs" will travel from San Francisco to Taipei**. Passengers will be tested before a pre-flight period of quarantine, and they will then be tested every two days in quarantine after they land. **The aim is to find the shortest safe quarantine period for brief business trips, instead of the 14-day prescription in vogue currently**. For Indian travellers to fly abroad, a lot will depend on the trajectory of the pandemic in the country, and on how regulators – DGCA as well as international regulators – certify the opening of their flight operations to or from India in the coming months.



## Life & Science

### Now, More Light on Sun's Coronal Heating Puzzle

→ A group of scientists working at the Pune-based National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA) have recently discovered tiny flashes of radio light emanating from all over the sun, which they say could help in explaining the long-pending coronal heating problem. "These radio lights or signals result from beams of electrons accelerated in the aftermath of a magnetic explosion on the sun. While we have not seen the magnetic explosions, these weak radio flashes that we have discovered are 'smoking guns' or the evidence for the same and hence bring us closer to explaining the coronal heating problem," said Professor Divya Oberoi, faculty member at the NCRA, who directed the research. Professor Oberoi said that these observations were the strongest evidence till date that the tiny magnetic explosions, originally referred to as nanoflares by eminent American solar astrophysicist Eugene Parker, can indeed be heating up the corona (the aura of plasma that surrounds the sun and other stars). He said that while the phenomenon of coronal heating has been known for the last 70 years, the availability of cutting-edge data from the Murchison Widefield Array (MWA) radio telescope proved to be a game-changer. "With this work, we have the strongest evidence till date of these magnetic explosions or 'nanoflares' as called by Prof. Parker in a theory he put forth in 1988. Our discoveries were greatly facilitated by availability of data from the MWA and our work at the NCRA," Prof. Oberoi said. "The strength of the magnetic fields varies a lot from one place on the surface of the Sun to another, by more than a factor of 1,000. But the corona is hot everywhere. So, this heating process has to work all over the corona, even in regions of weak magnetic fields. Until now, the process of how this magnetic energy is deposited in the corona had remained a mystery. Now, our observations can bring us closer to solving this," he said.

### Asteroid That Will Make A Close Approach to Earth in June

→ Earlier this week, NASA announced that a giant asteroid is expected to pass Earth (at a safe distance) on June 6. The asteroid is estimated to be between 250-570 meters in diameter, according to NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL). A Near-Earth Object (NEO), the asteroid is called 163348 (2002 NN4) and is classified as a Potentially Hazardous Asteroid (PHA).

#### What Are Near-Earth Objects (Neos). Why Are They Studied?

NEOs occasionally approach close to the Earth as they orbit the Sun, NASA's Centre for Near-Earth Object Study (CNEOS) determines the times and distances of these objects as and when their approach to the Earth is close. NASA defines NEOs as comets and asteroids nudged by the gravitational attraction of nearby planets into orbits which allows them to enter the Earth's neighbourhood. These objects are composed mostly of water ice with embedded dust particles. The scientific interest in comets and asteroids is largely due to their status as relatively unchanged remnant debris from the solar system formation process over 4.6 billion years ago. Therefore, these NEOs offer scientists clues about the chemical mixture from the planets formed. Significantly, among all the causes that will eventually cause the extinction of life on Earth, an asteroid hit is widely acknowledged as one of the likeliest. Over the years, scientists have suggested different ways to ward off such a hit, such as blowing up the asteroid before it reaches Earth, or deflecting it off its Earth-bound course by hitting it with a spacecraft. NASA's Near-Earth Object Observations Program finds, tracks and characterises over 90 per cent of the predicted number of NEOs that are 140 metre or larger in size (larger than a small football stadium). NASA maintains that objects of this size and larger pose a risk to Earth of "the greatest concern" due to the level of devastation that the impact is capable of



causing. Further, no asteroid larger than 140 metre has a “significant” chance of hitting the Earth for the next 100 years, less than half of the estimated 25,000 NEOs that are 140 metres or larger in size have been found to date.

### What is 163348 (2002 NN4)?

This asteroid is classified as a PHA, which means the asteroid has the potential to make threatening close approaches to the Earth. Asteroids with a minimum orbit intersection distance (MOID) of about 0.05 (AU is the distance between the Earth and the Sun and is roughly 150 million km), which is about 7,480,000 km or less and an absolute magnitude (H) of 22 (smaller than about 150 m or 500 feet in diameter) or less are considered PHAs. Even so, it is not necessary that asteroids classified as PHAs will impact the Earth. “It only means there is a possibility for such a threat. By monitoring these PHAs and updating their orbits as new observations become available, we can better predict the close-approach statistics and thus their Earth-impact threat,” NASA says. 2002 NN4 was discovered in July 2002 and is expected to approach the Earth on June 6.

### SpaceX-NASA Dragon Demo-2 Launch: All Your Questions Answered

→ Elon Musk’s SpaceX has become the first private company to launch human beings into orbit, after its **Falcon 9 rocket and Crew Dragon spacecraft** – carrying two NASA astronauts – successfully blasted off from the **Kennedy Space Centre in Florida**. This is the same launchpad from which **Saturn V rocket for the Apollo 11 Mission** had taken off, carrying the first humans to the Moon. The launch was particularly significant as it marked the **first instance of American astronauts being launched into orbit since 2011**. Veteran NASA astronauts **Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley** have embarked on a 19-hour voyage to the orbiting **International Space Station**, where **they will spend four months before returning home**. The mission was originally scheduled for Wednesday, **May 27**, but was postponed 16 minutes and 53 seconds prior to the launch due to bad weather caused by the **Tropical Storm Bertha**.

### What Makes This Mission Special?

With the launch of SpaceX’s Crew Dragon space craft, NASA is heralding a new chapter in space exploration – where private companies will have a bigger role to play. In an interview with Everyday Astronaut, NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine said a government monopoly in space exploration was not sustainable. Inviting private players is expected to exponentially bring down the cost of space travel. Further, this is the first time that **astronauts have been launched from US soil since the STS-135 mission on July 8, 2011**, following which all astronauts were flown to the International Space Station in **Russia’s Soyuz Capsule**.

### What Happened at The Launch?

Once Behnken and Hurley entered the capsule, the hatch was shut, and the rocket was fuelled with cold propellants for half an hour before the launch. This ensures better performance. Two minutes and 33 seconds after lift-off, the first stage main engine was cut off and three seconds later, the first and the second stages separated. The first stage rocket performed a flip manoeuvre, burnt during atmospheric re-entry, and was retrieved by the drone ship. A few seconds after the separation, the ignition of the second stage engine began. In the second stage, the Crew Dragon proceeded towards the International Space Station. **The Crew Dragon reached Earth’s orbit around 12 minutes after take-off**. The astronauts will orbit Earth for 19 hours and will occasionally fly it manually so that they can share their experience with future crews. Crew Dragon Capsule will dock automatically into the docking port Harmony, with the help of sensors and cameras, on May 31.





### The Mission

Once successfully docked, Behnken and Hurley will board the International Space Station and become members of the Expedition 63 Crew, and will perform tests on the Crew Dragon and conduct research. The mission is expected to last 30-90 days, following which the two astronauts will depart from the International Space Station by boarding the Crew Dragon. The trunk gets jettisoned, and a deorbit burn lasting approximately 12 minutes occurs, following which atmospheric re-entry takes place. The Crew Dragon capsule will splashdown in the Atlantic Ocean and will be recovered by the Go Navigator Recovery Vessel.

- SpaceX's Dragon spacecraft with two NASA astronauts on Sunday successfully docked with the International Space Station (ISS)

### SpaceX Crew Dragon: A New Era in Space Exploration

- The event generated tremendous excitement around the globe, not because of any special technological achievement but because of the agency that facilitated the trip. It was the first time that astronauts used a spaceship built and launched by a private company, and the event is being widely seen as the beginning of a new era in space exploration. The mission was called Demo-2, in keeping with the fact that it was still only a 'test flight', which if successful, would lead to more missions in the coming months.

### What's the Big Deal

For NASA, it was the first flight of its astronauts on an American spaceship, launched on American soil, after nine years. NASA used to have a fleet of five spaceships under its Space Shuttle programme, that were used to make a total of 135 of journeys into space, and the International Space Station (ISS), in the 30 years between 1981 and 2011. Two of these were destroyed in accidents, the Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003, each resulting in the death of seven astronauts. After the 2003 accident, in which India-born astronaut Kalpana Chawla was among those killed, the US government had decided to close the Space Shuttle programme. The three remaining spaceships, Discovery, Atlantis, and Endeavour, were formally retired in July 2011, even though they were fit for many more flights. It was decided that it probably no longer made sense for NASA to build and operate these spaceships. It was not just costly, but was also consuming a lot of scientific resources. The transportation needs could easily be fulfilled by space vehicles that some private companies were promising to make. Accordingly, it was decided to help and support these companies in building these spaceships that can be hired by other agencies as well, and even private individuals. The NASA collaboration with SpaceX and Boeing was a result of this. In the meanwhile, NASA hitched rides on Russian spaceships to travel to the ISS, for which it paid tens of millions of dollars for every trip. Russia also uses the ISS facility, and routinely sends its astronauts to the space station on its own spaceships. The new option is expected to be cheaper than that, besides offering the comfort of operating from home soil and eliminating dependence on a foreign country. Sunday's SpaceX flight therefore is a culmination of more than decade-long efforts to free to enable private players build and operate what essentially is a commercial taxi-service to space, and allow NASA to concentrate on deep space exploration, and work more vigorously towards taking humans to moon, and Mars, and, possibly, on some asteroid, in between.

### Private Participation, So Far

The involvement of private industry in the space sector is nothing new. World over, more and more work of space agencies is being done in collaboration with private companies. There are literally hundreds of private entities building commercial satellites for their clients. Launch services are still a somewhat restricted zone, considering that it requires elaborate facilities and deep pockets, but here too, there are several players apart from SpaceX and Boeing. Many,

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



like Virgin Galactic of businessman Richard Branson, have been already made space flights and hope very soon to start offering passenger rides to space whoever can afford to pay. In fact, **last year, a spacecraft built by Scaled Composites, a US company, even took a human being for a very short ride into space, becoming the first private spacecraft to do so.** While there are a lot many private companies operating in the space sector in the United States, there is no dearth of them even in India. **Most of them collaborate with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), in building and fabricating the components that go into making rockets and satellites.** There are several that have started making satellites for their own use, or for their clients. However, launch services, including the building of rockets or launch vehicles to take the satellites into space, is something that is still some distance away in India right now. While ISRO has been collaborating more and more with private industry, the capability to independently carry out even routine space missions, like the ones that SpaceX or Boeing or Virgin Galactic, have been undertaking frequently now, has been missing.

### Window to The Future

Sunday's flight also underlines the fact that space research and exploration is now a much more collaborative enterprise than earlier. Space agencies of different countries are not just sharing data and resources, but increasingly getting together to carry out joint missions as well. The International Space Station itself is a good example of international cooperation in the space sector. **The space facility is set to retire somewhere around 2028, and its replacement being planned is likely to have participation from at least ten countries, and possibly private players as well.** There is also a growing realisation that space agencies need to direct their energies and resources more towards scientific research and deep space exploration. It's been fifty years since the landing on moon, and efforts to take human beings to Mars and other celestial bodies, needs to be expedited. Getting back to the Moon, which NASA and some other agencies plan to do in the next few years, is just the first step in that direction. But that would also require huge amounts of financial resources that most of the space agencies, including NASA, are currently starved of. Private players are expected to infuse fresh investments, and also technological innovation that will benefit everyone.

### What Is the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction?

- The ongoing sixth mass extinction may be one of the most serious environmental threats to the persistence of civilisation, according to new research published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS). The research claims that this extinction is human-caused and is more immediate than climate destruction. **"Even though only an estimated 2% of all of the species that ever lived are alive today, the absolute number of species is greater now than ever before. It was into such a biologically diverse world that we humans evolved, and such a world that we are destroying,"** the study says.

### What Is the Mass Extinction of Species?

**Mass extinction refers to a substantial increase in the degree of extinction or when the Earth loses more than three-quarters of its species in a geologically short period of time.** So far, during the entire history of the Earth, **there have been five mass extinctions.** The sixth, which is ongoing, is referred to as the **Anthropocene extinction.** The five mass extinctions that took place in the last 450 million years have led to the destruction of 70-95 per cent of the species of plants, animals and microorganisms that existed earlier. These extinctions were caused by **"catastrophic alterations" to the environment, such as massive volcanic eruptions, depletion of oceanic oxygen or collision with an asteroid.** After each of these extinctions, it took millions of years to regain species comparable to those that existed before the event.



### So, What Is the Sixth Mass Extinction Then?

Researchers have described it as the “most serious environmental problem” since the loss of species will be permanent. The study analysed 29,400 species of terrestrial vertebrates and determined which of these are on the brink of extinction because they have fewer than 1,000 individuals. Out of the studied species, they concluded that over 515 of them are near extinction, and that the current loss of species, which is based on the disappearance of their component populations, has been occurring since the 1800s. **Most of these 515 species are from South America (30 per cent), followed by Oceania (21 per cent), Asia (21 percent) and Africa (16 percent) among others.** Further, attributing this mass extinction to humans, they said that one of the reasons that humanity is an “unprecedented threat” to many living organisms is because of their growing numbers. **The loss of species has been occurring since human ancestors developed agriculture over 11,000 years ago. Since then, the human population has increased from about 1 million to 7.7 billion. The study notes that more than 400 vertebrate species went extinct in the last century, extinctions that would have taken over 10,000 years in the normal course of evolution.** In a sample of 177 species of large mammals, most lost more than 80 per cent of their geographic range in the last 100 years, and as per a 2017 study published in the same journal, 32 per cent of over 27,000 vertebrate species have declining populations. **Significantly, the study calls for a complete ban on wildlife trade as many of the species currently endangered or on the brink of extinction are being decimated by legal and illegal wildlife trade.** Researchers point out that the current COVID-19 pandemic, while not fully understood, is also linked to the wildlife trade. “There is no doubt, for example, that there will be more pandemics if we continue destroying habitats and trading wildlife for human consumption as food and traditional medicines.”

### What Happens When Species Go Extinct?

According to the Centre for Biological Diversity, when species go extinct, the impact can be tangible such as in the form of a **loss in crop pollination and water purification.** Further, **if a species has a specific function in an ecosystem, the loss can lead to consequences for other species by impacting the food chain.** For instance, an example referenced by Columbia University’s Earth Institute states that **when the wolves in Yellowstone Park in California, US, were hunted to near extinction by the 1930s, the deer and elk they preyed upon thrived, as a result of which their grazing decimated the streamside willows and aspens, which provided habitat for songbirds. This also left the stream susceptible to erosion and a decline in the songbirds allowed mosquitoes and other insects that the birds would have eaten to multiply. Subsequently, the wolves were reintroduced into the park in 1995, after which they preyed on the elks and deer once again, the plant life returned and so did the songbirds.** The study warns that the effects of extinction will worsen in the coming decades as the resulting genetic and cultural variability will change entire ecosystems. **“When the number of individuals in a population or species drops too low, its contributions to ecosystem functions and services become unimportant, its genetic variability and resilience is reduced, and its contribution to human welfare may be lost.”** the study says.

### Rare Scorpionfish Found in Gulf of Mannar

- ➔ Researchers at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) have found a rare fish from Sethukarai coast in the Gulf of Mannar. Camouflaged within the seagrass meadows, the **band-tail scorpionfish (*Scorpaenopsis neglecta*),** well-known for its stinging venomous spines and ability to change colour, was found during an exploratory survey of the seagrass ecosystem. This was the first time that the particular species was found alive in Indian waters, said a press release. **The fish has the ability to change colour and blend with its surrounding environment to escape from predators and while preying.** “During the underwater survey, this



species was first sighted as a coral skeleton. On first look, its appearance was totally confusing and we doubted if it was a fish or fossilised coral skeleton covered with bivalve shells.

### Colour Changing

The fish is called 'scorpionfish' because its spines contain neurotoxic venom.

### Neurotoxic

"When the spines pierce an individual, the venom gets injected immediately and it can be extremely painful," Mr. Jeyabaskaran said, adding that **eating the fish would lead to death**. The specimen has been deposited in the National Marine Biodiversity Museum of the CMFRI. The research work was published in the latest issue of the journal Current Science.

## If Otherwise Fit, Blood Cancer Patients 'Usually Survive Covid'

- People with blood cancer are expected to be at higher risk of Covid-19 infection due to a weakened immune system from the cancer and the treatment they receive. Clinical researchers from Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and Barts Health NHS Trust have now studied the outcome of Covid-19 infection in patients with blood cancer. **The study found that even if patients were actively having intensive treatment for blood cancer that weakened their immune system, they usually recovered from Covid-19 as long as they were otherwise fit and well.** The study is published in the British Journal of Haematology. It looked at 35 adult patients with blood cancer who had tested positive for Covid-19 and monitored them for a minimum of 14 days. At the end of the observation period, 60% had recovered from Covid-19 infection. **The observations showed age was the most significantly associated factor with Covid-19 infection outcome, with almost all of the patients who died being aged 70 years or older at the time of Covid-19 diagnosis.** Patients who died also had significantly more coexisting health conditions, such as **hypertension, chronic kidney disease or diabetes**, than those who recovered from the virus. The data showed no correlation between blood cancer treatment and outcome following COVID-19 infection, and suggest that while patients with blood cancers have poorer outcomes than the general population after Covid-19, the majority still survive. In a statement, QMUL said this is the largest study to date to examine the clinical outcome of Covid-19 infection in patients with blood cancer, but added that the findings will need to be confirmed in large national and international registry studies.

## Lancet and NEJM Retract Controversial Studies On COVID-19

- Authors of two controversial studies published in The Lancet journal and the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) have retracted their research on COVID-19 as they could not vouch for the veracity of the data, sourced from a private company, for their analysis. The scientists, including Mandeep Mehra from Harvard Medical School, who was one of the common co-authors in the two studies, retracted the research papers stating that the members of the teams were not granted access to the underlying data for their research. Both the studies relied on data from a private company based in Illinois, U.S. called Surgisphere Corporation, with its CEO Sapan Desai and Mehra being common authors in the two research papers. **The Lancet study published on May 22, claimed to have assessed data from more than 96,000 hospitalised COVID-19 patients from six continents and reported substantially increased deaths and incidences of heartbeat rhythm changes associated with the use of hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and closely related drug chloroquine.** The NEJM report on May 1, suggested that any underlying heart disease in patients hospitalised for COVID-19 treatment is associated with an increased risk of death. However, in two open letters written to the



editors of both the journals on May 31, more than a hundred scientists from across the world flagged major **discrepancies in the quality of the data used in two studies**. The letters noted that the HCQ research was based on a database from Surgisphere, which according to the scientists, hosts COVID-19 patient data from hospitals around the world. The letters flagged several points of concern about the validity of this data, and the kind of analysis done in the study with it.

### Open Letter

Nearly 150 doctors signed an open letter to The Lancet last week calling the article's conclusions into question and asking to make public the peer review comments that preceded publication. The study, using data provided by healthcare data analytics firm Surgisphere, was not a traditional clinical trial that would have compared hydroxychloroquine to a placebo or other medicine. The Lancet's editors said in a note that serious scientific questions about the study were brought to their attention and an independent audit of the data has already been commissioned.

- ➔ The average peer-review takes weeks and the clinical trial process months, but now the expectation is that science delivers its results like magic. For years now, questions have been raised on the effectiveness of the traditional, time-consuming peer-review process and this has launched a welcome culture of papers being uploaded as preprints for review. In the present instance of the HCQ imbroglio, it is the independent effort by external scientists that brought the blight to light. The key lesson is that it is a mistake to assume the scientific process as one divorced from the influence of power, privilege, finance and politics. **The means and methods to a scientific result matter more than results – only achieved through global scrutiny. Openness, more than blame game, is what the post-COVID world needs now.**
- ➔ The World Health Organisation said that clinical trials of the drug hydroxychloroquine will resume, after having been suspended pending a safety review in the search for coronavirus treatments.

### Monoclonal Antibody to Block Coronavirus Infection Identified

- ➔ When the news of the pandemic reached a team of researchers in the Netherlands, their first reaction was to go back and look at frozen antibodies that recognised the 2002 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV), which they had stored in the early 2000s during the outbreak. And surprisingly one of the antibodies was found to recognise the infection due to the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. Further study showed that it can help block infection in cultured human cells. Berend-Jan Bosch from Utrecht University explained in a release that the antibody binds to a domain that is conserved in both SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2, explaining its ability to neutralise both viruses. He is one of the lead authors of the paper published in Nature Communications.

### Tests and Assays

The paper adds that this antibody can help develop antigen detection tests and serological assays. "This antibody – either alone or in combination – offers the potential to prevent and/or treat COVID-19, and possibly also other future emerging diseases in humans caused by viruses from the Sarbecovirus subgenus," the team writes. Frank Grosveld, co-lead author of the study from Erasmus Medical Center explained to The Hindu in an email what a human monoclonal antibody is and the group's previous work on it. "We set out to make antibodies against SARS, MERS and HCoV-OC43 [another coronavirus] with the aim to get antibodies that would recognise all three coronaviruses. **Parts of the proteins of these viruses are highly conserved (which means they are very similar) and we hoped to get antibodies that recognised these conserved parts. And indeed, we found such antibodies** [details of which] which were



published some time ago.” He adds that the newly identified antibody was found among previously identified ones that did not recognise all three viruses and were put in the freezer. “With new infections it is a race between the body making new antibodies versus the virus replicating, destroying cells and doing its damage. **The antibodies that are made in humans or in the mice can be isolated by several tricks. The classic one is to fuse the B-cells with leukemic cells to make them immortal,**” explains Dr. Grosveld. “**The fused B-cells called hybridomas are grown individually and tested whether they make an antibody that would recognise the target. Because they come from single B-cells hybridomas, they make only one specific antibody which is called a monoclonal antibody.** When a monoclonal-like [antibody that] we have generated is given to patients it does its work immediately, that is, much faster than the body could make its own antibodies,” he adds. Dr. Grosveld said that the team is currently testing the antibody in animal models and also collaborating with a pharmaceutical company to develop the antibody further. “On the more academic side we are studying how the antibody acts on the protein that the virus uses to infect cells.”

### Debate Over A Homoeopathic Drug – Arsenicum Album 30

→ A homoeopathic drug, **Arsenicum album 30**, has become a subject of debate after several states recommended it for prophylactic (preventive) use against Covid-19. **This was after the Ministry of AYUSH listed the drug among “preventive and prophylactic simple remedies” against Covid-19.** The debate stems from the fact that there is no scientific evidence that the drug works against Covid-19, a fact stressed not only by medical scientists but also by some homoeopathic practitioners themselves. **Arsenicum album 30 has been recommended by the state governments in Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.** While the Maharashtra government is yet to take a formal decision, Mumbai civic authorities have been distributing the drug to high-risk populations in at least two wards. The Haryana prisons department and Mumbai police too are also distributing the drug to prisoners and officers respectively. Even in states that have no protocol for using the drug against Covid-19, there have been reports about people flocking to homeopathic clinics to buy Arsenicum album, sometimes at triple the cost. Even local chemists have started stocking this medicine.

#### The Drug

**Arsenicum album is made by heating arsenic with distilled water, a process repeated several times over three days. The health hazards of arsenic contamination in water are well known: long-term exposure to the metal can cause skin cancer, pulmonary and cardiovascular diseases.** The homoeopathic drug has less than 1% arsenic, said Dr Amrish Vijayakar of Predictive Homoeopathy Clinic in Mumbai. “Arsenicum album is considered to correct inflammation in body. It takes care of diarrhoea, cough and cold,” he said. A small bottle with one course costs ₹20-30. Professor G Vithoulkas writes in an article published by the International Academy of Classical Homeopathy that Arsenicum album is used commonly by homeopaths to treat anxiety, restlessness, cold, ulcerations, burning pains. It is taken in powder form or as a tablet.

#### The Covid-19 Context

On January 28, at its 64<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Scientific Advisory Board of the Central Council for Research in Homoeopathy (CCRH) opined that “Arsenicum album 30 could be taken as prophylactic medicine against Coronavirus infections”. The CCRH released a fact sheet stating this medicine is only a “possible prevention” against flu. The following day, **the Ayush Ministry recommended taking the medicine for three days on an empty stomach and repeating the dose after a month if an outbreak continues locally.** On March 6, by when India had recorded five Covid-19 cases, Rajesh Kotecha, Secretary in the Ayush Ministry, wrote to all chief



secretaries listing out preventive and prophylactic measures. His letter recommended a three-day dose of Arsenicum album 30 as a prophylactic. The following day, the Ministry released another notification with “preventive and prophylactic simple remedies” against Covid-19-like illness and listed Arsenicum album 30 as a homeopathic solution. “For symptom management, the letter listed Arsenicum album among various homeopathic treatments, including Bryonia alba, Rhus toxica dendron, Belladonna and Gelsemium. “Homeopathy has reportedly been used for prevention during the epidemic of cholera, Spanish influenza, yellow fever, scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid, etc,” it said. The letter said during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, an expert committee in the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended “it is ethical to offer unproven interventions with as yet unknown efficacy and adverse effects, as potential treatment on prevention keeping in view no vaccine or anti-virals were available”. Following the Ministry’s recommendations, various state governments and district authorities have started distributing the medicine, in some cases free. **The Central Drug Standard Control Organisation last month issued a notification allowing private practitioners to try alternative remedies like Ayurveda and homoeopathy to treat Covid-19.**

### Where’s the Science?

Dr Balram Bhargava, director of the Indian Council of Medical Research told The Indian Express, “We have issued no guidelines regarding the medicine.” The WHO has no guidelines on using Arsenicum album as a Covid-19 treatment either. “No evidence that it works,” WHO chief scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan told The Indian Express. The Maharashtra government has set up a task-force to evaluate the homeopathic drug and decide whether it should be used against Covid-19. Its members said they remain undecided. Dr Archana Patil, joint director in the Public Health Department, said Maharashtra is allowing the drug’s use as an immunity booster, like vitamin C tablets, but not encouraging it as a prophylactic. Mumbai corporator Alpa Jadhav remembered seeing locals roaming around her area one day, although the lockdown was in effect. “They said they had taken Arsenicum album. It was scary; they believe this medicine can save them from coronavirus.”

### Concerns Within the Field

With no clinical trial or large-scale study having been undertaken anywhere to scientifically validate the use of Arsenicum album 30 as a preventive medication, the massive demand has worried some homeopaths, too. Dr Vijayakar said their organisation has written to the Ayush Ministry asking why no trial has been conducted to assess its efficacy before recommending it. **The Ayush Ministry has based its recommendation on existing use of the medicine for respiratory illness and influenza.** Several homeopaths have pointed out that each individual reacts differently to homeopathic medicines and one medicine cannot be universally held as a prophylactic for all. “It can only be a part of the treatment, if at all,” said Dr Bahubali Shah, a homeopathy practitioner.

## The Search for An Animal Model to Study COVID-19

- ➔ Animal models will be useful in testing out therapeutics such as vaccines and antivirals before they are tested on humans. A study published in Nature and two in Science have looked at a range of animals from this perspective. It emerges that only some of these, namely, **hamsters, cats, ferrets and non-human primates, are suitable to study various aspects of the infection.**

### Susceptible Animals

A group from China (Jiangzhong Shi and coworkers, in Science) studied the susceptibility of ferrets, dogs, pigs, chicken, ducks and cats to infection by SARS-CoV-2 – the virus that causes the disease COVID-19. According to their study, **while the virus replicates poorly in dogs, pigs,**



chicken and ducks, it actually replicated well in the upper respiratory tracts of ferrets and cats. They also found that cats transmitted the infection among themselves. In the experiment with ferrets, the animals were divided into two groups one of which was inoculated with a strain of virus isolated from an environmental sample collected from Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan and the other group was inoculated with a strain isolated from a sample taken from a human patient. Nasal and rectal swabs were examined on alternate days. One ferret in each group developed fever and loss of appetite on days 10 and 12 after inoculation. They were sacrificed on day 13, and sample tissues from various organs were collected and tested in order to find out whether the virus had infected the lower respiratory tract and other organs. They did not find viral RNA in these organs. "The study is useful because it indicates that from a diverse set of animals only a couple get infected in a reliable manner – ferrets and cats. It is interesting that cats can transmit the infection among themselves," says Satyajit Rath, biologist from IISER Pune, who was not involved in these studies. He also draws attention to the fact that since none of the animals developed serious illness, it may not be immediately close to the condition of humans. "Even in humans, only a small percentage are seriously sick," he adds, emphasising that the animal studies involved a small number only. B. Rockx and coworkers studied cynomolgus macaques (monkeys). This study published in Science finds that **when the monkeys were infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, they shed the virus in the upper and lower respiratory tracts.** They did not show severe symptoms. A paper published in Nature by researchers from Hong Kong studies golden Syrian hamsters. The group finds that SARS-CoV-2 infection in golden Syrian hamsters was like a mild infection experienced by humans.

### Right Question

Which then are the animals that can be used as suitable models to study COVID-19? A 'Perspective' article in Science discusses this: It really depends on the question being asked – Cats and ferrets may be useful in studying how the disease is transmitted and in testing antivirals to stop disease progression. Hamsters could be used for studying efficacy of vaccines. Non-human primates could be used to assess vaccine and antiviral effectiveness.

### Micro-Communities That Could Contain Spread of Covid-19

- Amid the pandemic, there is increasing pressure on governments to ease lockdown restrictions, especially to lift economic and psychological burdens on people who have been confined to their homes worldwide. Many countries have started gradually lifting restrictions even as the number of cases of the infection continues to rise. As a Covid-19 vaccine is still months away, questions about the methods that can be adopted to avoid the second wave of infections while easing restrictions have arisen. A new study published in Nature Human Behaviour suggests that one of the ways of effective social distancing strategies to keep the Covid-19 curve flat include the idea of social bubbles. "...simple behavioural rules can go a long way in keeping the curve flat," the study says.

### What Are Social Bubbles?

UK's roadmap for exiting the lockdown stated that people could expand their household groups to include one other household in the same exclusive group, in order to allow those who are isolated some more social contact, "and to reduce the most harmful effects of the current social restrictions, while continuing to limit the risk of chains of transmission." This method would also allow some families to return to work by sharing childcare responsibilities. The idea is based on **New Zealand's model of household "bubbles", an exclusive social group that is allowed to meet with each other amid the pandemic.** The country followed this approach during the lockdown and allowed the expansion of the bubbles as transmission slowed and restrictions eased. Essentially, as per New Zealand's model, a bubble is referred to as an





individual's household or the people that one lives with. Under Alert level 3, people are allowed to extend their bubbles slightly to include caregivers or children who might be in shared care. It also applies to people who are living alone or a couple who wants the company of another one or two people. "These people don't need to live in the same household but must be local. Always keep your bubble exclusive and keep it small," the government's advisory says. **In case a member of the bubble develops symptoms, the entire bubble quarantines itself, preventing further spread of the infection.** Research published by the London School of Economics and Political Science says that the concept of social bubbles proved effective for New Zealand since it allowed people who were isolated, vulnerable or struggling to receive the care and support they needed. Further, such a policy can be an effective policy for other countries to encourage compliance with social distancing regulations while meeting care and support needs.

### What Does the Study Say?

The study introduces three strategies, which include **contact with similar people, strengthening contact in communities and repeatedly interacting with the same people in bubbles.** The study says that these strategies rely less on confinement and allow strategic social contact while still flattening the curve. With regards to social bubbles, the study says that to create them individuals must decide with whom they want to regularly interact and overtime, they should restrict interactions to just these people. **Social bubbles can also be applied by employers to create departmental or work unit bubbles of employees.** For instance, for hospitals and essential workers, the risk of transmission can be minimised by introducing shifts with a similar composition of employees. This could mean clubbing together employees based on their residential proximity. The authors of the study maintain that **these "micro-communities" are difficult for a virus to penetrate and if in case the infection is contracted by one contact, it would be difficult for the virus to spread much further.**

### Can A Handheld Device Kill Virus with UV Light?

- Can you kill the novel coronavirus with ultraviolet light? Yes, you can, but the hurdle for such an approach lies in finding a device that would emit sufficient amounts of ultraviolet light while being, at the same time, energy-efficient and portable. Now, researchers have reported that such a device is feasible – personal, handheld, and built from a newly discovered class of conductors. They have reported their findings in the Nature Group journal Physics Communications.

### Ultraviolet Light

In the broad spectrum of electromagnetic radiation that comes from the sun, and which is transmitted in waves or particles, visible light is just one of several regions that are defined based on the wavelength and frequency of these waves or particles. When these regions are arranged according to wavelength, **ultraviolet light comes between visible light and X-rays** – that is, the **wavelength of UV light is smaller than that of visible light and greater than that of X-rays.** The wavelength of ultraviolet radiation is between **10 nanometres and 400 nanometres** (1 nanometre is a billionth part of a metre). **Ultraviolet radiation in the 200-300 nanometre range is known to destroy the virus, making it incapable of reproducing and infecting,** according to Pennsylvania State University, which was involved in the new research. **Ultraviolet radiation is one of two methods for sanitising and disinfecting public spaces from bacteria and viruses – the other being chemicals. Both chemicals and ultraviolet radiation are meant to disinfect public spaces only, not human skin. As the World Health Organization points out: "Ultra-violet (UV) lamps should not be used to disinfect hands or other areas of your skin. UV radiation can cause skin irritation and damage your eyes."**



### The Hurdles

To disinfect areas from the coronavirus with UV radiation, one needs sources that emit sufficiently high doses of UV light. Such devices do exist, but as Pennsylvania State University points out, these radiation sources are “typically an expensive mercury-containing gas discharge lamp, which requires high power, has a relatively short lifetime, and is bulky”. The solution is to develop UV light-emitting diodes (LEDs), which would be portable and energy-efficient. Diodes are, simply put, specialised conductors that transmit electricity in one direction. LEDs that emit UV light, too, exist. But again, “applying a current to them for light emission is complicated by the fact that the electrode material also has to be transparent to UV light”. The challenge was to find such a material.

### The Solution

The Pennsylvania State University team, in collaboration with materials theorists from the University of Minnesota, figured that the solution to this challenge could lie in a recently discovered new class of transparent conductors that use a material called **strontium niobate**. Indeed, theoretical predictions pointed to the material. The researchers reached out to Japanese collaborators to obtain strontium niobate films, and tested their performance as UV transparent conductors. The researchers said this is a critical step towards technology maturation which makes it possible to integrate this new material into UV LEDs at low cost and high quantity.

### Study Finds Link Between High Blood Pressure and Covid-19 Death Risk

- A new study has found that patients with higher blood pressure face twice as high a risk of dying from the COVID-19 compared to patients without high blood pressure. **The researchers found that 34 of these 850 hypertensive patients (4%) with Covid-19 died compared to 22 out of 2,027 patients without hypertension (1.1%) – a 2.12-fold increased risk after adjustment for factors that could affect the results, such as age, sex and other medical conditions.** In addition, the study found that **patients with high blood pressure who were not taking medication to control the condition were at even greater risk of dying from Covid-19.** Among the patients with hypertension who were not taking medication for the condition, 11 out of 140 (7.9%) died from coronavirus compared to 23 out of 710 (3.2%) of those who were taking medication – a 2.17-fold increased risk after adjusting for confounding factors. In a meta-analysis, the researchers pooled the data from the Huo Shen Wan patients with data from nearly 2,300 patients in three other studies to investigate the death rates in patients being treated with drugs to control blood pressure levels. Specifically, they compared between patients treated with a class of drugs called RAAS inhibitors, and those treated with other drugs. **They found a lower risk of death among the 183 patients treated with RAAS inhibitors than in 527 patients treated with other drugs.** However, the researchers say this result should be treated with caution as the number of patients in this analysis was small and so it could be due to chance. As this was a study that looked at data from observations in the hospital, the researchers say it is too early to make clinical recommendations based on these results, and that results from randomised controlled clinical trials are needed.

### New Study Suggests SARS-Cov-2 May Be Detected Using A ‘Naked Eye’ Test

- Scientists at the **University of Maryland School of Medicine (UMSOM)** have developed an experimental diagnostic test for COVID-19 that can visually detect the presence of SARS-CoV-2 in 10 minutes. With relatively free movement, the chances of the infection spreading are greater and therefore, tests that can deliver results as quickly, like this naked eye test, may be crucial in containing the spread of the disease. The test uses a highly specific molecule that



attaches itself to gold nanoparticles, which is able to detect a specific protein, which is a part of the genetic sequence unique to the virus. The authors have published their findings in the journal ACS Nano.

### How Does the Test Work?

Through this “naked eye” test, a nasal swab or a saliva sample is taken from the patient and mixed with a simple laboratory test, which contains a liquid mixed with gold nanoparticles attached to a molecule that binds itself to SARS-CoV-2. If the solution turns to a deep blue colour, it indicates that the virus is present. On the other hand, if the solution does not contain the virus in it, it does not change its colour and retains its purple hue.

### How Does This Method Compare with Other Tests Used for Coronavirus Testing?

This method is faster than other tests such as the conventional RT-PCR test since it does not require the use of advanced laboratory techniques, which is the case with techniques commonly used to amplify DNA for analysis. RT-PCR tests can take up to nine hours to show results, however, the overall time, from the time that the samples are collected to the report being delivered can take over 24 hours. The PCR test takes longer also because the swab is screened to decide the family of the virus, following which a second test is done to ascertain if the virus is the novel coronavirus. In April, states in India started looking at “rapid tests” or serological tests as an alternative to the RT-PCR tests amid the growing number of cases in the country. Rapid tests are blood tests, which can be used to identify if the person has been exposed to a particular pathogen. The serological test screens the plasma for antibodies that the body develops against the virus. It takes less than 30 minutes. Even so, the PCR test is able to identify the virus at an earlier stage than serological tests, which checks for antibodies that can take several days to develop. Significantly, the positive serological tests ultimately go through the PCR filter. Further, while rapid tests and RT-PCR tests are capable of delivering false negative results, the chances of that happening with the naked eye test are low. Moreover, because this test does not require laboratory equipment or trained personnel to run the test and analyse the results, it could be far less expensive than the other tests available in the market. Even so, the researchers say more clinical studies on this test are warranted and the test needs the US Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) approval before it can be sold in the market.

### A Few Infected People Account for Larger Virus Spread

- Three separate studies using very different methods and patient cohorts have found that a small percentage of people who have been infected with novel coronavirus account for a large proportion of novel coronavirus spread, much above the expected average. These are called “superspreading events” (SSEs). For SARS-CoV-2, with a basic reproductive number (the number of people an infected person can infect) of around three, more than eight or 10 secondary cases have been suggested to constitute a superspreading event. For MERS, superspreading events have reportedly involved up to 82 secondary cases. There has been much discussion about the number of people an infected person can spread the virus to, which is called the reproduction number or  $R_0$ . But additionally, the dispersion factor ( $k$ ) is also important. “In real life, some people infect many others and others don’t spread the disease at all,” “The consistent pattern is that the most common number is zero. Most people do not transmit.” The lower the dispersion factor is, the more transmission comes from a small number of people, Science says.



### Superspreading Events

Some well-known superspreading events include a choir practice in a church in Mount Vernon, Washington, in which 61 people participated. One person who had apparently had non-specific symptoms ended up infecting 53 choir members after singing together for 150 minutes, the CDC found. The other well-known superspreading events include the church outbreak in South Korea and Singapore, outbreak in a dormitory for migrant workers in Singapore leading to 800 cases, and Zumba classes in South Korea causing 65 cases. Similar cases have been reported from cruise ships, prisons, old-age homes, meatpacking plants and ski resorts. Back home, a tourist from Italy was found to have infected over a dozen people in Jaipur, while a family that returned to Kerala from Italy infected many. Other examples of superspreading events include the religious congregation by Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi and Koyambedu market in Chennai. Many studies utilising global datasets have estimated even greater potential for SARS-CoV-2 superspreading and suggest that as little as **10% of cases could account for 80% of all transmission**, according to a paper published in Wellcome Open Research. The authors conclude, "most infected individuals do not contribute to the expansion of an epidemic". As a result, it will be possible to contain the spread if interventions are targeted at high-risk groups responsible for the majority of transmission.

### Why It's Safer to Postpone Elective Surgery

→ **Patients with the SARS CoV-2 infection, who undergo surgeries are at an increased risk of mortality**, says a newly published study in the medical journal Lancet. Researchers studied data of 1,128 patients from 235 hospitals across the world and found that the 30-day mortality in such patients was nearly 23.8%, which is much greater than the numbers seen in high-risk patients before the pandemic. The study carried out by experts from University of Birmingham included patients undergoing surgery who had SARS-CoV-2 infection diagnosed within seven days before or 30 days after surgery. Their surgeries were carried out between January 1 and March 31. While overall 30-day mortality in the study was 23.8%, it also showed that mortality was higher among men and patients above the age of 70. Mortality in other subgroups was also high: 18.9% in elective surgery patients, 25.6% in emergency patients, 16.3% in those who underwent minor procedures and 26.9% in those who underwent major procedures. "We would normally expect mortality for patients having minor or elective surgery to be under 1%," co-author Aneel Bhangu was quoted as saying in a press release by the University of Birmingham. "These mortality rates are greater than those reported for even the highest-risk patients before the pandemic; for example, the 2019 UK National Emergency Laparotomy Audit reported 30-day mortality of 16.9% in the highest-risk patients, and a previous study across 58 countries reported a 30-day mortality of 14.9% in patients undergoing high-risk emergency surgery," he added. Going by the global experience, medical experts in India have been trading cautiously, by **postponing elective surgeries** and managing patients with conservative treatment. At KEM Hospital, one of the largest public hospitals in Mumbai, all elective surgeries have been postponed but an average of eight emergency procedures including Caesarean sections, laparotomies, fixing compound fractures etc. are being carried out. "In patients with the SARS CoV-2 infection, the postoperative complications are much higher and thus the mortality is high too," said hospital's Dean, Dr. Hemant Deshmukh. Dr C. Pramesh, director of the Tata Memorial Hospital said it takes about 10 days for a COVID-19 patient to turn negative and it is wise to wait till then to operate.



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