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International

Why A Top American Policy School Dropped the Name of a Past President

- The renowned Princeton University has now joined a ballooning list of famous organisations in the United States that have announced efforts towards addressing systemic racism in the wake of George Floyd's death. **The Ivy League university said its School of Public and International Affairs would drop the name of Woodrow Wilson, America's 28th president from 1913 to 1921, who had been its namesake since 1948. "Wilson's racism was significant and consequential even by the standards of his own time.** He segregated the federal civil service after it had been racially integrated for decades, thereby taking America backward in its pursuit of justice. He not only acquiesced in but added to the persistent practice of racism in this country, a practice that continues to do harm today," Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber said in a statement. President Trump on Monday tweeted his disapproval, "Can anyone believe that Princeton just dropped the name of Woodrow Wilson from their highly respected policy centre," calling the move "incredible stupidity".

Who Was Woodrow Wilson?

Born in the American South before the brutal Civil War, Wilson (1856-1924) worked as an academician for several years before entering politics. For eight years, he served as the top administrator at Princeton, transforming the then sleepy university into an avant-garde institution. In 1911, supported by conservatives in the Democratic party, Wilson got elected as the governor of New Jersey. In two years, he was propelled to the US presidency, and became the first occupant of the White House to have a PhD degree. **As president, Wilson enacted several important pieces of legislation, and the US emerged as a world power after ensuring victory for the Allies in World War I.** At home, the Wilson administration saw the reduction of import duties, started the country's central bank and a national business oversight body, and strengthened anti-monopoly and labour laws. **In Wilson's second term, the US passed its 19th constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote.** Abroad, Wilson played a key role in negotiations leading to the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. **His famous 'Fourteen Points' led to the creation of the League of Nations, which although failed, served as a blueprint for the United Nations after World War II. In 1919, Wilson was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.**

Why is Woodrow Wilson Controversial?

Despite his many achievements both in the US and internationally, Wilson held highly racist views, and his administration is blamed for pushing back against decades of African American progress. Wilson segregated the country's civil service, demoting or transferring several black officials who had reached senior positions after working for decades; many having white civil servants reporting to them. When opposed by an African American leader, Wilson replied, "segregation is not humiliating, but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you". The policy had long-lasting effects, and was not reversed by succeeding administrations. Wilson reflected Southern prejudices against African Americans, and had called the post-Civil War black vote as "ignorant and often hostile". **He had also spoken**



approvingly of the Ku Klux Klan, and had allowed a White House screening of the viscerally racist 1915 film 'The Birth of a Nation'. His tenure also saw the lynchings of hundreds of black people, mostly in the South.

The Debate at Princeton

In 2015, a group called the Black Justice League staged a 32-hour sit-in at the university, demanding the removal of Wilson's name from the public policy school and a residential college. Even while he worked at Princeton, Wilson maintained anti-black views, and is known to have discouraged African American students from enrolling. The university only admitted its first black students in the 1940s. Although Princeton president Eisgruber agreed to consider the move, the university board in 2016 voted to keep the name, but announced "an expanded and more vigorous commitment to diversity and inclusion at Princeton". Now, with the national debate on race relations at fever pitch, the university appears to have changed its views. Eisgruber's Saturday press statement read, "Wilson's segregationist policies make him an especially inappropriate namesake for a public policy school. When a university names a school of public policy for a political leader, it inevitably suggests that the honoree is a model for students who study at the school. "This searing moment in American history has made clear that Wilson's racism disqualifies him from that role. In a nation that continues to struggle with racism, this University and its school of public and international affairs must stand clearly and firmly for equality and justice."

'Negro' Which the Spanish Word for Black

With Referendum Win, Vladimir Putin Tightens Grip on Power

→ With Russians overwhelmingly backing a set of constitutional amendments in a referendum, Vladimir Putin can **potentially stay in power for two more six-year terms after his term expires in 2024**. After a week-long vote came to an end on Wednesday, **preliminary results released by the Election Commission showed that almost 78% of voters endorsed the amendments, while 21% voted against them**. Some 65% voters had turned up to cast their ballots. In the vote, Russians were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the changes to the Constitution. The changes included **a reorganisation of the government, introducing a higher minimum pension and wages, a ban on gay marriage, restricting top officials from holding dual citizenship, enshrining "faith in God" as a core value and emphasising the primacy of the Constitution over international treaties and rulings**. The most controversial change, however, was underplayed by the Kremlin during the campaign – **resetting President Putin's term limits**.

The Centre Of Power

The Russian Constitution bars more than two consecutive presidential terms. Mr. Putin, who became President for the first time in 2000, swapped the presidency with his confident Dmitry Medvedv after his first two terms. He remained the centre of power during this time as Prime Minister. Mr. Medvedv served one term and stepped aside for Mr. Putin to assume the presidency again. He is now into the second term of his second stint as President, which will expire in 2024. The new Constitution doesn't change the two-term limit in theory, but in practice, it resets the clock on Mr. Putin's terms so that in the first election under the new Constitution, to be held in 2024, Mr. Putin can start afresh. Mr. Putin has said he hasn't



decided on running again. But if he chooses so, given the hegemony of his reign over Russia's political landscape, he could remain in office for two more terms until 2036 when he will be 83 years old. **The amendments have also enhanced the powers of the State Council, an advisory body until now, which Mr. Putin heads.** Overall, the changes allow him to tighten his grip over Russia.

In Pursuit of Legitimacy

The proposed changes had already been approved by Parliament and the Supreme Court. But the Kremlin chose to put it on vote for legitimacy and popular approval. Putin wanted to get it done before the economic situation turns worse. Now that the amendments got popular mandate, the ball is in Mr. Putin's court. **If he stays in power for two more terms, he will be the longest serving Russian leader since Peter the Great. The Tsar, who built the Russian Empire, was in power for 43 years until his death in 1725.** While the constitutional impediments for Mr. Putin's continued rule are now removed, the road ahead for him may not be smooth. It has never been smooth for Mr. Putin. He inherited a Russia that was in an economic free fall and strategic retreat in 2000 after the troublesome Boris Yeltsin years. Much of the support Mr. Putin enjoys now derives from his efforts to rebuild the state and the economy and restore some of the country's lost global clout. After 20 years in power, Mr. Putin again faces daunting challenges.

Challenges Ahead

According to the IMF, the economy hasn't expanded in dollar terms for a decade. The Fund estimates the GDP to shrink by 6.6% this year. With the pandemic affecting local businesses and the oil price fall eating into exports revenue, the Kremlin finds it difficult to fix the economy in the near term. In foreign policy, **Russia's relationship with the West remains troublesome. The sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 are still in place. While Russia managed to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime after its intervention in the civil war, the Syrian crisis is far from resolved.** Worse, Russia faces allegations of interference in the elections of other countries. Domestically, **Opposition politician Alexei Navalny and his supporters continue to protest against the Kremlin despite crackdowns.** Mr. Navalny has already rejected the referendum results. For Mr. Putin, there's a crucial difference between the challenges he faced in 2000 and now. Back then, he inherited a weak state and his job was to fix it. Now, he is the state that is facing a fresh set of political, economic and foreign policy challenges.

Why Has Iran Issued A Warrant Against Donald Trump?

- A local prosecutor in Iran on Monday issued an arrest warrant against US President Donald Trump and dozens of others who they believe carried out the drone strike that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad on January 3 this year. Trump and 30 others have been accused by Iran of "murder and terrorism charges".

Who Was Qassem Soleimani?

Soleimani was in charge of the **Quds Force** of Iran's **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**, which the US designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in April last year. The Quds Force undertakes Iranian missions in other countries, including covert ones. Further, Soleimani, who had headed the Quds since 1998, not only looked after intelligence gathering



and covert military operations but also drew immense influence from his closeness to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and was seen as a potential future leader of Iran.

What Do the Charges Against Trump Mean?

Iran has issued an arrest warrant for Trump and has requested France based Interpol to detain him and others who they believe were involved in carrying out the drone strike. Alqasimehr, the prosecutor, has been quoted by Iran's ISNA news agency as saying that Iran has also requested Interpol to issue a "Red Notice" for Trump and others. Interpol describes a Red Notice as "a request to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action". An RN is published by Interpol at the request of a member country. The fugitives may be wanted for prosecution or to serve a sentence. Even so, a Red Notice is simply an international wanted person's notice and not an international arrest warrant. It is unlikely Interpol would grant Iran's request as its guidelines for issuing such notices limit it from "undertaking any intervention or activities of a political" nature and therefore, at best, Iran's move signals and the heightened tensions between the two countries.

What Is the European Union's 'Safe List' For Covid-19 Travel?

- ➔ From July 1, residents from over 14 countries that are not part of the European Union (EU) and are deemed to be 'safe' will be allowed to enter the EU. The list, which is expected to be finalised Tuesday, excludes residents from the United States, Brazil and China. The US and Brazil have the first and second-highest number of coronavirus cases in the world right now, with more than 2.6 million and 1.3 million cases respectively. The US also has the greatest number of deaths from the virus, at over 126,000.

What Is The 'Safe List'?

Residents of countries that are included in the list will be allowed to enter the EU. As of now, EU nationals are allowed to move within the bloc, British nationals, who will be treated as part of the EU till December 31, are also allowed to travel the EU. The UK is also planning to launch an 'air bridges' scheme as per which, travellers from certain countries will not be subjected to a mandatory quarantine of two weeks. According to a report in the BBC, countries included in the list are Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan and Morocco. The list will be reviewed every 14 days and new countries may be added and some taken off the list, depending on the coronavirus statistics and how the countries manage the spread of the disease. India is not expected to be on the list since the number of cases are still rising, with total cases at more than 560,000.

Why The 'Safe List'?

From March 17 onward, countries in the EU coordinated action on its external borders in order to restrict non-essential travel for an initial period of 30 days. Thereafter, the restrictions were further extended till May 15 and on May 8, 2020 the commission recommended that the travel restrictions be extended for another 30 days till at least June 15. Subsequently, the commission invited member countries to extend the restrictions again till June 30 and set out an approach to progressively lift the restrictions. The EU member states and Schengen Associated countries have temporarily suspended non-essential travel from "third countries" to the EU plus area. Third countries are those that are not a member of the Union. The Schengen area comprises 22 of the 27 member states of the EU plus four



European Free Trade Association Countries, which are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. EU member states of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, Cyprus and Ireland are not Schengen countries. Apart from the 27 member states, there are five EU candidate countries, which include Turkey, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Albania.

In 24 Hours, Palestine Faces an Existential Threat (Hamid Ansari - Former Vice-President of India, 2007-2017)

- On June 24, the UN Secretary General António Guterres told a virtual meeting of the United Nations Security Council that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at a “watershed moment” and that the Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank have alarmed the Palestinians, many Israelis and the international community. Such annexation would be “a most serious violation of international law”. He called upon the Israeli government to abandon its annexation plans and asked the **Middle East Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union and the UN)** to resume its mandated mediatory role.

A Violation

The UN Secretary General’s alarm has been sounded in the context of the **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s reported plan to annex on July 1 around 30% of the Occupied West Bank**. This will include annexation of all the existing (post-1967) settlements in addition to areas surrounding them and access roads. This, from published accounts, has the approval of the Trump Administration. Under international law, **annexation is forcible acquisition of territory by one state at the expense of another state**. According to Prof. Nathaniel A. Berman of Brown University, U.S., such an act **even if sanctified by Israeli law is illegal under international law and would violate the universally acknowledged principle of the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force”**. This, according to him, is the accepted position of all international legal bodies including the International Court of Justice. The same position has been taken by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights). In a statement on June 16, it described the annexation of occupied territory as a serious violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the Geneva Conventions, and contrary to the fundamental rule affirmed many times by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly that acquisition of territory war or by force is inadmissible. It pointed out that the 53-year-old Israeli occupation is a source of profound human rights violations of the Palestinian people and said “these human right violations would only intensify after annexation. What would be left of the West Bank would be Palestinian Bantustan, islands of disconnected land completely surrounded by Israel and with no territorial connection with the outside world. Israel has recently promised that it will maintain permanent security control between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Thus, the morning after the annexation would be the crystallisation of an already unjust reality: two peoples living in the same space, ruled by the same state, but with profoundly unequal rights. This is a vision of a 21st century apartheid.” The statement concludes that despite the dismal record of Israel’s past violation of international law, “accountability and an end to impunity must become an immediate priority for the international community”.



The Israeli Pulse

Despite Mr. Netanyahu's bravado, an opinion poll conducted by the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, in March last year showed that while 28% of the Israelis opposed annexation, 11% supported full annexation with political rights for the Palestinians and 16% full annexation with no political rights for Palestinians. In addition, 15% were for partial annexation and 30% expressed no views. An interesting, unprecedented, entrant in the debate is an opinion article, titled "It's either Annexation or Normalization", written in Hebrew by the United Arab Emirates Ambassador in Washington and published in an Israeli newspaper, Yediot Ahronot. It urged the Israeli government to desist from the contemplated move.

The Effect of The Plan

What would be the consequences of such a move? Would Palestinians living in annexed areas, and owning around 23% of its land retain their private property? Would they be enshrined in a legal framework of a two-class population divided by ethnicity and given Israeli residency as a category of "subjects" of the annexing entity? Would they be on a par with Israeli Arabs of Palestinian origin (Muslim, Christian and Druze) who together constitute about 20% of Israel's population? Above all, will it take away from the Palestinians the right to have their own state under the right of national self-determination recognised times without number by the international community? Would there be demographic consequences? **Israel, by its foundational proclamations, "is not a Jewish state only because most of its inhabitants are Jews. It is state for the Jews wherever they may be, and for any Jew who wishes to be here". Its official ideology of Zionism (somewhat analogous to other doctrines of strident nationalism of the 20th century) was described much earlier by Vladimir Jabotinsky as "a colonizing adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force".** Ever since the war of June 1967, the Israeli effort has been to procrastinate a settlement and change ground realities. Israel today is member of the international community and contributes to international cooperation. It has succeeded in normalising its relations with a wide range of countries. A concomitant of this is the observance of globally accepted norms of state conduct. A reluctance to do this is premised on the support of "powerful friends" and imperatives of geopolitics. Must this necessarily have permanence? The record of





Palestinian resistance and of protest movements the world over show that injustice and denial of rights has no permanence and, as Jean Jacques Rousseau said a long time back, "the strongest is never strong enough to be always master unless he transform his power into right, and obedience into duty".

For New Delhi

India has a substantive relationship, reaching strategic dimensions, with Israel. It is mutually beneficial. **India's amity with the Palestinian people, and its principled support to their cause, predates India's own independence.** On the global stage, we have invariably supported the UN Security Council and General Assembly Resolutions supportive of the Palestinians. At this critical juncture, and now that we are back on the Horseshoe Table, would we support an annexation in contraventions of international legality and of our own commitments?

Why Turkey Wants to Convert Hagia Sophia Into A Mosque

→ Turkey's highest court this week convened to decide whether Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia museum can be turned into a mosque. The court's ruling is likely in two weeks. **The 1,500-year-old structure, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, was originally a cathedral before it was turned into a mosque.** In the 1930s, **Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, shut down the mosque and turned it into a museum in an attempt to make the country more secular.** There have been calls for long from Islamist groups and nationalists in the country to convert the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. Last year, just days ahead of the local elections, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had said it had been a "very big mistake" to turn the Hagia Sophia into a museum and that he was considering reverting it.

What is the Hagia Sophia?

The construction of this iconic structure in Istanbul started in 532 AD during the reign of Justinian I, the ruler of the Byzantine Empire, when the city was known as Constantinople. The structure was originally built to become the seat of the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church and remained so for approximately 900 years. In 1453, when Constantinople fell to Sultan Mehmet II's Ottoman forces, the Hagia Sophia was ransacked by the invading forces and turned into a mosque shortly after. The structure of the monument was then subjected to several interior and exterior changes where Orthodox symbols were removed or plastered upon and minarets were added to the exterior of the structure. For a long time, the Hagia Sophia was Istanbul's most important mosque. In 1934, Ataturk ordered that the Hagia Sophia be converted into a museum. It opened to the public in 1935.

What Is the Controversy About?

When Erdogan entered politics a little less than three decades ago in Turkey, observers say the status of the Hagia Sophia was not particularly on his agenda. On the contrary, he once objected to the calls to convert it into a mosque. But his rhetoric changed in 2019 during municipal elections in Istanbul that he ended up losing. The next instance when Erdogan brought up the subject of converting the Hagia Sophia coincided with US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Observers believe that Erdogan's plans for the conversion of the Hagia Sophia are closely connected with his attempts to score political points more than anything else and perhaps to drum up political support that he has seen diminishing following his loss in Istanbul's municipal elections last year.



Why Is Greece Objecting to The Conversion of Hagia Sophia?

The controversy surrounding the Hagia Sophia comes at a time when there have been diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Greece over other issues. In May this year, Greece objected to the reading of passages from the Quran inside the Hagia Sophia on the 567th anniversary of the Ottoman invasion of the former Byzantine capital, another instance of disagreement between the two countries regarding the conversion of the Hagia Sophia. Greece's Foreign Ministry had issued a statement saying this move was a violation of UNESCO's 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage'. Greece had said the Hagia Sophia had "been designated a museum of world cultural heritage and is currently being used to promote other purposes". Turkey responded by saying that Greece's objections to the reading of passages from the Quran were indicative of its "intolerant psychology". According to observers, the view among some within Turkey's political circles is that the status of the Hagia Sophia is a domestic matter where the interference of "international players" is not welcome.

What Is Next for Hagia Sophia?

Local news reports suggest that Erdogan has ordered his government to hold prayers at the Hagia Sophia on July 15 to commemorate the four-year anniversary of the 2016 failed coup attempt against his government. Experts say while Erdogan doesn't need the courts to decide on the fate of the Hagia Sophia, they believe legal rulings will add legitimacy to his proposals. There has also been little opposition to these plans within Turkey, they say, because religious minorities do not wish to be involved in what is seen as a polarising subject. Last month, Greece had appealed to UNESCO, objecting to Turkey's moves on grounds that the conversion would violate international conventions. For its own part, UNESCO too has denounced Turkey's plans. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the representative of Orthodox Christians, said he was "saddened and shaken" over Turkey's attempts to convert the Hagia Sophia. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had stated that converting the Hagia Sophia would mean that the structure would not be able to "serve humanity as a much-needed bridge between those of differing faith traditions and cultures".

Li Zhenheng: The Photographer Who Documented the Cultural Revolution

- Chinese photographer Li Zhenheng, who is known for his coverage of the Chinese Cultural Revolution during the 1960s, died at the age of 79 in New York City. His work remains an important source of rare documentation of a period marked by purges, murders, anti-intellectualism and chaos in China. While the exact date of Zhenheng's death is not known, an article posted on the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press's WeChat account said he died of a cerebral haemorrhage after many days of hospitalisation.

Who Was Li Zhenheng?

Zhenheng was born on September 22, 1940 in the north-eastern province of Liaoning, which at the time was under Japanese military observation. According to information on the Red Colour News Soldier website – the name of Zhenheng's book of photos on the Cultural Revolution – Zhenheng's mother died when he was three and his older brother, who was a member of Mao Zedong's army, was killed in the civil war. In 1963, he found a job as a photographer at the Heilongjiang Daily, which coincided with the start of the Socialist Education Movement, as a result of which Zhenheng went back to the countryside where he lived with peasants and studied the work of Zedong. In May 1966, Zedong launched the Great



Proletarian Cultural Revolution, but it was not easy to capture this movement given the restrictions on depicting “negative” scenes through photography. The name of his book ‘Red Colour News Soldier’, published in 2003, comes from the red armband of the Red Guards, required to be worn so that he could photograph without harassment. As a result, he not only took propaganda photographs required by the newspaper he was working for but even “negative” ones, whose negatives he hid under the floorboards of his apartment for years. Even so, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, in September 1969, Zhensheng along with his wife Zu Yingxia was sent to the Chinese “gulag” where they spent two years doing hard labour. He eventually returned to the newspaper and became the head of the photography department in 1972.

What Was the Cultural Revolution?

After the failure of the “Great Leap Forward” (1958-1962), during which time an estimated 30-45 million people died, Zedong was eager to assert himself after being side-lined in the Communist Party of China (CPC) and he saw such an opportunity in the Cultural Revolution, a way to weed out the “revisionists” and “reactionaries” from China. The May 1966, notice announcing the Cultural Revolution said, “The whole party must follow Comrade Mao Zedong’s instructions, thoroughly expose the reactionary bourgeois stand of these so-called academic authorities,”. From June 1966 onward, schools and universities were shut down since children and students were expected to take part in the Red Guard activities and were urged to attack the “counter-revolutionaries”. During this time, millions of people were persecuted and many officials within the party, considered to be enemies were jailed, tortured or driven to suicide. According to Jacques Menasche, who has contributed to the text of Zhensheng’s book, by the fall of 1966, Zedong had become to most Chinese, a “living god” made possible by popular songs, editorials that extolled his virtues as millions travelled to Beijing, sometimes on foot to get a glimpse of him. “Mao managed such sweeping control over the country through a propaganda campaign of unprecedented scope,” Menasche writes. The presence of Mao’s slogans on the walls of factories and across “every” newspaper, “put his likeness into every home on posters, buttons, fabrics and dishes. Mao was simultaneously ever-present (in image) and inaccessible (in person).” In an interview he gave to The New York Times in 2018, he said, “No other political movement in China’s recent history lasted as long, was as widespread in its impact, and as deep in its trauma as the Cultural Revolution,”.

How New Hong Kong Security Law Gives China More Controls on City State

- At 11 pm on Tuesday, an hour before the 23rd anniversary of Hong Kong’s transfer from Britain, China unveiled a sweeping new national security law for the island city, taking aim at the pro-democracy movement that had captured global attention since last year. Titled ‘The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’, the legislation was “unanimously” passed by the Chinese parliament earlier that day, and subsequently made a part of Hong Kong’s Basic Law. The far-reaching law, which greatly expands Beijing’s power in Hong Kong, has been criticised by the United States as “draconian”. The United Kingdom has also called it passing a “grave step”.

New Law Targets Protesters with Harsher Punishments

The new law includes the following as offences– Secession, Subversion, Terrorist Activities, and Collusion with a Foreign Country or with External Elements to Endanger National

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



Security. All four offences can invite life imprisonment as the maximum punishment, followed by lesser penalties. The offences are widely defined. Collusion includes as an offence “provoking by unlawful means hatred among Hong Kong residents” towards Beijing or the city government. Terrorism includes “sabotage of means of transport, transport facilities, electric power or gas facilities, or other combustible or explosible facilities”, and “attacking or damaging the premises and facilities” of the city government is among the definitions of subversion. Taking aim at the perceived involvement of foreigners in city politics, the law also allows the prosecution of persons who are not the residents of Hong Kong for committing an offence under the law outside Hong Kong.

Office for Safeguarding National Security

The new national security law further blurs the distinction between the legal systems of semi-autonomous Hong Kong, which maintained aspects of British law after the 1997 handover, and the mainland’s authoritarian Communist Party system. **Bolstering its presence in Hong Kong, mainland China will establish a new department here called the ‘Office for Safeguarding National Security’.** With Beijing’s approval, the Office would be able to take over jurisdiction from the city’s independent law courts if a case is “is complex due to the involvement of a foreign country or external elements”, if “a serious situation” makes the local application of the security law difficult, or due to the occurrence of “a major and imminent threat to national security”. **In cases that are taken over by the Office, prosecutors as well as adjudicators will be appointed by mainland China, and Chinese procedural laws would apply.** Like their counterparts in India, Hong Kong courts are known to follow a strict interpretation of criminal statutes– offering a greater advantage for the person accused. Under the new law, however, the power of interpretation has been vested in the Standing Committee of the Chinese parliament, which could prescribe harsher sentences for the same offences. If a trial involves “State secrets” or “public order”, it could be closed to the media and the public; only the judgment would be delivered in open court. **The Hong Kong Police Force will also have a separate department to deal with national security matters, and the city’s Justice Department will have to form a specialised prosecution division.** Notably, the police will have sweeping powers to investigate offences, such as being able to search any premises, vehicles, aircraft; ordering the surrender of travel documents; confiscating property; and, upon the Chief Executive’s approval, being able to covertly investigate or tap phones– such powers that have traditionally required prior court approval, as per the South China Morning Post. **A new body called the ‘Committee for Safeguarding National Security’ will be formed with Hong Kong’s Chief Executive at its helm, and will be immune from judicial scrutiny.** The Committee, which will have a Beijing-appointed national security adviser, will be responsible for formulating national security policies among other tasks.

The National Security Quagmire

A former British colony, Hong Kong was handed over to mainland China in 1997, becoming one of its Special Administrative Regions. It is governed by a mini-constitution called the Basic Law – which affirms the principle of “one country, two systems”, and upholds Hong Kong’s liberal policies, system of governance, independent judiciary, and individual freedoms for a period of 50 years from 1997. **Under Article 23 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong was supposed to enact the national security law on its own. But, when the city government first tried to enact the law in 2003, the issue became a rallying point for massive protests that year. Ever since, the government steered clear of introducing the legislation again. The other way of implementing the law was by its inclusion in Annex III of the Basic Law– a list of**



legislations “confined to those relating to defence and foreign affairs as well as other matters outside the limits of the autonomy of the Region.” Adding a law to this list causes it to be enforced in the city by way of promulgation– meaning automatically being put into effect. Beijing on Tuesday chose this route.

Timbuktu, The Faraway Land That Still Isn't Far Enough for Coronavirus to Reach

→ It still holds our imagination as a metaphor for a chimera but COVID-19 has breached the end of the earth – faraway **Timbuktu in the Western African country of Mali**. The city, located 1,000 km from the capital Bamako, has already seen more than 500 cases, and, at least, nine deaths, making it one of the worst affected places in the country.

“A Place That Is Very Far Away”

The mystique of Timbuktu owes a lot to its inaccessibility, which continues even today. Located about 20 km away from the river Niger, on the southern tip of the Sahara Desert, there is nothing but thousands of miles of barren desert to its north. In its heyday, the city was both a great centre of learning and a prosperous trading outpost, dealing primarily in salt, gold, cotton and ivory. Since medieval times, the remoteness of Timbuktu, in the heart of sub-Saharan Africa, has fired the literary and cultural imagination of the West and appealed to adventurers with tales of the splendours that awaited those who managed to survive the arduous journey to it. “The rich king of Timbuktu has many plates and sceptres of gold... he keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court... There are numerous doctors, judges, scholars, priests – and here are brought manuscript books from Barbary, which are sold at greater profit than any other merchandise,” wrote the 16th century Moorish traveller, Leo Africanus, in his definitive *Descrittione dell’Africa* (Description of Africa). Africanus reportedly made the journey around 1510, when the city was at its peak. Historical accounts suggest that there have been settlements in Timbuktu since the early 12th century, when it was a local Tuareg outpost. But it soon established itself as an important serai or pit stop for camel caravans on the Saharan trade routes. According to legends, Timbuktu’s fame also spread across Europe when news of the 14th century king Mansa Musa’s opulence reached the Western world. On a holy pilgrimage to Mecca, Musa passed through the Egyptian capital, Cairo, where his largesse in distributing alms in gold coins reportedly crashed the price of gold in the land. Timbuktu came to signify a kind of El Dorado to the outside world, a place brimming with treasures, that revealed itself only to those who were lucky enough to reach its realm. The city would reach its pinnacle under the Songhai empire, one of Africa’s most influential ruling states in the 15th and 16th century.

Timbuktu today is a distant cry from what it used to be in its golden age. Still relatively inaccessible, it has been plagued by poverty, corruption, war and terrorism, following its years as a French colony. The Sahara Desert has been fast breaching its boundaries, the silting of the Niger River impacting its water supply. From 2008, acts of terrorism had impacted its fledgling tourism industry, prompting several nations to issue advisories against visiting the place. In 2012, first Tuareg-led rebels, and then, terror outfit al-Qaeda took hold of parts of northern Mali, including Timbuktu. The latter was neutralised by a French-led military operation in 2013. Peace was finally brokered in 2015 at the intervention of Algeria when the Tuareg rebels signed a peace agreement, but the region continues to remain impoverished and politically turbulent.



UN Rights Chief Slams Virus Response in China, Russia, U.S.

→ The UN rights chief on Tuesday said COVID-19 was being instrumentalised to silence free speech, citing China and Russia, while voicing alarm at statements in the U.S. that “deny the reality” of the virus. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet pointed to Russia, China, Kosovo, Nicaragua among others, where “threats and intimidation against journalists, bloggers and civic activists, particularly at the local level, (were being used) with the apparent aim of discouraging criticism of the authorities’ responses to COVID-19”. Ms. Bachelet also voiced concern about “severe restrictions on freedoms of expression” in Egypt and “excessive and arbitrary enforcement” of pandemic response measures in El Salvador. “Censorship and criminalisation of speech are likely to suppress crucial information needed to address the pandemic,” she told the 44th session of the UNHRC. The former Chilean president said it was vital for leaders to maintain “consistent, credible and fact-based communication” with citizens, praising South Korea’s “open” approach to its pandemic response. “In contrast, in Belarus, Brazil, Burundi, Nicaragua, Tanzania and the U.S. – among others – I am concerned that statements that deny the reality of viral contagion, and increasing polarisation on key issues, may intensify the severity of the pandemic by undermining efforts to curb its spread,” she said.

Foreign Affairs

Ladakh Through A Bifocal Lens: A Short Zoom-In, Zoom-Out History

Looking Back at An Ancient Land

Lying between the **Kunlun mountain range in the north and Himalayas to the south, Ladakh was originally inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent.** Historically the region included the valleys of Baltistan, Indus, and Nubra, besides Zaskar, Lahaul and Spiti, Aksai Chin, Ngari and Rudok. Major General Dr GG Dwivedi (Retd), an expert in Sino-Indian relations who has served in the region, says, “Located at the crossroads of important trade routes since ancient times, Ladakh has always enjoyed great geo-strategic importance.” **In the beginning of the first century AD, Ladakh was part of the Kushan empire. Later it changed hands multiple times, alternating between the kingdoms of Kashmir and Zhangzhung. In 1834, Gen Zorawar Singh, a general of Raja Gulab Singh who ruled Jammu as part of the Sikh empire, extended the boundaries of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s kingdom to Ladakh, which till the 15th century was part of Tibet and was ruled by dynasties of local Lamas.**

Partition, Pakistan And Chinese Occupations

Immediately after India’s Partition, tribal raiders from Pakistan attacked Ladakh. They captured Kargil, and were heading for Leh when they were confronted by the Indian Army, who got back Kargil. Although India has always considered Aksai Chin to be part of Jammu and Kashmir, in the 1950s the Chinese built a highway, called western highway or NH219, connecting Tibet with Xinjiang through this region, which was more easily accessible to the Chinese than to the Indians, who were across the Karakoram. India learnt of this road in 1957, and it was one of the causes of the 1962 India-China war, after which China strengthened its control over this region. China today claims Aksai Chin to be part of Hotan county of its Xinjiang province. Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley, which was part of the Baltistan

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur

region north of the Karakoram, to China following a Sino-Pakistani agreement signed on March 2, 1963.



The Strategic Importance of Ladakh

Gen Dwivedi says China's forays into the region began after the 1949 Communist Revolution, when Chairman Mao Zedong, a veteran of guerrilla warfare, began consolidating China's periphery as part of his expansionist designs. **The People's Liberation Army (PLA) occupied Tibet in 1951, and then began to eye Ladakh.** The reason was that the road connecting Kashgar in Xinjiang to Lhasa in Tibet (NH 219) had to pass through Aksai Chin, which was held by Indians but was seldom patrolled by them. The Tibetan revolt of 1959 and the Dalai Lama's flight to India saw China further strengthening its military presence in Ladakh to ensure the security of NH 219. **India reacted with its 'forward policy' as part of which it began setting up Army posts in the region to prevent Chinese expansion.** "This resulted in the initial clash between the Indian and Chinese forces in the Kongka Pass area in 1959. Later, Galwan Valley became the scene of action when the Indian Army established a post to cut off the Chinese post in the Samjunjing area, marking the beginning of the 1962 war," says Dwivedi.

Pangong Tso. The Contested Lake

In the latest faceoff, Indian troops first spied the Chinese on the banks of Pangong Tso. Dwivedi says this lake, which is one-third in India and two-thirds in China, is of great tactical significance to the Chinese who have built infrastructure along both its sides to ensure the speedy build-up of troops. **"Chinese incursions in this region aim at shifting the LAC westward**

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



so that they are able to occupy important heights both on the north and the south of the lake, which will enable them to dominate the Chushul Bowl,” says Dwivedi. The narrow Chushul valley, which lies on the road to Leh with Pangong Tso to its north, was an important target for the Chinese even during the 1962 war. It was here that the Battle of Chushul was fought.

Strategic SSN, To the Far North

The area spanning Galwan, Depsang plateau, and Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO), is called Sub-Sector North (SSN). Lt Gen B S Jaswal (Retd), former northern army commander, says this enclave that lies to the east of the Siachen glacier is of immense significance given its proximity to the Karakoram Pass, close to China’s western highway or NH 219 going to Aksai Chin. It’s the SSN that provides land access to Central Asia through the Karakoram Pass. Domination of this area is also crucial for the protection of the Siachen glacier, lying between the Salto ridge on the Pakistani side and the Saser ridge close to the Chinese claim line. The Galwan heights overlook the all-weather Durbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road, which connects Leh to DBO at the base of the Karakoram Pass that separates China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region from Ladakh. Domination over these heights allows China to easily interdict this road, says Gen Dwivedi. “Occupation of Galwan will neutralise the tactical advantage India gained by building the all-weather Durbuk-DBO road over the last two decades,” he said. Last year, the Border Road Organisation (BRO) made this rugged terrain even more accessible by completing the 430-metre-long Colonel Chewang Rinchen Setu (bridge) across the Shyok river. With this, the Darbuk route to DBO became available round the year, and the travel time of troops to the SSN was halved. Some analysts believe it was this bridge, coupled with the ongoing work on a link road to LAC in this area, which prompted the PLA to enter Galwan. The Chinese have also intruded into the Depsang plains near a place called Bottleneck point, an area 7 km away from an ITBP base on the newly-built Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road. They have done it in the past too, most recently in 2013 and 2015, coming almost 15 km inside the Indian LAC. But on both occasions, they were forced to retreat. Gen Dwivedi says SSN is critical to India also because it offers maximum scope for military collaboration between China and Pakistan against India by virtue of its location bordering the Siachen glacier.

- ➔ What It is in this context, that questions are now being raised about the failure of intelligence. It is axiomatic that leaders make better decisions when they have better information, and the enduring value of intelligence comes from this fundamental reality. Admittedly, the timing and nature of China’s actions should have aroused keen interest in intelligence circles about China’s strategic calculations. The Chinese build-up in the Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso and Hot springs-Gogra did not require any great intelligence effort, since there was little attempt at concealment by the Chinese. India also possesses high quality imagery intelligence (IMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities, distributed between the National Technical Research Organisation, the Directorate of Signals Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence and other agencies, which made it possible to track Chinese movement. Where, perhaps, intelligence can be faulted is with regard to inadequate appreciation of what the build-up meant, and what it portended for India. This is indicative of a weakness in interpretation and analysis of the intelligence available, as also an inability to provide a coherent assessment of China’s real intentions. Intelligence assessment of China’s intentions, clearly fell short of what was required. It is at the same time true that while India’s technological capabilities for intelligence collection have vastly increased in recent years, the capacity for interpretation and analysis has not kept pace with this. Advances in technology, especially Artificial Intelligence have, across the world, greatly augmented efforts at intelligence analysis. It is a moot point whether such skills were employed in this instance.



The failure to decipher China's intentions in time is no doubt unfortunate, but it has to be understood that deciphering China's intentions, understanding the Chinese mind (which tends to be contextual and relational), and trying to make sense of Chinese thinking, are an extremely difficult task at any time. Even so, since last year when China's economy began to show signs of a decline followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, China is known to have become extremely sensitive to what it perceived as efforts by others to exploit its weakness. It has often felt compelled to demonstrate that no nation should attempt to exploit the situation to China's disadvantage. India's intelligence and policy analysts obviously failed to analyse this aspect adequately, while trying to make sense of China's latest forward push. Another of China's current preoccupation, viz. that India is feeling emboldened because of its growing strategic alignment with the United States, should also have been adequately considered by the analysts, in any assessment of putative Chinese responses. **The principal responsibility for intelligence assessment and analysis concerning China, rests with the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), and to a lesser extent, the Defence Intelligence Agency.** It may not, perhaps, be wrong to surmise that **the decision of the NSCS to dismantle the Joint Intelligence Committee has contributed to a weakening of the intelligence assessment system.** In the case of the R&AW, lack of domain expertise, and an inadequacy of China specialists might also have been a contributory factor.

Limitations of Summit Meets

We cannot also minimise the adverse impact of certain policy imperatives. For one, the preference given recently to Summit diplomacy over traditional foreign policy making structures proved to be a severe handicap. Summit diplomacy cannot be a substitute for carefully structured foreign office policy making. Any number of instances of this nature are available. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Great Britain was one of the earliest victims of Summit diplomacy. The disastrous meeting between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and U.S. President Richard Nixon had long-term adverse implications for India-U.S. relations. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President George W. Bush did establish a rapport through frequent Summit meetings, but this was the exception rather than the rule. Currently, India's Summit diplomacy has tended to marginalise the External Affairs Ministry with regard to policy making, and we are probably paying a price for it. As it is, the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) stock of China experts seems to be dwindling, and its general tilt towards the U.S. in most matters, has resulted in an imbalance in the way the MEA perceives problems and situations.

Why China Factor Has Led to An Increase in Price of Heparin; Will Other Drugs Follow?

- India's drug pricing regulator has allowed pharmaceutical companies to increase the ceiling price of essential medicine heparin by 50 percent until December 31. This may only be the first of several drugs to get a price hike as the country tries to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak here as the nationwide lockdown and the 'China' factor takes its toll on India's pharmaceutical industry.

What Is Heparin and Why Is It Essential Here?

Heparin is a blood thinner that has long been used in patients vulnerable to blood clots in their legs, lungs, heart or other body parts. It is used to reduce their risk of heart attacks, strokes and pulmonary embolism. Several patients with critical illnesses, including those requiring kidney dialysis, are given the drug. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of



Health and Family Welfare included the drug in its clinical management guidelines for the treatment of Covid-19 patients in the ICU.

Why Did Companies Seek A Hike on Its Ceiling Price?

Because it is so essential to high-risk patients, the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) had capped heparin's ceiling price sometime in 2018. However, there have been instances of shortage of this drug during the pandemic, according to the drug pricing regulator. **This is because the active pharmaceutical ingredient (API), which forms a considerable amount of the cost of making the drug in India, has increased drastically. APIs are crucial elements in drug production as they give medicines their therapeutic effect. Since September 2018, the price of this API has shot up 211 per cent, according to an expert committee that looked into this matter. With the maximum price that companies can charge for the drug fixed, but the API costs rising, they claimed it had become unviable to continue manufacturing and selling the drug in India.** Companies like Gland Pharma, Biological E, Samarth Lifesciences, Abbott Healthcare, Troikaa Pharmaceuticals and Celon Labs market heparin products in India, according to pharmaceutical market research firm AIOCD Awacs PharmaTrac.

What Powers Did India's Pricing Regulator Use to Increase the Price of Heparin By 50 Per Cent?

NPPA used extraordinary emergency powers provided to it under paragraph 19 of the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 2013. This provision allows for the regulator to, in extra-ordinary circumstances, fix the ceiling or retail prices of any drug regardless of whether they were under or eligible for price control under normal circumstances. It also allows NPPA to increase or decrease their prices irrespective of the annual wholesale price index of that year.

Has This Been Done Before?

The first time NPPA increased the prices of medicines under price control was in December 2019, where it hiked, by 50 per cent, prices of 21 drugs integral to public health programmes and often used as the first line of treatment. This included the BCG vaccine for tuberculosis, vitamin C, antibiotics like metronidazole and benzylpenicillin, anti-malarial drug chloroquine and leprosy medication dapsone.

Is This Because Of India's Tensions with China?

While the development also comes at a time when tensions between India and China have been on the rise, it is separate from this issue. **The increase in heparin's API costs have happened over the course of the last two years. Even the costs of APIs for other drugs from China have been on the rise since before the clash at Galwan Valley.** According to one industry association, the spike in API costs during the pandemic are also **in part the aftermath of the lockdown in Wuhan.** Chinese firms took a hit when they had to shut their factories temporarily or were facing difficulties in exporting their APIs during their lockdown. Some of the hikes in API costs are because of such firms trying to recover the costs they endured from this impact, said the association. While there had been issues with delayed clearances of API consignments from China at Indian ports over the last fortnight, shipments of pharmaceutical products have been released this week, as per an export promotion body.



Will More Drugs See A Hike in Prices?

It is too soon to say which and how many drugs may see a hike in prices, but NPPA has received representations from different firms over the last two months at least for similar hikes in prices of other crucial medicines. Some of the representations have been for antibiotics and vitamins made from APIs majorly coming from China.

With Economic Measures, India Seeks to Turn Tables on China

- India is considering a range of economic measures aimed at Chinese firms amid the border tensions. The move to ban 59 Chinese apps may be just the start, with other measures likely to follow if tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) continue, without disengagement. On Friday, Power Minister R.K. Singh said India would not import power equipment from China – worth \$2 to \$3 billion annually – while Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari said on July 1 Chinese companies would not be allowed to take part in road projects. Reports have said the government is considering trade and procurement curbs targeting China. The government is also increasing scrutiny of Chinese investments in many sectors, and weighing a decision to keep out Chinese companies from 5G trials. The moves could potentially cost Chinese companies billions of dollars. The message from Delhi is it cannot continue trade and investment relations as normal, if China does not agree to return to the status quo of April before its incursions along the LAC began. The Chinese government has hit out at the measures, while state media have widely criticised calls in India to boycott Chinese goods. **China is itself no stranger to such moves, having frequently deployed economic countermeasures, from restricting market access to boycotting goods, in the midst of its own disputes, with countries ranging from South Korea and Japan to the Philippines. China's state media spearheaded a boycott of South Korean goods in 2016 and 2017, when Seoul deployed the U.S. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence missile system. China then placed curbs on outbound tourism to South Korea, and closed almost 90 Korean-owned Lotte Mart stores in the mainland. In 2010, China began restricting exports of rare earths elements to Japan – a key ingredient for many electronics industries – following a collision near disputed East China Sea islands. Two years later, mass protests were organised by China over the islands issue, which led to boycotts of Japanese brands. With the Philippines, a dispute over the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea in 2012 led to China curbing imports on bananas.**

China's Leverage

In all those relationships, China had particular leverage that it used to inflict immediate economic pain. In the India-China economic relationship, where trade is lopsided in China's favour, both sides have different levers that they could turn to, but options are tilted in China's favour because China is far less dependent on India's market than India is on Chinese imports. India's biggest lever is its market. For TikTok, one of the 59 apps banned, India is the biggest overseas market with more than 100 million users. **While the parent company ByteDance reported modest earnings of \$5.8 million in 2018-19, its first full year in India, a source close to the company told the Chinese finance magazine Caixin that ByteDance "is anticipating a loss of more than \$6 billion, most likely more than the combined losses for all the other Chinese companies behind the other 58 apps banned in India."** If India does have leverage that could hurt potential revenues of Chinese companies, the problem for New Delhi is China could inflict immediate economic pain should it choose to. In 2019-20, India's imports from China accounted for \$65 billion out of two-way trade of \$82 billion. India relies on China for crucial imports for many of its industries, from auto components to active



pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). Between 70% to 90% of APIs come from China. Industry representatives have expressed concern over delays in customs clearances. **If China curtailed exports to India, consequences would be more serious.** India faces difficult choices and needs to be selective in its measures, said former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran. “You have to choose areas where you don’t get hurt more than they do,” he told The Hindu. “TikTok is a good candidate as India is their largest market. Telecom is another. This is a huge market for Huawei.” Whether India’s measures will influence China’s behaviour on the border will ultimately depend on Beijing’s calculus, and whether its perceived gains from the current border stand-offs outweigh the potential costs of losing a key market.

Why We Can’t Easily Wipe Out China from India’s Silk Weaving Industry

→ At a time when Chinese goods are frowned upon and slogans of ‘down with China’ fill media air, there’s one industry that will simply come to its knees without its primary raw material from China – India’s silk weaving industry. “Without Chinese silk threads, not only will the entire industry come to a halt, but the heritage we have of woven silks, be it in Benares or elsewhere in the country will be lost,” says Varanasi-based master weaver Maqbool Hussain. **Nearly 80 per cent of the silk threads that weavers use across the country come from China. Of the rest, 10 per cent comes from Karnataka, and the rest from Bihar and Assam.** In India, there are primarily four types of silk thread sources – domestic, which include **mulberry** and **eri**, and wild that includes **tussar** and **muga**. “There have been alternatives from Vietnam and Korea, but their scales of production don’t match our demand,” says Hussain. Benarasi saris have been showpieces on the world’s stage, be it at London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, where the lavish use of zari and silk testified to the craft and skill of its weavers, or when the Vishwakarma exhibitions of the 1980s featured a collection of these saris. “Known for their exquisite workmanship, the **Benares saris long ago were made with tissue, silk, and fine pure zari, from silver threads coated in gold. If you melted a sari, you were left with a lump of metal that could fetch you a good sum in the days gone by. It was not unusual, therefore, for traders to go door to door and barter saris for bartans. The Surat zari of present times does not match that level of purity,**” says Jaya Jaitly, President-Founder, Dastkari Haat Samiti. **With the dependence on Chinese silk threads, the Benarasi silk sari has taken a different shine and no longer holds the heaviness that came with pure zari.** Secunderabad-based master weaver Gajam Govardhana, known for his ikkat dyeing tradition, testifies that silk weaving across the country today, from Salem and Erode to West Bengal, Rajasthan and Varanasi all depend on China for its threads. **The difference in quality between Chinese threads and threads from Karnataka is in the finish and thickness. Reeling is how the raw silk filaments are drawn out from the cocoon. And the machines in India do not give the smoothness or the shine that Chinese threads have. This leads to thicker threads which can be used on hand looms, but not on the warp in power loom because of the speed with which the yarn is woven – and the chances of the breaking are greater.** “Our sericulture predates even China’s and our threads from Karnataka have better depth and strength than Chinese silk threads. However, our handicap is in the reeling and finishing,” says Hussain. However, **many skilled handloom weavers continue to use silk threads from Karnataka in their weft while weaving saris, though all power loom weavers opt for Chinese threads for an even product.** Given that many weavers in Benares have shifted to the power loom, it’s not unusual for container loads of Chinese silk threads to arrive at local markets. “The cost of Chinese silk threads is almost the same as that from Karnataka, which is anywhere between ₹3,500 to ₹5,000 per kg. However, **with locally-made threads there is 25 per cent wastage after washing the threads,**” says Govardhana. **Silk threads are always washed to get rid of the cocoon coating, while**



Chinese threads do not require any washing. A Benarasi sari requires approximately 800 g silk threads for its weave, while an Ikkat sari needs a kilogramme. Govardhana faults the decrease in production in silk threads from Karnataka to the lack of support cocoon farmers receive. "Farmers who produce vegetables and fruits for big companies are given more wholesome support by the state, because of which cocoon farmers are left high and dry," he says. Jaitly believes that while Chinese silk threads are widely used, our own homegrown eri, tussar and khadi silk can be promoted and the cocoons made more accessible to weavers across the country. For alternatives, the government should create an infrastructure too, says Hussain. Govardhana believes subsidies alone mean nothing. There can be a way for weavers to become self-reliant. "The state can identify weavers who are good and skilled. Build them a house and give them about 3-acre land, where they can grow their own raw materials, be it cotton, silk or they can do farming. So that they can alternate between seasons and farm and weave accordingly," he says.

Reviving SAARC to Deal with China (Prabhash Ranjan - Senior Assistant Professor of Law, South Asian University, New Delhi)

- As India-China border tensions continue to fester, a hegemonic China, as part of its global expansionism, is chipping away at India's interests in South Asia. This should be a major cause for concern for New Delhi. China's proximity to Pakistan is well known. Nepal is moving closer to China for ideational and material reasons. China is wooing Bangladesh by offering tariff exemption for 97% of Bangladeshi products, and has intensified its ties with Sri Lanka through massive investments. According to a Brookings India study, **most South Asian nations are now largely dependent on China for imports despite geographical proximity to India.**

Reinvigorating SAARC

Several foreign policy experts argue that India's strategic dealing with China has to begin with South Asia. In this regard, it is important to reinvigorate SAARC, which has been in the doldrums since 2014. In the last few years, due to increasing animosity with Pakistan, India's political interest in SAARC dipped significantly. India has been trying hard to isolate Pakistan internationally for its role in promoting terrorism in India. However, as Professor S.D. Muni argues, Pakistan is not facing any isolation internationally. India started investing in other regional instruments, such as BIMSTEC, as an alternative to SAARC. However, BIMSTEC cannot replace SAARC for reasons such as lack of a common identity and history among all BIMSTEC members. Moreover, BIMSTEC's focus is on the Bay of Bengal region, thus making it an inappropriate forum to engage all South Asian nations. One way to infuse life in SAARC is to revive the process of South Asian economic integration. **South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world with intra-regional trade teetering at barely 5% of total South Asian trade, compared to 25% of intra-regional trade in the ASEAN region.** While South Asian countries have signed trade treaties, the lack of political will and trust deficit has prevented any meaningful movement. According to the World Bank, trade in South Asia stands at \$23 billion of an estimated value of \$67 billion. India should take the lead and work with its neighbours to slash the tariff and non-tariff barriers. There's a need to resuscitate the negotiations on a SAARC investment treaty, pending since 2007. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, intra-ASEAN investments constitute around 19% of the total investments in the region. The SAARC region can likewise benefit from higher intra-SAARC investment flows. Deeper regional economic integration will create greater



interdependence with India acquiring the central role, which, in turn, would serve India's strategic interests too.

Domestic Challenges

There are two major domestic challenges that India faces in revitalising SAARC. First, to reap political dividends at home, and for ideological reasons, there has been an unrelenting top-dressing of anti-Pakistan rhetoric and Islamophobia on the Indian soil. There's also a recurrent use of the 'Bangladeshi migrant' rhetoric. Such majoritarian politics influences foreign policy in undesirable ways. It dents India's soft power of being a liberal and secular democracy, which gives moral legitimacy to India's leadership in the region. This divisive domestic politics fuels an anti-India sentiment in India's neighbourhood. Second, the economic vision of the Modi government remains convoluted. It's unclear what the slogans of atma nirbharta (self-reliance) and 'vocal for local' mean. The government's economic advisers contend that this does not mean autarky. On the other hand, the Prime Minister and his Ministers are stating that India needs to cut down its dependence on imports, thus signalling a return to the obsolete economic philosophy of import substitution. If this marks sliding back to protectionism, one is unsure if India will be interested in deepening South Asian economic integration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi did well by reaching out to SAARC leaders earlier this year, but such flash-in-the-pan moments won't help without sustained engagement.

India, Bhutan Sign Pact for First Joint Hydel Project

- ➔ India and Bhutan took a major step forward for the construction of the 600 MW **Kholongchhu project**, their **first hydropower joint venture project in Bhutan's less developed eastern region of Trashiyangtse**. The project's "Concession agreement," which was signed in the presence via video-conference of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Delhi, and Bhutan's Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji and Economic Affairs Minister Loknath Sharma in Thimphu, marks a shift as it is the first time an India-Bhutan hydropower project will be **constructed as a 50:50 joint venture**, not as a government-to-government agreement. Speaking at the ceremony, both Foreign Ministers called the agreement a "milestone" in the India-Bhutan partnership, under which four hydropower projects have been built in the last 30 years totalling a capacity of 2,100 MW, and another two are under construction. The Kholongchhu project is one of four additional projects agreed to in 2008, as a part of India's commitment to help Bhutan create a total 10,000 MW of installed capacity by 2020.

Signed in 2014

The inter-governmental agreement for the Kholongchhu project was signed after prolonged negotiations on the structure of the joint venture, in April 2014, and the foundation stone was laid when Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Thimphu a few months later. However, **progress on preparing the site ground to a halt in December 2016 over India's new power tariff guidelines (on Cross Border Trade of Electricity - CBTE), until the government amended its guidelines after negotiations with the Bhutan government. During Monday's ceremony, the Bhutanese Foreign Minister said the delay had "some benefits" as many issues on the ground were ironed out during the period.** According to the agreement finalised, the construction for the Kholongchhu Hydro Electric Power (HEP) project will begin soon, and be completed in the second half of 2025.



Why Balochistan Liberation Army, Which Targets Chinese Interests in Pakistan, May Have Attacked Karachi Stock Exchange

→ Posted on Twitter and other social media, a photograph stamped with the letters B L A, showing four armed men in camouflage with a caption naming them and their “**self-sacrificing attack**” on the **Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi**, is being widely seen as a claim by the Balochistan Liberation Army for the attack. **The BLA is a Baloch secessionist militant group headed by UK-based Hyrbayair Marri**. Pakistan has long accused India of backing Baloch separatists and militants – an allegation India has always denied. It also alleges an Afghan hand in the movement. Monday’s attack appears to have been foiled at the gates of the PSE, where all four men were shot dead by security forces. A policeman and two security guards are also reported to have died. The four-armed attackers threw a grenade as they attempted to enter the complex. According to reports in the Pakistani media, they were carrying backpacks with food supplies and ammunition that seemed to suggest they were prepared for a long drawn out operation. If indeed this is an attack by the BLA, as the claim appears to suggest, this is their second time in Karachi, Pakistan’s business capital and its largest city where the country’s biggest port is located. It is also the capital of the Sindh province. The previous terrorist attack in Karachi was in November 2018, when the BLA claimed a strike on the Chinese consulate in the city, killing four people – two visa applicants and two policemen. The three attackers were killed by security forces. **There is a Chinese angle to Monday’s attack too. According to a December 2016 report in the Dawn newspaper, the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) sold 40 per cent strategic shares to a Chinese consortium comprising three Chinese exchanges – China Financial Futures Exchange Company Limited (lead bidder), Shanghai Stock Exchange and Shenzhen Stock Exchange – which bought 30pc of the strategic stock, and local financial institutions Pak-China Investment Company Limited and Habib Bank Limited, both of which bought 5 per cent each. The transaction was valued at \$85 million.**

In August 2018, a month before the attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, a suicide attack on a bus carrying Chinese engineers in Dalbandin caused injuries to three Chinese nationals. Last year, in a widely-shared video on Twitter and other social media, a purported member of the “Majeed Brigade” is heard warning Chinese President Xi Jinping to “get out of Balochistan”. In another video on YouTube, a former leader of the Majeed Brigade, “General” Aslam Baloch, alleges that the Chinese government is helping Pakistan security forces fight Baloch militants by providing them spying equipment. He also alleged that the Chinese are building military bases along the Balochistan coast. China is developing Gwadar Port in Balochistan as a key link in its Belt and Road Initiative. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor, that begins at Khunjerab Pass in Gilgit-Baltistan ends at Gwadar. It is envisioned as China’s superhighway to the oilfields of the middle-east. Hyrbayair Marri, who is said to lead the BLA, is the son of Khair Baksh Marri, the late head of the Marri, the largest Baloch tribe, and seen by the Pakistan security establishment as part of an axis of anti-Pakistan tribal chieftains, along with Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and Sardar Ataullah Mengal. Marri, who died in 2014, was a Baloch nationalist, and spent years in exile in Afghanistan. **Militant Baloch secessionism is low-intensity guerrilla warfare that has never gained critical mass except for a brief period in the 1970s, primarily because Balochistan is a thinly populated province. Some secessionists speak of Greater Balochistan, which also includes Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan province.**



Brief Reprieve

→ According to reports in Pakistan and India, the Financial Action Task Force, the global watchdog group, has decided to grant Pakistan and other countries on its watch list a three-month extension on fulfilling commitments, in view of the pandemic. Pakistan was placed on the **grey list or "increased monitoring" list** in June 2018, and given time until October 2019, in order to complete a **27-point action plan** on countering terror finance and anti-money laundering. Failing that, it would be put on the **black list of "high-risk jurisdictions" facing severe financial sanctions**. This means that in effect, Pakistan will have had at least one extra year to meet its deadlines, despite the fact that it has only completed about 14 points so far. The remainder is still a tall order, and **includes improving mechanisms to curb terror financing, amending laws to curb 'Hawala' transactions and placing sanctions against cash couriers who facilitate terror groups, completing the prosecution of groups banned by the UNSC, and converting madrassas run by them into formal schools**. Each item demands more accountability by Pakistan on terror groups, as well as a shift within its ruling establishment on the benefits of allowing such groups to exist at all.

Despite this being Pakistan's third stint on the FATF watch list (prior occasions were in 2008 and 2012-2015), there is little evidence that it has yet internalised that message. In a U.S. report on terrorism released last week, Pakistan remains a "safe haven" for most UN proscribed groups. The report also adds that its steps to prosecute certain leaders of JeM and LeT are inadequate. In the past year, Pakistan has pursued indictments against LeT leaders, but not on serious charges, and even 26/11 mastermind Hafiz Saeed has only been convicted for "being part of a banned terrorist outfit" and for "having illegal property". Meanwhile, LeT operations commanders Zaki Ur Rehman Lakhvi, Sajid Mir, and JeM chief Masood Azhar appear to be at large. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's reference in its Parliament to al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden as a "martyr" underlines the establishment's attitude to these groups. Pakistan's failed attempt to have the UNSC designate four Indians as terrorists last week – it was vetoed by the U.S. – speaks to its lack of credibility on the issue. **Pakistan is counting on its role in facilitating the Afghanistan peace deal by pushing Taliban leaders to participate in order to mitigate its troubles at the FATF, and with support from countries keen to conclude the Afghan deal, may even ensure a few more extensions for its government**. Eventually, given the rigorous FATF action plan, and the combined pressure of countries in the group, Pakistan would do well to realise that only clear and consistent actions would free it from the commitments at the FATF. In any case, giving a free rein to terror groups cannot be in its own interest.

India Loses Jurisdiction Over Italian Marines Case

→ The long quest for justice for the two Kerala fishermen shot dead by Italian marines from the Enrica Lexie about 20.5 nautical miles off India's coast in February 2012 has ended in disappointment. **An international arbitration court has ruled that India does not have jurisdiction to try the marines, who, it held, were entitled to immunity as they were acting on behalf of a state. The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague admitted that both India and Italy had concurrent jurisdiction in the matter but concluded that the marines' immunity precluded India's jurisdiction. In India's favour, the PCA found that the Italian vessel had violated the right and freedom of navigation of the Indian fishing vessel under UNCLOS, and that the action, which caused loss of lives, property and harm, merited compensation. It asked the parties to consult each other on the compensation due to India as a result. More significantly, the PCA rejected a key argument by Italy that India, by leading the Italian vessel**



into its territory and arresting the marines, violated its obligation to cooperate with measures to suppress piracy under Article 100 of UNCLOS. This may mean that the arbitration court did not view the incident as one related to piracy at all. The incident had caused national outrage as the public saw these as wanton killings, inasmuch as the circumstances indicated no attempt by the fishing vessel at piracy. The fishing vessel was within the country's Contiguous Zone and it was quite clear that the offence warranted arrest and prosecution under domestic law.

With the piracy angle ruled out, a regular trial was in order. The Union government should have taken over the prosecution and ensured a quick trial. However, as legal tangles were being sorted out, and India was dealing with the diplomatic fallout, the marines managed to obtain orders to leave the country. The Supreme Court ruled that only the Centre, and not Kerala, can prosecute the marines. A bigger legal issue, which caused more delay, came later. The National Investigation Agency invoked the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against Safety of Maritime Navigation and Fixed Platforms on Continental Shelf Act, 2002. This caused a diplomatic furore as it provides for the death penalty. The EU threatened to impose trade sanctions. Ultimately, it took time for these charges to be dropped. **The PCA's award, which is final and has been accepted by India, is a huge setback for the expectation that the two marines would face a criminal trial in India.** In the end, Italy succeeded in taking the matter out of India's hands. It should now make good on its commitment to have the marines tried under its domestic laws. The takeaway for India should be the lessons, in the legal and diplomatic domains, that can be drawn from the experience.

- ➔ The Government of India said it was studying an international tribunal's ruling that the Italian marines accused of killing two fishermen in the waters off the Kerala coast on February 15, 2012, held "immunity" and would face a trial in Italy, not India. **While the tribunal held in Italy's favour the main submission, of jurisdiction, it found merit in India's counter-claim that the marines on board "Enrica Lexie" had violated the freedom of navigation rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) by shooting at fishing boat "St. Antony" and should pay compensation to the victims' families, the boat owner and crew members.** In their defence, the marines claimed they mistook the fishermen for "pirates" and that the shooting occurred in international waters.
- ➔ Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said, "The tribunal observed that India and Italy had concurrent jurisdiction over the incident and a valid legal basis to institute criminal proceedings against the marines. However, it found that the immunities enjoyed by the marines as State officials operate as an exception to the jurisdiction of the Indian courts and, hence, preclude them to judge the marines. India has taken note of the award and will be in touch with relevant entities on the matter." The Italian government, which was the plaintiff, said it would carry out the decision of the arbitration court "in a spirit of cooperation" with India. As a result, Italy will resume its criminal investigation into the 'Enrica Lexie' case, while India "is required" to cease exercising its jurisdiction on the marines.
- ➔ It also struck down Italy's claim that the marines, who had been kept mostly at the Italian Embassy in New Delhi before being repatriated by the government in September 2014 and 28 May 2016, were entitled to any compensation at all.

[How Will the Ban of TikTok And Other Chinese Apps Be Enforced; What Will Be the Impact?](#)

- ➔ India banned 59 apps originating from China, including very popular ones like the short video platform TikTok, UC Browser, file sharing app ShareIt, and CamScanner, which allows iOS and Android devices to be used as image and document scanners.



What Is the Legal Basis for India's Action?

The ban has been enforced under **Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000** ("Power to issue directions for blocking for public access of any information through any computer resource"): "Where the Central Government or any of its officers specially authorised by it... is satisfied that it is necessary or expedient so to do, in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognizable offence relating to above, it may... by order, direct any agency of the Government or intermediary to block for access by the public or cause to be blocked for access by the public any information generated, transmitted, received, stored or hosted in any computer resource." The Ministry of Information and Technology has said that it "has received many complaints from various sources including several reports about misuse of some mobile apps... for stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users' data in an unauthorised manner to servers which have locations outside India". Since this "ultimately impinges upon the sovereignty and integrity of India, is a matter of very deep and immediate concern which requires emergency measures", it has said.

How Will the Ban Be Enforced?

The notification is expected to be followed by instructions to Internet service providers to block these apps. Users are likely to soon see a message saying access to the apps has been restricted on the request of the government. However, while this will impact apps like TikTok and UC News that need a live feed to serve any purpose, users might still be able to continue using apps that don't need an active Internet connection to be used. But further downloads of these apps, like CamScanner, are likely to be blocked on Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store.

What Will Be the Impact of The Ban?

Some apps on the banned list are very popular in India, especially TikTok, which has over 100 million active users in the country, mainly in the heartland. New social media platforms like Helo and Likee, as well as video chat app Bigo Live are immensely popular among Indians who are not comfortable in English. These users will have to look for substitutes. Also, most of these platforms have Indian creators, for many of whom this is the only source of income. Many of these apps have offices and employees in India, and a few thousand jobs could be at stake.

Retaliatory Step Signals Intent, Blocks China Access to Growing Youth Market

- In its exercise of coercive diplomacy with China amid the tense standoff in Ladakh, the government has, for now, picked up a low-denomination item – mobile apps, given their limited impact on Indian businesses but one that has a disproportionately large presence in the mass consumer segment. Banning 59 mobile apps that have Chinese overhang is both a statement of intent and a strong signal. This may not hurt India given the alternatives in the app space but for China, the Indian app market is growing and valuable. More so because internet costs here are one of the lowest in the world, and consumers number over 800 million. Nearly half of these smartphone users are below 25 and hungry for content on their devices. This is probably the first big action that hits Chinese business interests in India. Two months ago, in April, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, made it mandatory for foreign direct investment from neighbouring countries to take prior



government approval. This was also aimed at curbing opportunistic takeovers/ acquisitions of Indian companies during times of the Covid-19 pandemic, when valuations were at new lows. **As against the strategy of stopping physical goods, which could be challenged by China at the World Trade Organisation, this focus on the technology sector is being seen as one that could be more effective from New Delhi's perspective.** A ban on physical goods will also adversely impact India's business and economy while hardly making a dent on China's. This may, however, be just the first rung in what could be an escalatory ladder.

- While the FDI approval norms were changed citing concerns over hostile takeovers, analysts tracking Chinese investments said, it would make it difficult for Chinese tech giants such as Tencent and Alibaba to invest in Indian IT start-ups. Over 2015-19, Chinese investors including Alibaba, Tencent, TR Capital and Hillhouse Capital, have invested over \$5.5 billion in Indian start-ups, according to Venture Intelligence that tracks private equity, venture capital, M&A transactions and valuations, in India. In fact, Venture Intelligence data shows that **at least 16 of the 29 unicorns (start-ups valued at more than \$1 billion now) have at least one Chinese investor.** As India became part of the global trade, it really did not develop any specific China-centric policy, said a former Commerce Secretary. "Our policy boiled down to anti-dumping duty, safeguards and trade barriers," he said. However, now the government has started looking at specific policies in at least a few sectors like mobile manufacturing, active pharmaceutical ingredients and medical devices, he said.
- TikTok is currently the most downloaded mobile app in India, with more than 120 million active users, and that is seen as shaping a new youth culture, especially in the country's hinterland. Operated by tech giant ByteDance, the app enables users to create short videos and overlay voices or music and surpassed 2 billion downloads globally in April, according to San Francisco-based market intelligence firm SensorTower, Inc. About 30 per cent of TikTok's downloads came from India, according to the firm, even as India's share of the app's revenues and profits is lower than that in the home market of China and the US. TikTok, however, was in a clear expansion mode in India, adding to its staff strength and regional push, according to RoC filings made by ByteDance in recent months.
- Along with TikTok, the apps banned include WeChat, a messaging app, and Weibo, a Chinese social network that's akin to Twitter. Between 2012 and 2018, the time spent by an Indian watching online videos grew from an average of around 2 minutes a day to over 50 minutes a day, according to a report by the Publicis-owned media agency Zenith. While Google-owned YouTube has more users in India than TikTok, analysts see TikTok as having more potential in terms of personalisation of content and overall influence. TikTok's relentless push into India's hinterland is evidenced by the fact that the Chinese app supports over 15 Indian languages, enabling the app to hone regional talent in a very personalised manner. According to SensorTower data, India has been the biggest driver of TikTok installs, generating 611 million lifetime downloads to date, or 30.3 per cent of the total. China is the No. 2 country for installs, accumulating 196.6 million to date, or 9.7 per cent of all downloads, for its version of the app, known as Douyin. This figure does not include third-party Android store installs in the country. The US rounds out the top three countries for downloads, where it has registered 165 million installs, or 8.2 per cent of the total. TikTok has been blocked in India once earlier, when in May 2019 – in the run up to the general elections – the government banned the app's downloads for two weeks after the Madras High Court ruled that it could expose children on the app to graphic content or predators. TikTok had appealed and the court subsequently reversed its ruling. This time, though, the ban could be there to stay.



India's Torture Culture Needs to End Now (Ajit Prakash Shah - Retired Chief Justice, Delhi And Madras High Courts)

→ By now, everyone has heard of the tragic deaths of P. Jayaraj and J. Benicks, a father-son duo in a small town in Thoothukudi. Jayaraj, 58, was arrested by the police following an altercation with them on keeping his son's mobile phone shop open in violation of lockdown rules. After Benicks was also taken into custody, the two were mercilessly thrashed to death. **Being found guilty of the 'offence' of keeping a shop open during the lockdown would have ordinarily granted Jayaraj and Benicks a maximum of only three months of imprisonment.** The story, sadly, does not end with the police alone. Before the two men died, the police sought their remand, which a judge sitting in a court complex mechanically seems to have granted, without ever seeing the two men, or seeming to question the rationale for their remand. The series of events, starting with the cruel lockdown enforcement methods and concluding with the utterly gruesome and entirely avoidable deaths, is a sign that we are living with a completely broken system of law enforcement.

Endemic to Police Culture

Torture is, in fact, an integral part of police culture all over the country. Indeed, it would not be amiss to argue that this culture in India today is reminiscent of the brutality of the colonial police forces that we are so keen to forget. Official data also accept that police torture is a reality, but the quality of such data is always suspect. The pervasiveness of police torture is best understood in the compelling case found in reports made by NGOs and observers over the years, including by the Asian Centre for Human Rights, Amnesty International and People's Union for Democratic Rights. The data on torture show that it is not only an integral part of India's policing culture; in some investigations (such as terror cases), it is treated as the centrepiece. **The fact is that the current laws facilitate such torture, such as through the admissibility of confessions as evidence under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which continues refurbished as the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act.** Unfortunately, policing has also not mainstreamed the upgrade to newer technologies, like DNA analysis, which can directly impact law enforcement practices. What some have labelled as India's "public secret" is tiptoed around in the international arena. The official position on state-sponsored or state-endorsed torture can be seen in a 2017 quote by India's then Attorney-General. In his opening speech in Geneva at the country's universal periodic review at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Attorney-General invoked Gandhi and Buddha, stating that "India...believe[s] in peace, non-violence and upholding human dignity. As such, the concept of torture is completely alien to our culture and it has no place in the governance of the nation." This would be a textbook example of hypocrisy, if ever. Undoubtedly, the offending officers in the Thoothukudi case are being prosecuted, and some compensation will also be paid to the victims' families. But such piecemeal action is not what is needed. What we really need is a recognition that torture is endemic and a systemic problem, and **the only answer lies in stringent legal framework that is aligned with and committed to the principles of international law under the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) to which India has been a signatory since 1997, and a watertight enforcement mechanism that deters such practices.**

Supreme Court on Torture

Even before India signed the UNCAT, our Supreme Court had brought about glorious jurisprudence highlighting the many problems with the country's torture culture. In Raghbir

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Singh v. State of Haryana (1980), the Court was “deeply disturbed by the diabolical recurrence of police torture resulting in a terrible scare in the minds of common citizens that their lives and liberty are under a new peril when the guardians of the law gore human rights to death.” These sentiments were revisited in Francis Coralie Mullin v. Union Territory of Delhi (1981) and Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra (1987), where the Court condemned cruelty and torture as violative of Article 21. This interpretation of Article 21 is consistent with the principles contained in the UNCAT. The UNCAT aims to prevent torture and other acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment around the world. **Although India signed the UNCAT in 1997, it is yet to ratify it.** In 2010, a weak Prevention of Torture Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha, and the Rajya Sabha later sent it to a Select Committee for review in alignment with the UNCAT. But the Committee’s recommended law, submitted in 2012, never fructified, as the then UPA government allowed the Bill to lapse. In 2016, Ashwani Kumar, a senior advocate and former Union Minister of Law, sought the enactment of a torture law via a Supreme Court petition. By 2017, the Law Commission had submitted its 273rd report and an accompanying draft torture law. But the Supreme Court dismissed the petition on grounds that **the government cannot be compelled to make a law by mandamus; treaty ratification was a political decision; and that it was a policy matter.** A second petition on the issue filed by Mr. Kumar also met the same fate as the first one. This rejection was a sign of the Supreme Court turning its back on its own glorious jurisprudence, and its efforts to aid law-making in the past, whether in using the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women to reform the law around workplace sexual harassment; or customary international law in environmental cases; or the right to privacy – this long and varied list is revelatory of a proactive Court that sees itself as responsible for nudging Parliament into legislative action. Even with failings, the Commission’s draft Bill is better than not having one at all. A version based on this draft was circulated to State governments for views, but nothing has come of it, and nothing is likely to, either. This reluctance is arguably because all governments appear to collectively agree that police brutality is a necessary evil to maintain law and order.

#EndTortureToday

Neither the Home Ministry nor this government is likely to take up the torture law. Indeed, the manner in which the torture bill has been treated reveals a betrayal of the people of India by successive governments. There have been opportunities for 23 years to enact a law on torture, but they have been studiously avoided. State consultation also has no meaning. It is evident that all governments enjoy the status quo, where the police are used as a tool for self-preservation. Any disequilibrium is not politically desirable. As disheartening as this may seem, all is not lost. There is much inspiration around us. Days after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis in the U.S., when a policeman held him in an 8-minute-46-second-chokehold, the #BlackLivesMatter movement emerged, with many Indians joining in too. The movement, led by the people, started a national debate in the U.S. on policing, including radical reforms such as defunding and disarming the police. Arguably we need a people’s movement at home too that will bring about the necessary legislative changes that the Law Commission has suggested, and that encourages institutions to #EndTortureToday. Only the people can rise up against these practices, just as they are doing in other parts of the world. And by people, I include important stakeholders like the Bar, the media, civil society and student groups. Each of these have relevant roles to play in bringing about the change we want to see. It is merely a matter of who decides to pick up the mantle first.

➔ **In the last three years, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India has received nearly 5,300 complaints of custodial deaths (police and prison) and we can be sure that it is**

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only a fraction of the actual number of such deaths. If reporting such deaths is difficult, the legal process to investigate, prosecute and fix accountability has even more hurdles. This is evident from the fact that while government data recorded 1,727 deaths in police custody between 2000 and 2018, only 26 police officials were convicted. In a country where custodial torture and killing is an open secret, it is baffling that we still do not have a domestic law that enables torture prosecution by accounting for the particularities of custodial torture. We continue to struggle with the inadequacies of our regular criminal law in this regard.

An Issue Glossed Over

Despite a suggestion by the Law Commission of India that if a person dies in police custody the burden should be on the police to show that they are not responsible for it, the law still requires the prosecution to prove that the police caused the death.

Besides the usual police investigation into a custodial death, the law mandates an independent magisterial inquiry. It is perhaps a reflection of our institutional apathy that such inquiries have happened in only about 20% of custodial deaths. And to top it all, prosecution of police officials for custodial torture requires the sanction of the government. The question about why torture is rampant has no straightforward answers. One of course is that the system incentivises torture by seeking convictions without modernising the police force. However, police violence is not limited to investigations and goes well beyond that. The use of torture is also often justified by police personnel as being required to teach 'hardened criminals' on behalf of society. But here in killing Jayaraj and Benicks, the police seem to have inflicted violence out of sheer expectation of impunity. It reflects a deeply worrying aspect of torture where police unleash violence because they know that the chances of being held accountable are slim. The worst thing we can do now is to think of the incidents at the Sattankulam police station in Tamil Nadu as being perpetrated by a few errant police personnel. There is an institutional and public culture that breeds, protects and even celebrates this kind of violence. At the heart of that culture is our proclivity to embrace mob justice in situations where we feel it is 'deserved'. And in instances where we are forced to confront murders such as those of Benicks and Jayaraj, we must acknowledge that our celebration and tolerance of police brutality is just as much to blame as anything else. The blood of Benicks and Jayaraj are on all our.

Venugopal Gets A Year's Extension As A-G

→ The Union government has extended the term of K.K. Venugopal as Attorney-General (A-G) for one year, Tushar Mehta as Solicitor-General (S-G) for three years, beginning July 1, appointed six new Additional Solicitors-General (ASGs) and extended the tenure of five ASGs. While the A-G was reappointed by President Ram Nath Kovind, the other appointments were notified by the Law Ministry late on Monday after the Appointments Committee of Cabinet (ACC), headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cleared them. Mr. Venugopal was appointed in July 2017 after his predecessor Mukul Rohatgi resigned. Even though the usual tenure (including reappointment) of the A-G is three years, he has been given a one-year extension because he agreed for that period owing to his advanced age of 89. The AS-Gs who got a three-year extension are Vikramajit Banerjee, Aman Lekhi, Madhavi Goradia Divan, K.M. Nataraj and Sanjay Jain, an official release said. The senior advocates who have been appointed ASGs are Balbir Singh, Suryaprakash V. Raju, Rupinder Singh Suri, N. Venkataraman, Jayant K. Sud and Aishwarya Bhati. Besides reappointing Anil C. Singh as the ASG for the Bombay High Court and Satya Pal Jain for the Punjab and Haryana High Court, five new ASGs have also been appointed. They are Yezdezdard Jehangir Dastoor for the



Calcutta High Court, Chetan Sharma for the Delhi High Court, Sankaranarayanan for the Madras High Court, Krishna Nandan Singh for the Patna High Court and Devang Girish Vyas for the Gujarat High Court.

P.V. Narasimha Rao, The Subversive Insider (Parakala Prabhakar - Former Communications Adviser to The Government of Andhra Pradesh And Managing Director Of RightFOLIO, a Hyderabad-Based Knowledge Enterprise)

→ P.V. Narasimha Rao was, arguably, the first accidental Prime Minister of India. He was also an accidental Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Very few, if any, foresaw Rao to be Prime Minister in 1991. No one had expected him to become the Chief Minister of his State about two decades before that. Once in office, on both occasions, Rao brought in reforms that fundamentally changed the destiny of Andhra Pradesh and India. Rao, who would have turned 99 on Sunday, was essentially a mute rebel, intensely uncomfortable with the socio-economic ethos around him. The rebel in him was not in enough measure to make him an outsider, but was sufficient to mount an intellectual challenge from the inside. A combination of his discomfort with the status quo and his unwillingness to roll up his sleeves for an open fight turned him into a subversive insider. In both his roles as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and Prime Minister, he subverted the very structures that he was a definite yet uneasy beneficiary of. More than anything else subversion defines his long, successful but unspectacular political career. Temperamentally he preferred to avoid open fights. His inclination was for negotiation, compromise or, at best, a crafty rear-guard action. This perhaps enabled him to occupy strategic positions and carry out his project, but surely left him with no passionate following or a die-hard political constituency that owns him. In the event, this personality trait subverted his own place in the popular mind of India. As Chief Minister, he dismantled the political and economic power of the large feudal land-owning class, but without any grandstanding. He did not try to portray his measures as an all-out assault on the archaic structures of economic and social control. But they indeed were. His land reforms gradually squeezed the surplus capital out of the rural economy. That capital made its way into trade, industry and urban areas. The economic landscape of Andhra Pradesh was never the same again. This was an unlikely subversion because Rao was a member of that very land-owning class.

The 1991 Economic Project

His political rise owed much to the decline of regional satraps in the Congress system, the rise of its 'high-command culture' and the consolidation of the 'socialistic pattern of society' as its creed. However, as Prime Minister and Congress President, Rao defanged that arrogant culture and obliterated its socialist creed. **His liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation programme unleashed economic and social forces that changed India beyond recognition from what it was until then. The policy departures under his watch hurtled India into a different and hitherto unfamiliar political economy. Rather than describing it as an attempt to upend the Nehruvian legacy, he laboured to portray it as a continuation of Jawaharlal Nehru's vision and Rajiv Gandhi's dream – another characteristic subversive manoeuvre, not a frontal attack. The economic paradigm that he introduced then remains unchallenged even today. Since he left office, every major political formation in the country participated in successive Central governments or supported them from outside. But none could overturn the fundamentals of his 1991 economic project. Rao's subversion of the Nehruvian economic**



doctrine is irreversible. He disagreed with the imposition of Emergency but was reluctant to break ranks and openly defy his party high-command. He made peace with the rebel in him without ceasing to be an insider. He took the help of his friend Nikhil Chakravarthy to vent his dissent. He published a series of articles in Mainstream under the pseudonym 'A Congressman'. Again, the subversive insider in him answered the call of his conscience by mounting an intellectual challenge to Emergency. His passion for democratic values was evident during the days when the Bharatiya Janata Party was battling 'political untouchability'. Rao declared that BJP leaders too were elected to Parliament by the same political process as he and others in the Congress were and, therefore, one had to do business with them. That view was no less than blasphemy in the Congress of those days.

Shaping a New India

Rao learnt to keep quiet in about a dozen languages. He never claimed credit for his successes in the Punjab, Assam, Kashmir, and for dousing the fires of the Mandal agitation. He did not effectively defend himself when accused of inaction during the Ayodhya episode. He did not cultivate a regional, caste, ideological constituency. Nor did he cultivate a personal following. He stayed away from patron-client politics. Rejecting him, therefore, is no slight to any region, caste, or an ideological constituency. His party could easily disown him without fear of backlash. Today, no group owns or claims him as its own. Celebrating his achievements has no rewards; denouncing him has no punishment; ignoring him has no penalty. There is no one to celebrate his achievements in life; no one to bemoan his humiliation in death; no one to make a spirited demand for awarding the Bharat Ratna to him. Perhaps his subversive streak did not spare his own legacy. The Telangana government has begun celebrating his birth centenary on a grand scale. One hopes that its efforts would reclaim Rao's rightful place in the popular consciousness of the new India that he helped shape.

Does Geelani's Resignation Mark Waning of Separatism?

- The unexpected resignation of 90-year-old Hurriyat chairman Syed Ali Geelani from the conglomerate of separatist groups, left the already squeezed Kashmiri separatists in a state of shock and Pakistan in a corner. Mr. Geelani, suffering from multiple ailments and tended by two sons at his Srinagar residence, has been the face of hard-line separatism for many decades now. A close associate of Mr. Geelani, who refused to be named, said his resignation is aimed at both Pakistan and the redundant leadership around him. His resignation comes at a time when the separatists' constituency is raising questions over the Hurriyat's response to the Centre's decision to revoke J&K's special status last year. It remains to be seen if Mr. Geelani will also resign from his own party, the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat. Many see Mr. Geelani's move as his last bid to play "the politics of deathbed" and "fulfil his wish to die a martyr, who never compromised". From contesting Assembly elections in 1970s to issuing boycott calls against the same after 1990s, Mr. Geelani steered Kashmir's separatist movement and his ideas influenced both the people on the streets and the fast-growing militant cadre then. However, neither age nor health nor recent political events favour him anymore. Meanwhile, his resignation has paved the way for his old friend Muhammad Ashraf Sehrai to emerge as new 'old-guard' leader. Besides, it could also see the rise of younger leaders like Masrat Alam. The timing of Mr. Geelani's decision is also significant. It comes at a time when the Centre's hardball politics managed to end the separatist politics, if not the sentiment, in one stroke on August 5, 2019, and succeeded in putting a pressure on them, not to rally people against the decision to revoke J&K's special



status. His resignation may give a sense of defeat to his own supporters and a boost to the mainstream parties to make inroads into separatist constituencies.

Lax on Safety

→ Two deadly industrial disasters, in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, leading to the loss of at least eight lives and causing serious injuries to many, once again underscore the value of safety protocols. In a boiler blast at the Neyveli thermal power station, six people were killed and a dozen workers suffered severe burns, while a toxic chemical leak at a pharmaceutical plant in Visakhapatnam led to two deaths immediately. These and two other recent disasters, also at a Neyveli power plant and the LG Polymers factory in the Visakhapatnam area, have come at a stressful time when India is trying to find its feet in the midst of the pandemic. What happened in Neyveli is inexplicable, since the power producer had encountered a boiler furnace blowout only on May 7, and had ordered a review of its infrastructure and processes. Without meticulous care, boilers are dangerous pieces of equipment. High-pressure and superheated steam make for a lethal combination, if their release mechanism is not kept in good order, and there is an explosion. For this very reason, they are regulated strictly under the Indian Boilers Act, at least on paper. The terrible consequences of lax boiler safety were evident three years ago in Rae Bareilly, when a blast at an NTPC power plant killed a few dozen people. But States have clearly not internalised a culture of zero tolerance to boiler accidents. The gas leak in Visakhapatnam apparently involving benzimidazole, a chemical used in pharmaceuticals, raises questions on maintenance and operational procedures. The probe into how vapours of a stable but acutely toxic chemical escaped should lead to an upgrade to safety protocols. In the Neyveli incident, there is a suggestion that the boiler was not in operation as it had tripped and was in the process of being revived. Since the major operations of this equipment involve a furnace and production of steam, what led to an unexpected blowout? NLC India, a key power producer, has an obligation to present a transparent report on why its facilities are beset by mishaps. Occupational safety demands that boilers are operated by trained personnel, but some of those on the ground have been described as contract employees. It will take an independent probe to determine whether cost calculations guided staffing decisions in such a hazardous sector. The response of the Centre and States to industrial accidents is usually to stem public outrage by announcing compensation for victims. A transparent inquiry that leads to a fixing of responsibility and reform is a low priority. This culture must change. Such accidents are mostly preventable, and occur rarely in the industrialised world, because of impeccable attention to safety. India's aspirations to industrialise should be founded on safety.

Reading the Draft Environment Impact Assessment Norms

→ The Delhi High Court extended till August 11 the deadline for public feedback on the draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020. This was after the government had changed the deadline from August 10 to June 30. The Covid-19 emergency had delayed the publication of the draft in the Gazette by 19 days. So, when thousands emailed to seek an extension to the mandatory 60-day window for public feedback, the Environment Ministry top brass thought it fit to allow another 60 days until August 10. But Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar set the new deadline on June 30, limiting the extension to only 20 days. This did not go down well with activists who have been pushing for the draft's withdrawal altogether. Activists moved court, leading to the extension on Tuesday. Activists claim that far from an improvement, the 2020 draft is a regressive departure from the 2006 version it seeks to replace.



Background

A signatory to the Stockholm Declaration (1972) on Environment, India enacted laws to control water (1974) and air (1981) pollution soon after. But it was only after the Bhopal gas leak disaster in 1984 that the country legislated an umbrella Act for environmental protection in 1986. Under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, India notified its first EIA norms in 1994, setting in place a legal framework for regulating activities that access, utilise, and affect (pollute) natural resources. Every development project has been required to go through the EIA process for obtaining prior environmental clearance ever since. The 1994 EIA notification was replaced with a modified draft in 2006. Earlier this year, the government redrafted it again to incorporate the amendments and relevant court orders issued since 2006, and to make the EIA “process more transparent and expedient.”

The Contention

Though established to safeguard the environment, the EIA process, argue activists, often achieved the opposite by offering a façade of legal paperwork for a range of de facto concessions enjoyed by industries. For example, reports on projects’ potential (damaging) impact on the environment – the bedrock of the EIA process – are frequently shoddy and consultant agencies that prepare those reports for a fee are rarely held accountable. Lack of administrative capacity to ensure compliance often renders long lists of clearance conditions meaningless. Then there are periodic amendments exempting one category of industries or the other from scrutiny. On the other hand, developers complain that the EIA regime dampened the spirit of liberalisation, leading to red tape and rent-seeking. Delay in project clearance during the UPA-II rule became an election issue in 2014 when then prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi hit out at the Congress by claiming that files did not move in the Environment Ministry till “Jayanthi tax” was paid.

Red Flags

The 2020 draft offers no remedy for the political and bureaucratic stronghold on the EIA process, and thereby on industries. Instead, it proposes to bolster the government’s discretionary power while limiting public engagement in safeguarding the environment. While projects concerning national defence and security are naturally considered strategic, the government gets to decide on the “strategic” tag for other projects. The 2020 draft says no information on “such projects shall be placed in the public domain”. This opens a window for summary clearance for any project deemed strategic without having to explain why. Additionally, the new draft exempts a long list of projects from public consultation. For example, linear projects such as roads and pipelines in border areas will not require any public hearing. The ‘border area’ is defined as “area falling within 100 kilometres aerial distance from the Line of Actual Control with bordering countries of India.” That would cover much of the Northeast, the repository of the country’s richest biodiversity.

What’s Exempt

All inland waterways projects and expansion/widening of national highways – two focus areas of the government and championed by Nitin Gadkari, the minister in charge of the sectors concerned – will be exempt from prior clearance. These include roads that cut through forests and dredging of major rivers. The 2020 draft also exempts most building construction projects of built-up area up to 1,50,000 sq. m. This is a reiteration of the Environment Ministry’s December 2016 notification that was set aside by the National Green



Tribunal in December 2017. The government subsequently moved the Supreme Court but did not get any relief.

The Big Shift

The two most significant changes in the new draft are the provisions for **post-facto project clearance** and abandoning the public trust doctrine. Projects operating in violation of the Environment Act will now be able to apply for clearance. It is a reiteration of a March 2017 notification for projects operating without clearance. All a violator will need are two plans for remediation and resource augmentation corresponding to 1.5-2 times “the ecological damage assessed and economic benefit derived due to violation”. For such late applications, a developer will have to cough up ₹2,000-10,000 per day for the period of delay. Consider the impact of this penalty on, say, an illegal sand miner who takes out several truckloads every day. **In an order on April 1, the Supreme Court held “ex post facto environmental clearances” contrary to law. It said: “Environment law cannot countenance the notion of an ex post facto clearance. This would be contrary to both the precautionary principle as well as the need for sustainable development.” The 2020 draft also spells out how the government will take cognisance of such violations. It has to be reported either by a government authority or the developers themselves. There is no scope for any public complaint about violations. Instead, the reliance is on the violators to disclose, Suo motu, that they broke the law.**

Legal Question

An EIA notification is issued under Section 3 of the Environment Protection Act, 1986, to impose restrictions on setting up new projects or expansion or modernisation of existing projects. The section stipulates that such measures must benefit the environment. In the April 1 order, the Supreme Court also said: “For an action of the Central government to be treated as a measure referable to Section 3, it must satisfy the statutory requirement of being necessary or expedient for the purpose of protecting and improving the quality of the environment and preventing, controlling and abating environment pollution”. As the window for public feedback to the 2020 draft was extended on Tuesday, its various provisions aimed at facilitating the government’s doctrine of “ease of doing business” keep open the question if the notification is aligned to the purpose of the Environment Act.

Why Is Trouble Brewing Around the Statue of Unity in Gujarat?

- **The Statue of Unity (SoU) site in Kevadia village** is in the spotlight again, after the Gujarat government tightened vigil around it to prevent villagers from protesting by farming on land acquired by it for building various infrastructure to boost tourism. On June 17, the Narmada district administration formed five teams to keep vigil on the acquired farmlands in six villages around the SoU recently fenced by the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (SSNNL). Since then, four cases of trespassing have been registered against villagers in Gora, Navagam and Limdi. The villages that protested in May and June when SSNNL began fencing the land after the Gujarat High Court dismissed their petitions, include Vaghadiya, Kevadia and Kothi.

The Background

The Gujarat government had originally acquired the land in 1961, for the construction of the Narmada dam canal and subsequently transferred possession to SSNNL, a wholly-owned Gujarat government public limited company that was incorporated in March 1989 to execute



and manage the Sardar Sarovar Dam project. SSNNL was part of the trust that built the 182-metre statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on behalf of the government of Gujarat and continues to manage the structure. The Gujarat government, last year cleared a bill to set up a Statue of Unity Area development authority to help expedite projects in the area that is predominantly tribal. Although the SSNNL has almost completed the fencing of the land, about 250 original landholders and their heirs are yet to accept the compensation offered by the SSNNL. General Manager (Technical & Co-ordination) of Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Limited (SSNNL) M B Joshi, said, "A significant time has passed and the younger generation may not even know the facts of the compensation awarded to their forefathers. Moreover, we cannot consider the third or fourth generations of the landholders as beneficiaries. The younger generation feels they are not getting anything. The value of the cash compensation has now gone down and the market value of the lands is high. We are willing to discuss the compensation and take their suggestions."

What Villagers Argue

The villagers of Limdi, Kevadia, Vagadiya, Navagam, Kothi and Gora say that the government had acquired the land 59 years back, for the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam, but is now intending to put the land to use for other commercial purposes and not for the dam, which is why the SSNNL claim on the should be invalidated. They have been backed by the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) founded by Chhotu Vasava who has also called it the 'Statue of Displacement' and the Congress which also staged a demonstration against the police detaining protesting tribals. The six villages filed a PIL in Gujarat High Court protesting the acquisition and calling the compensation offered "meagre". The HC dismissed their petition in May, after which the SSNNL began fencing the land. After several incidents of trespassing, the police pitched a tent on one of the hillocks for a commanding vigil of the area. On June 25, a group of women from Kevadia village led by a villager Leela Tadvi, took over the tent and declared that they would not move till the police removed it. Deputy Superintendent of Police, Kevadia, Vani Doodhat clarified that the tent was only for a panoramic view of the area as "there is sensitive installation with Narmada dam and Statue of Unity" and that it was not for "vigil on their land". Predominantly a population of Tadvi tribals, two of the six villages, Kevadia and Vagadiya, are bitter about being called "illegal occupants" on their own farmlands. The land acquired from both these villages faces the main road and is in close proximity to the SoU where hotels and resorts are coming up.

What SSNNL Says

In its reply to the High Court, SSNNL said that the government acquired physical possession of land in five villages measuring 1814.65 acres and paid compensation packages. But since the lands were not utilised, the villagers returned to their lands and subsequently the original landholders died. According to SSNNL, as per the Narmada Waters Dispute Tribunal (NWDT) Award of 1979, the six villages had 238 landholders, of which about 105 original landholders are yet to agree upon the compensation package. Similarly, 241 men, sons of the original landholders, were counted as beneficiaries and of these, about 120 are yet to accept the compensation.

Rights of The Tribals

Kevadia colony, in Nandod taluka of Narmada district, is a Schedule V area where the provisions of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas), Act, 1996 (PESA) are in force. Both Schedule V and PESA provide for the rights to territorial integrity where the tribal



panchayats have to decide the course of development and also land acquisition. The laws prevent any transfer of tribal lands to non-tribal entities. However, villagers have been claiming that they have not been taken into confidence in the plan to develop Kevadia, as a tourist hub.

What Did It Take for Indian Railways to Achieve 100% Punctuality?

- The Indian Railways has announced that it achieved 100 per cent punctuality of its passenger trains on July 1, a never-before feat. Its previous best on-time performance, according to the Railways, was 99.54 per cent on June 23, when just one train got delayed.

Is This A Big Deal?

This is no mean achievement – it is indeed not an easy ask given all the constraints that the Railways usually face while running a train on its designated path and time slot. **It is important, however, to remember the context – very few trains are running now, and the punctuality of the Railways can hardly be compared with its own performance on this count in pre-Covid times, when it ran over 13,000 passenger trains and over 8,000 freight trains every day. The 100 per cent punctuality on July 1 has been achieved when the network is running just 230 passenger trains – along with about 3,000 loaded freight trains and 2,200 empty ones.** The reasons that usually because delays have been systematically eliminated, a spokesman for the Railways said. Also, **trains that are delayed by up to 15 minutes are considered to have been on time, as per practice.**

Why Do Trains Get Delayed, Anyway?

There are a number of reasons, which is also why the achievement of the Railways is significant. There are unforeseen situations such as a failure of assets like the signalling system and overhead power equipment. Several types of breakdowns can occur, related to rolling stock, tracks, etc., that make a train lose time along the way. Then there are external unforeseen problems like run-over cattle and humans, agitations on the tracks, and the like.

And What Have the Railways Been Doing Right?

“The maintenance of tracks was carried out in a quick time during the Covid period in various critical sections, so the average speed increased, and stretches of slowing down were minimised,” the Railways spokesperson said. “Better and modern signalling is also making an impact. Another reason is better planning and operations analysis.” He attributed this to better monitoring at the Division level, and said that the entire organisation at every level was focussed on this.

How Do the Delays Impact the Overall System?

In normal times, these failures take away a lot of scheduled time when the train is detained even for a short time, because making up the lost time during the remainder of the journey is a tricky business. It's not as though a train can just run faster to make up for lost time. In a network chock-a-block with trains, a train hardly ever has such leeway built into its pre-set path. Any train that gets delayed inordinately due to whatever reason during the journey theoretically eats into the “path” – or time slot allotted on the track – of another train. It then becomes a matter of which train to prioritise. Conventionally, Rajdhani's and premium trains get priority of path over ordinary mail/express trains. Usually in railway operations, a train running on time, maintaining its schedule on its given path, is not disturbed to make space



for a train that has suffered irredeemable delays along the way and is now hopelessly “out of path”, so to speak. Freight trains, whose runs are not exactly time-sensitive, are usually held up to make way for passenger trains.

But Why Do the Railways Have to Juggle Operations in This Way?

It's a constantly dynamic scenario in which railway operations professionals take calls all the time. At the heart of the problem is network capacity constraints. **Which basically means that there are more trains than the network can handle in a given time bracket. Around 60 per cent of all train traffic is on the Golden Quadrilateral, even though it represents just about 15 per cent of the total network.** There are projects to enhance capacity by building additional lines and modernising signalling systems, etc. The Railways are working on what is called a “zero-based timetable”. In this concept, which is to be introduced soon, every train that enters the network is justified based on needs and costs. It is expected to make train operations more seamless.

From Pinaka To Astra, The New Weapons DAC Has Approved ‘For Defence Of Borders’

- ➔ As the government expects the standoff with China to continue well into the winters, and the armed forces ready for the long-haul, preparing for all eventualities, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday cleared several proposals worth close to ₹39,000 crore that will boost the combat capabilities of all three services—Army, Navy and the Air Force. The most prominent of these proposals include missile systems for the three services, and additional fighter jets for the Air Force. The aircraft will be bought from Russia, and also from the domestic Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.
- ➔ A large number of these projects, government said, have been made possible due to Transfer of Technology by DRDO to the Indigenous Industry. G Satheesh Reddy, Chairman of Defence Research and Development Organisation called the air-to-air Astra missile, Pinaka munitions and Land Attack Cruise Missile as “state of the art systems developed by DRDO”. He said the “armed forces and industry will be immensely benefitted with the manufacturing of these indigenous systems”.

Pinaka Missile System for The Army

It will enable raising additional regiments over and above the ones already inducted. It is an **all-weather, indirect fire, free flight artillery rocket system**, according to the DRDO. “It provides a unique capability to accurately deliver a devastatingly lethal and responsive fire against a variety of area targets such as exposed enemy troops, armoured and soft skin vehicles, communication centres, air terminal complexes, fuel and ammunition dumps. The Pinaka weapon system consists of Rocket, Multi Barrel Rocket launcher, Battery Command Post, Loader cum Replenishment Vehicle, Replenishment Vehicle and Digicora MET Radar.”

Astra Missiles for Navy And Air Force

Astra Missiles, with Beyond Visual Range capability will serve as a force multiplier and immensely add to the strike capability of Navy and Air Force, the government said on Thursday. **The BVR class of Air-to-Air Missile (AAM) system designed to be mounted on fighter aircraft**, says DRDO and adds that it is “designed to engage and destroy highly manoeuvring supersonic aircraft”. “The missile has all weather day and night capability. The missile is being developed in multiple variants to meet specific requirements. The ASTRA



Mk-I Weapon System integrated with SU-30 Mk-I aircraft is being inducted into the Indian Air Force (IAF). It can be launched in autonomous and buddy mode of operation with features for Lock-On-Before Launch (LOBL) and Lock-On After Launch (LOAL).”

MIG 29 & Su-30 MKI Fighter Jets

To address the long felt need of the Indian Air Force to increase its fighter squadrons, the government said, the DAC approved procurement of 21 MIG-29 from Russia. It is a twin-engine, multirole fighter jet, developed by the Soviets in 1970s, but has been upgraded since. Russia will also upgrade existing 59 Mig-29 aircraft of India. The deal will cost ₹7,418 crore. Government will also buy 12 Sukhoi Su-30 MKI from Hindustan Aeronautics Limited at an estimated cost of Rs 10,730 crore.

Development of Long-Range Land Attack Cruise Missile Systems (LRLACM) for Navy and Air Force

It is aimed at enhancing India’s firing range from between 400 km and 500 km of the Brahmos to 1000 km. DRDO says “presently, lead in projects have developed, demonstrated and matured critical cruise missile technologies such as aerodynamic configuration, vertical launch using solid booster, thrust vector control system, booster separation, in-flight wing deployment, in-flight engine start and long range way-point navigation system”. The seeker development and testing by DRDO laboratories, it said, are demonstrated and is at a high-level of readiness. The proposed development of fully indigenous long-range land attack cruise missile can greatly enhance the operational capability of services, DRDO says.

The Mapillah Uprising (Mohammed Ayooob - University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University)

- With the centenary of the Mapillah rebellion of 1921 fast approaching, controversy has erupted over Malayalam movie projects commemorating what was arguably the greatest challenge to British rule between the great uprising of 1857 and the Quit India movement of 1942. Right-wing radicals have launched attacks on social media against actor Prithviraj Sukumaran after he announced his role as the lead actor in the film Variyamkunnan that celebrates the life and exploits of Variyamkunnath Kunhahamed Haji, a leading figure in the Mapillah revolt against British rule. The controversy surrounding the Mapillah uprising demonstrates that in the case of most important historical events no single narrative is accepted by all sections of society. There are multiple narratives propounded by people of different ideological persuasions. More often than not these divergent perspectives are shaped by the proponents’ current political projects and their preferred visions of their societies’ future. Frequently, it is not history that determines the present and the future but the political preferences of contemporary actors that dictates the reading of history at the popular level. The Mapillah uprising is no exception to this rule. On the one hand, people of secular and nationalist persuasions see it as a major instance of resistance to British colonial rule. On the other, people of the Hindutva persuasion revile it as an example of ingrained Muslim hatred against Hindus. Both these perceptions are based on single-factor explanations of a very complex phenomenon. The rebellion can be understood only if one discards ideological blinkers. It is an excellent example of the veracity of the assertion that important historical events always have multiple causes and do not occur in a social, economic, and political vacuum.



The Revolt

The immediate trigger of the uprising was the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by the Congress in 1920 in tandem with the Khilafat agitation. The Malabar Congress, many of whose leaders were Nairs, was the most active participant in these twin agitations with several Hindu leaders addressing Khilafat gatherings. The anti-British sentiment fuelled by these agitations found fertile ground among the Muslim Mapillahs of south Malabar living in economic misery which they blamed in large part on British rule. The British had introduced new tenancy laws that tremendously favoured the landlords and instituted a far more exploitative system than before. The pre-British relations between landlords and tenants were based on a code that provided the tenants a decent share of the produce. The new laws deprived them of all guaranteed rights to the land and its produce and in effect rendered them landless. This change created enormous resentment among the tenants against British rule. The fact that most of the landlords were Namboodiri Brahmins while most of the tenants were Mapillah Muslims compounded the problem. The Nairs formed an intermediate grouping of well-off peasantry with their own economic and social grudges against the Namboodiri landlords but largely unsympathetic to the economic travails of the Mapillahs.

The Spark That Lit the Fire

The Non-Cooperation Movement combined with the Khilafat agitation provided the spark that lit the fire of Mapillah revolt against the British rulers and their Hindu landlords. The fiery speeches by Muslim religious leaders that accompanied the Khilafat movement added to the religious fervour of an already desperate peasantry and fuelled their ire against the British and the Hindu landlords leading to the atrocities committed by a segment of the mobilised Mapillahs against Hindus regardless of caste. Non-partisan analyses of the uprising make clear that multiple factors contributed to the character of the movement. These included economic distress, anger against foreign rule and the tenancy laws it instituted, and religious zeal. But above all it was an agrarian revolt that simultaneously took on the garb of anti-colonialism and religious fanaticism.

- The Malabar Rebellion (also called the Mappila or Moplah Rebellion by the British) broke out in the southern taluks of Malabar in August 1921. By the time the government troops captured Haji in January 1922, the rebellion had fizzled out. It largely took the shape of guerrilla-type attacks on janmis (feudal landlords, who were mostly upper caste Hindus) and the police and troops. There were excesses on both sides – rebels and government troops. Incidents of murder, looting and forced conversion led many to discredit the uprising as a manifestation of religious bigotry. Moderate Khilafat leaders lamented that the rebellion had alienated the Hindu sympathy.

Striking A Blow Against Assam's Inclusive Ethos (Manoranjan Pegu - Trade Union

Activist Based In Delhi)

- The Assam government recently decided to promulgate a law to make the Assamese language compulsory in all schools, both public and private, including the Kendriya Vidyalayas, from Classes I to X. The State Governor has already given a formal assent to the Cabinet's decision. However, the law will not be applicable in Barak Valley, Bodoland Council and other Sixth Schedule areas, where Bengali, Bodo and other indigenous languages will take precedence. The 'Assamese nationalists' are of course happy. Some are even demanding for it to be made compulsory in the exempted areas. However, none of them is



talking about what effects it will have on communities such as the Misings, Deoris, Rabhas and the other smaller tribes and their mother tongues.

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Streaming for Reading (Brij Kothari Is on The Faculty Of IIM-Ahmedabad And the

Founder of PlanetRead)

- A national implementation of Same Language Subtitling (SLS) on existing general entertainment content (GEC) on TV and streaming platforms, also known as Over-The-Top (OTT), would revolutionise reading literacy in India, in addition to having massive national impact in two other domains, that of media access among Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) people and of language learning. India is globally the first country where the mainstreaming of SLS on TV and streaming content is being advanced for mass reading literacy. **When SLS is implemented on TV in all Indian languages, as broadcast policy now stipulates, it will automatically give daily reading practice to an estimated 600 million weak readers who currently cannot read and understand simple text, like a newspaper. Within three to five years of regular exposure to SLS on entertainment content already watched, many of them will become functional and some even fluent readers. Close to a billion viewers in India watch on average 3 hours and 46 minutes of TV every day (FICCI-EY, 2019). No other activity, nationally, comes close to commanding four billion person-hours every day. SLS has the proven power to transform much of TV and OTT content consumption into routine reading practice that is inescapable, subconscious, sustainable, scalable, and extremely cost-effective. COVID-19 has further highlighted the potential of the SLS solution for upping the nation's mass reading skills. Globally, 1.4 billion children, and in India 300 million, have been locked out of schools. Intermittent school openings and closures are to be expected going forward. Even prior to COVID-19, the primary education system's long-standing crisis was captured in the well-known outcome that half of India's rural children in Class 5 could not read a Class 2-level text. The 'Accessibility Standards' of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), framed in September 2019 under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, require 50% of all entertainment content on TV to carry captions in the same language, or SLS, by 2025. Perhaps, the onus is on Door darshan to implement its own parent Ministry's standards, before private channels can be obligated to do the same.**

Taking Netflix To Court in The U.S.

A policy quirk is that the MIB's Accessibility Standards do not automatically apply to the content on OTT platforms, even though the content overlap is over 90%. In the U.S., the

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



National Association of the Deaf (NAD) took Netflix to court on this issue, citing that its lack of closed-captioning on streaming content was a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Netflix lost and was ordered to caption all its streaming content by 2014, and to continue captioning content hosted thereafter. This explains why OTT platforms globally now offer captioning or SLS on all English content, because they have a legal obligation to do so. This victory did not come about through an appeal to corporate conscience, but rather, through the courts. In India, OTT platforms are currently in a dance with the government, arguing for self-regulation. Going by historical precedent, the only languages that OTT platforms provide SLS in are those that have been mandated generally in a country in the 'Global North'. The 'Global South' is lagging in this regard, thus missing out on a simple and affordable intervention that it needs the most to address its low-reading literacy challenge. India could take the lead by mandating SLS on all Indian language content hosted by OTT platforms. **If in normal times, reading along with SLS on TV at home, is known to complement and improve reading skills picked up in school**; in the context of school closures and in life beyond schooling, SLS can power lifelong reading engagement and progress.

How Has Covid-19 Helped Reduce Farmer Suicides in Punjab

- Over the past three months, which included the lockdown period and the unlocking that started unfolding since June 1, around three dozen farmers and/farm labourers have committed suicides as per the reports collected by the farmers' organisation across the state. According to this figure, on an average around 12-13 farmers took their lives per month over the past three months. This number though is very high, still it is about 70 per cent lesser than suicides per month that the state was recording prior to the lockdown. As per Punjab Revenue Department record, over the last four years, on an average 40-42 farmers/farm labourers took their own lives every month in the state.

What Are Experts' Views on Fewer Suicides in Punjab?

Currently spending across society, including farming community, has been reduced to essentials. Secondly, there is a perception that the government may help farmers to come out of the debt net during Covid-19 crisis on the lines of most developed countries like Canada and the USA where big economic assistance was provided to the farmers by their respective governments. There is a possibility less pressure on farmers for repaying their debts currently due to the pandemic has led to a decline in suicide cases.

What Do Farm Outfits Say?

Due to COVID-19, farmers are relieved because of the postponement of instalment payments. Moreover, they are not facing humiliation, including 'Kurki of their farmland (attachment of farmers' land) by banks and money lenders. "In rural Punjab, a huge expenditure that happens on marriages and even on last rites, is not happening as of now because of restrictions. This was a big burden," said farmer Sukhpal Singh from Kanakwal village in Sangrur, adding that such social obligations were taking huge toll on a large number of farmers in rural Punjab.

Will the Trend of Lower Suicides Continue?

Experts feel that the trend is a temporary relief and the situation will worsen as the number of suicides might increase once normalcy returns. They fear that banks and other financial establishments will adopt hawkish measures to realise their outstanding dues from the farmers, which will, in turn, put the farming community under financial and psychological



pressure. Jagmohan Singh, general secretary BKU Dakaunda Ekta said that right now farmers are focusing on filling the food coffers of the country but this does not mean that suicides will not return. "Suicides will stop only when governments have the will of brining small, marginal, semi medium and medium farmers out of debt net at least for once, implement Swaminathan report in complete letter and spirit and scrapping the agricultural ordinances like the abolition of Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act, along with exercising control over private money lenders and some private banks." Out of around Rs one lakh crore debt on farmers in Punjab, nearly 34 per cent is from the non-institutional bodies, which charge a whopping 28 to 30 per cent rate of interest. "If coronavirus can defer such extreme steps, then a little effort from the government to lessen farmers' distress can have a magical impact on this sad and sordid phenomenon," concluded Jagmohan Singh.

COVID-19 Shadow on Ashadhi Ekadashi

→ With eight COVID-19 cases being reported from Pandharpur, the temple town will see a muted Ashadhi Ekadashi celebration on Wednesday. With cases continuing to rise in Pune, Satara and Solapur districts, the State government and district authorities had scrapped **the annual palki procession this year in which lakhs of warkaris (devotees) undertake the wari (pilgrimage) on foot from Dehu and Alandi (in Pune district) to the Vitthal-Rukmini temple in Pandharpur. To ensure the continuation of this long-standing tradition, the padukas (footprints) of Saints Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar from Dehu and Alandi (in Pune) respectively were transported by special State transport buses on Tuesday. The garlanded buses, with a few warkaris, including descendants of the saints, set off from Pune to Pandharpur in the afternoon and reached Solapur in the evening.**

Route Not Revealed

To dissuade warkaris participation, the Pune district administration had earlier decided not to reveal the route of the convoy. In keeping with tradition, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray will be reaching Pandharpur on Tuesday night to perform the puja early on Wednesday at Vitthal-Rukmini temple. Solapur is the worst-hit district in the Pune division, with more than 260 COVID-19 deaths and over 2,550 cases, of which over 730 are active ones.

Stringent Regulations

As a number of areas near Vitthal-Rukmini temple premises have been designated as 'containment zones', police authorities and district administration officials will be stringently regulating Wednesday's festivities. "Other than the Chief Minister, no elected representative from the district will be allowed near the temple premises. We are actively dissuading everybody from attempting to gather near the temple in the wake of the rising novel coronavirus cases," said a police official. The then chief minister Devendra Fadnavis performed the puja in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019. Following the Maratha quota agitation, he could not do so in 2018.

Delhi's Plasma Bank: What's the Aim, How Effective Has the Therapy Been So Far?

→ The Delhi government will set up a plasma bank within the next two days for coronavirus patients at the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS), Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced on Monday. The chief minister said that the creation of the repository is a first-of-its-kind initiative in the entire country and appealed to recovered patients to donate their



plasma. The chief minister said the state government will issue dedicated helplines for those willing to donate plasma.

What Is A Plasma Bank, Why Is It Required?

Like in blood banks, where blood is extracted and stored for those who might be in need, the idea is to extract and store plasma from people who have recovered from Covid-19 and give it to someone suffering from the disease. The CM said it will become operational within two days and is likely one of its kind in the country so far. Ever since a few hospitals in the city got permission to administer the therapy, people have been posting messages on social media, asking those who have recovered to donate plasma. The government, led by the CM, has made similar appeals. However, many who recover remain unwilling to donate, leading to more demand than supply. Just last week, the Delhi Assembly speaker filed a police complaint alleging he was duped by a man posing as a plasma donor. The bank is being started keeping in mind the experiences of several people who had to run pillar to post to arrange plasma for their loved ones.

At What Stage Is the Therapy in Delhi?

Delhi was among the first few states to get ICMR approval to conduct trials with plasma therapy, which is still at trial stage. Once a person contracts the virus, the blood produces antibodies and certain cells 'remember' the antigen and produce antibodies when they come in contact with the same virus again. The plasma trial is examining if the plasma containing antibodies from recovered patients is beneficial to others as well. Doctors in Delhi hospitals have found so far that the therapy is not as effective on critical patients, but those with moderate symptoms appear to be responding well.

Who Can Be A Donor?

A healthy person between the age group of 18-60 years and with no comorbidities. Consent must be taken, and the patient should have recovered at least three weeks before donating and tested negative for Covid-19 twice.

In Unlock 2.0, States Can No Longer Seal Borders. Why Is This Important?

- ➔ The Centre issued guidelines for Phase II of the 'Unlock'. In view of rising Covid-19 cases, most existing curbs such as the ban on reopening schools and colleges, as well as multiplexes, gyms, and bars, and the operation of Metro rail services, have been maintained. However, **the most important part of the order issued on Monday night is that the Centre has taken away the right of states to seal their borders.** Over the past month, since the central government ushered in the phase of reopening of the economy and restoration of public life and normalcy through what was called "Unlock" (as opposed to 'lockdown'), multiple states have resorted to sealing their borders to arrest the spike in novel coronavirus infections. Some states such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have even imposed lockdowns. The new order from Ministry of Home Affairs is likely to make some states that are struggling with rising Covid numbers uncomfortable – and may become a point of friction between these states and the Centre.

Unlock 2.0: What Exactly Does the Order Say?

As part of Unlock II, the government has extended lockdown in containment zones until July 31 – however, it has allowed further relaxations in areas outside of these containment zones.



These include reducing night curfew hours to 10 pm-5 am from the currently applicable 9 pm-5 am. In larger showrooms where there is ample space, more than five customers can be allowed at a time, provided they maintain the stipulated distance of six feet between themselves. This would be a relief to shopping malls. The Centre has said that despite these relaxations, the states will have the right to impose more restrictions if they deem it necessary for Covid containment. However, they will not be allowed to seal their borders – either for the public or for goods. “States/ UTs, based on their assessment of the situation, may prohibit certain activities outside the Containment zones, or impose such restrictions as deemed necessary. However, there shall be no restriction on inter-State and intra-State movement of persons and goods including those for cross land-border trade under Treaties with neighbouring countries. No separate permission/ approval/ e-permit will be required for such movements,” the MHA guidelines said.

What Does This Part of The Order Imply?

Its meaning becomes clear when compared with the guidelines in the May 30 order that were issued for the first phase of Unlock. Those earlier guidelines too, had used these words, but had added a caveat: “If a state/UT, based on reasons for public health and its assessment of the situation, proposes to regulate the movement of persons, it will give wide publicity in advance regarding restrictions to be placed on such movement, and the related procedure to be followed.” A senior Home Ministry official told The Indian Express that **the latest order simply means that no state can seal its borders or prohibit public movement within the state anymore, for whatever reasons. Under the Disaster Management Act, decisions taken by the Centre for disaster mitigation or containment of a disease are binding on states unless the union government itself allows them space to manoeuvre.**

So, What’s the Problem Here?

The problem, states may argue, is once again, **over-centralisation of pandemic containment measures. The pandemic trajectory is at different stages in different states and all states are accordingly taking measures to contain them.** It is in this context that lockdown has been re-imposed in cities such as Bengaluru and Chennai recently even as the rest of the country is opening up for more and more activity. While states such as UP and Haryana have intermittently sealed their borders with Delhi multiple times in the past couple months, many other states have taken such a decision visa vis their neighbouring states or inter-district movement very recently and may have to withdraw the same. For example, as recently as June 29, Mumbai sealed its borders with its suburbs. On June 27, Tamil Nadu sealed its borders with Karnataka. Rajasthan announced on June 10 that it was sealing its borders and inter-state movement of public would be allowed based on passes issued by the administration. Due to rising cases in Gujarat, Daman sealed its borders with the state. All these states and UTs have argued that they had to take these decisions because of rising cases of Covid and their analysis showing the infection was coming from the neighbouring states.

Why Is the Home Ministry Doing This Then?

The basic aim of the Centre is to open the economy more and more even as it makes efforts to contain the pandemic spread. The economy has suffered a serious setback during the lockdown and the government believes without seamless movement of public and goods across all borders, the economy will continue to struggle. “Also, we are now at a stage where Covid-19 cannot be fought in silos. It has to be a collective effort. All states have to come



together both to contain the pandemic and lift the economy. In context of Delhi, Home Minister Amit Shah has already said that the concept of NCR would not be allowed to be diluted and Haryana, UP and Delhi have to together fight the pandemic," a Home Ministry official said.

What Can States Do in This Situation?

Legally, states have no option but to follow the MHA's orders. However, some states suffering badly may petition the Centre for more freedom to help them deal with their crisis. States have been arguing for long that they understand their situation better and thus should be allowed more elbow room to take decisions. The Centre has indeed given a lot of freedom to states to decide on their Covid containment strategy in the past couple of months. However, to what extent this new decision may make states uncomfortable, and what relaxations the Centre may give, remains to be seen.

Defining Containment Zones

- In the current pandemic, all interventions are primarily geared towards reducing people-to-people contact, and thus breaking the chain of transmission to the extent possible. That is the objective with which the lockdown was imposed, red, orange and green districts were classified, and containment zones were demarcated. The first two measures, which are operational at the macro level, have all but gone, due to various compulsions. The demarcation of containment zones, which works at a more micro level, is likely to remain as long as the disease is spreading. In fact, experts say this is the only practical isolation strategy available to authorities, and local administrations both in urban and rural areas need to be empowered and equipped to manage this effectively.

What Are Containment Zones?

The lockdown, implemented in five phases, worked at the national level, while the classification of red, orange and green districts operated at the state and inter-district levels. Demarcation of containment zones is done within a town, village, or municipal or panchayat area. Neighbourhoods, colonies, or housing societies where infected people live are sealed, and access is restricted. Containment zones are where the restrictions on movement and interaction are the most severe. In many cities, the entire demarcated area is barricaded and the entry and exit points closed. Only the very basic supplies and services are allowed inside.

Who Defines the Containment Zones?

It is the district, town or panchayat authorities that decide which areas have to be marked as containment zones, how large they would be, and what kind of restrictions would apply. The rules for the national lockdown, for example, were set by the central government, while the state governments decided what restrictions to impose on districts. The district administration, municipal corporation or panchayat bodies exercise a great deal of discretion in demarcation of containment zones. The definition and time period vary, and are continuously reviewed and updated.

How Are They Demarcated?

The parameters used are similar, but the exact criteria applied varies, and usually depends on local conditions. These have also evolved with time, and are under constant review. In general, containment zones are getting smaller with time as the number of cases are



increasing – from entire localities, to colonies or neighbourhood, to streets and lanes, to particular buildings, and now just particular floors. As of now, in Delhi, a containment zone is declared if three or more infections are detected. In Gurgaon, if five positive cases emerge within a 1-km radius, that area is designated a containment zone. In Noida, an area within a radius of 250 m, or one floor of a building, is declared a containment zone, even if one person is found positive. While some cities denotify areas after 28 days if no fresh case emerges from the containment zone, this period is seven or 14 days in some other cities. The perimeter of the containment zone is also different in different cities.

[The Precarious Condition of Hospital Cleaning Staff \(The Writers Are with The Research Institute for Compassionate Economics\)](#)

→ Early on in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, Indians were encouraged to applaud the work done by doctors, nurses, and ‘other health workers.’ However, among these ‘other workers’, hospital cleaners, who face elevated risks of exposure to infection, are rarely spoken of. While the essentialness of their work has never been clearer, the stigma attached to the work they do means that it remains precarious and devalued. The poor working conditions and caste prejudice that cleaners face puts at risk not only the workers themselves, but also their families and neighbours, and the patients and doctors the cleaners come in contact with.

[Accorded Low Social Status](#)

In our research about cleaning and infection control practices in public hospitals, we interviewed cleaners and other hospital staff in 22 health facilities in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh in 2016 and 2017. Even before the pandemic, cleaners did not have sufficient protective equipment or training to safeguard themselves and patients. Most cleaners we met were Dalits who belonged to ‘sweeper castes.’ Their ‘low’ social status, and the fact that most of them are contract workers, meant that they were often afraid to ask for what they needed, including the protective equipment they were legally entitled to receive. Unfortunately, many cleaners did not even have gloves as they swept and mopped floors, cleaned latrines, and wiped delivery tables. One cleaner explained that she only used one glove per delivery because the contractor did not provide gloves, and because it was difficult to ask nurses for supplies. Another said that they were once given protective equipment, including rubber boots and masks, but these supplies were soon stolen. They wanted to ask for replacements, but were afraid to speak up for fear of being fired. Most cleaners we spoke to were afraid of contracting infections at the hospital and of taking them home to their families. However, to earn a living, they continued to work even without protective gear. In this time of COVID-19, without protective equipment, these workers are at risk and could also put patients and staff at risk. We hope they are not afraid to ask for what they need to keep themselves and others safe. **COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of closely following infection control protocols, but cleaners also suffer due to lack of training.** Most cleaners we met had received none. There seemed to be several reasons for this. First, cleaning jobs were not considered important enough to warrant special training. Second, as a cleaner explained, anyone of a sweeper caste who took the job of a cleaner was assumed to already know what to do: “We are of a low caste, and from childhood we have been doing this work... what better training than this could there be?” And third, hospital staff who received infection control training often did not communicate procedures and guidelines in detail to cleaners because they assumed that they were not intelligent enough to understand. Thus, in the rapidly changing environment of a pandemic, cleaners may be the last to learn about important new protocols. But, given the nature of the work they do – directly handling



bio-waste and body fluids that may be infectious, and coming in close contact with patients as they assist hospital staff – equipping cleaners with knowledge and protection should be of utmost importance. Much attention has been given to the alarming personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages that doctors and nurses face, for good reason. But hospital cleaners are as essential to ensuring patient survival and the functioning of hospitals. We must not allow caste prejudices to exacerbate the dangers of COVID-19. Rather, we should take advantage of this moment as an opportunity to train, protect, and improve the working conditions of these essential workers as they do the indispensable work of ensuring the survival of the sick.

Business & Economics

Why, Despite the Pandemic, Some Billionaires Are Becoming Richer

- The COVID-19 pandemic may have pushed the world economy into a tailspin, with 2020 projected to be worse than any of the years since the global financial crisis. But billionaires, at least a select group of them across countries, have seen their wealth soar during the past three months, which have been financially painful for most people across the world. In the US, billionaires have become richer to the tune of \$565 billion since March 18, according to a report published earlier this month by the Washington DC-based think tank Institute for Policy Studies and Clearwater, Florida-based advocacy group Americans For Fair Taxation. The total wealth for billionaires stood at \$3.5 trillion, up 19 per cent from the low point near the beginning of the pandemic, the report said. Amazon chief Jeff Bezos alone is worth \$36.2 billion more than he was on March 18. This during a phase when nearly 43 million Americans filed for initial unemployment benefits.

What Explains the Trend?

The surge in wealth of the richest Americans is being driven by the sharp bounce back of the stock market in US, primarily driven by the unprecedented action from the US Federal Reserve. Despite the surge in US Covid-19 cases and the record 43 million Americans filing for unemployment benefits, the Nasdaq has been hovering at close to record highs. The US Fed's emergency response to the crisis, including cutting interest rates to zero and undertaking to buy unlimited amounts of bond has translated into assets such as stocks, despite being risky investments, seeing fresh demand. Investors have been buying equities, with Big Tech companies and those linked to healthcare – Big Pharma and hospital stocks – among the major beneficiaries. During the crisis, Amazon shares have surged nearly 50 per cent from their mid-March lows while Facebook too has recovered from the troughs that it hit in March to record highs. Like Bezos, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's new worth has surged over \$30 billion since March 18, the IPS report found. The study calculated billionaire wealth using data provided by the Forbes Global Billionaires List, a real-time assessment of net worth. March 18 is used as the starting date as that is the date tied to the 2020 Forbes Global Billionaire survey and also roughly corresponds with the time period when US Government began imposing lockdown restrictions. Other tech players who have seen their wealth surge over the past three months include Tesla's Elon Musk, Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, and former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, who have each seen their wealth surge by \$15 billion or more since March 18, the report found. Eric Yuan, the founder and CEO of Zoom too has seen a sharp increase in wealth during the



pandemic, and is reported to be worth about \$2.58 billion. The Walton family, major stakeholders in retail major Walmart, are also big gainers. Jim, Alice and Rob Walton each made about \$3 billion during the three months to May 19. This is even as the US' pandemic job-loss figures have surged to 28.5 million – three times the number of jobs lost during the 2008 financial crisis. The unemployment rate is expected to climb to nearly 20 per cent, higher than it's been since the Great Depression. While the billionaires have clearly benefited, those invested in stocks in the US have also benefited from the V-shaped recovery in the stock market, with the bounce back in the markets improving the valuations of investment portfolios, pension and retirement funds. An investment in a regular fund that tracks the S&P 500 would have given investors a tidy return of nearly 40 per cent since the March 23 lows, according to a CNN estimate that used Bloomberg numbers for underlying calculations.

What's Been the Trend Around the World?

In the three months since the pandemic spread across countries, the resultant coronavirus-led bloodbath in global stock markets had also impacted a number of global billionaires negatively, at least initially. A record 1,062 billionaires saw their wealth decline, while 267 of them dropped out of the billionaires list. The total combined net worth of billionaires in 2020 stood at \$8 trillion, falling from \$8.7 trillion in 2019, according to Forbes data. "The richest people on Earth are not immune to the coronavirus. As the pandemic tightened its grip on Europe and America, global equity markets imploded, tanking many fortunes... Of the billionaires who remain, 51 percent are poorer than they were last year," it stated in a report released earlier this month. **Those who've benefited include promoters of online retail companies and technology firms that have some benefits from the pandemic and the lockdown.**

What Are the Implications of These Trends?

The rising divide between haves and have-nots is already listed as a contributor to the unrest being fuelled across the United States. Wealth inequality is likely to get even worse because of this crisis, experts say. "The surge in billionaire wealth during a global pandemic underscores the grotesque nature of unequal sacrifice," said Chuck Collins, one of the co-authors of the Americans for Tax Fairness and the Institute for Policy Studies study. In India, even before the crisis hit, it needs to be noted that the rich list was largely insulated from the broader downturn that has gripped India's economy. India minted three billionaires every month as the nation's stock markets surged to new highs, despite a slowing economy ahead of this crisis, according to Hurun Global Rich List 2020. "Indian billionaires are defying gravity as the structural slowdown in the economy doesn't seem to hamper the growth of Indians in the list," said Anas Rahman Junaid, managing director and chief researcher, Hurun Report India released earlier this year.

US Says Huawei, ZTE Are 'National Security Threats': How Will This Impact India?

- In a sudden move, **the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on June 30 formally designated Chinese telecom vendors Huawei Technologies Company and ZTE Corporation, all their parent and subsidiaries, as well as affiliate firms, as "national security threats".** The move is expected to put additional pressure on Huawei and ZTE, which have been accused of being close to the Chinese government and spying for them by sharing data of US citizens.



Why Has the US Banned Huawei and ZTE?

The US-Huawei-ZTE tussle is nearly a decade old now. The first official action on the Chinese telecom equipment maker was taken as early as 2012, when the House Intelligence Committee released a report saying both the companies posed a risk to national security and that US businesses should avoid buying equipment from them. In its report, the committee had then said that **neither Huawei nor ZTE properly addressed concerns raised by members on the companies' ability to snoop on US citizens or firms.** In 2018, however, US President Donald Trump had said that of the two vendors, ZTE would be able to remain in business in US after paying a fine of \$1.3 billion, and providing "high-level security guarantees." Trump's predecessor **Barack Obama's administration had blacklisted ZTE for seven years for violating economic sanction norms imposed on Iran.** The FCC's June 30 move to re-classify ZTE also as "national security threats" effectively reverses the decision by Trump which allowed the company to continue working in the US. On all the occasions, the US government had accused Huawei and ZTE of working in ways that were contrary to "national security or foreign policy interests." **"Both companies have close ties to the Chinese Communist Party and China's military apparatus, and both companies are broadly subject to Chinese law obligating them to cooperate with the country's intelligence services,"** FCC Chairperson Ajit Pai said in the latest order.

Why Is the Ban on Huawei And ZTE Important?

Huawei is the world's largest maker of telecom equipment and the second largest maker of mobile phone parts. The company has been at the forefront of innovation that has allowed many companies in developing and as well as developed economies to build large telecom infrastructure at very low costs. On the other hand, ZTE, another Chinese vendor, has tied up with several big corporations to manufacture their patented equipment in China at very low costs. A ban on both Huawei and ZTE could mean an increase of up to 30 per cent in cost of telecom equipment across the board, especially when countries all over the world are gearing up to launch 5G services, according to experts. Apart from hardware, Huawei has also been trying to make inroads into the software and operating systems (OS) industry. In May this year, the company launched a mobile OS called **HarmonyOS**, which it said could rival Google and Apple's OS.

Does the Huawei Ban Impact India?

The US FCC's decision to classify Huawei and ZTE as "national security threats" could put pressure on friendly allies, such as India, to take similar, if not the same action. **With the reserve price for 8,300 MHz spectrum, including the 5G band kept unchanged at ₹5.22 lakh crore,** low cost equipment from Huawei or ZTE could have provided some relief to domestic Telco's. The Chinese vendor was a major equipment supplier to companies like Vodafone Idea and Bharti Airtel during the initial roll-out of the 4G services in India. Over the years, Huawei has made inroads into nearly 25 per cent of the total telecom equipment market in India. While Bharti Airtel uses up to 30 per cent Chinese telecom equipment, including Huawei's for its networks, Vodafone Idea uses as much as 40 per cent. In December last year, the company had some reprieve when telecom minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said all players, including Huawei, were permitted to participate in 5G trials in the country. To allay security fears, **Huawei India's Chief Executive Officer had in June 2019 said the company was ready to sign a "no backdoor" agreement** with the government. Under the agreement, Huawei would vouch that it did not gain access to any Indian customer's equipment under any circumstance. A lot has, however, changed since then. Following a skirmish at Galwan



Valley in Ladakh, during which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, sources from the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) had on June 17 said that 4G network expansion tenders floated by Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL) would be reworked to bar global vendors such as Huawei and ZTE from participating. So far, private telecom operators have neither been officially told nor unofficially nudged to discontinue using Chinese telecom equipment. They have, however, warned of huge economic costs if such a ban is put in place. One of the most important implications, they said, could be the loss of their cost arbitrage, as barring Huawei and ZTE from even bidding in the 5G auctions could mean equipment as much as 30 per cent costlier. "Overall, the prices of Chinese gear are up to 30 per cent lower compared to their European competition. That gives us buyers a point to negotiate. With them (Chinese companies) gone, our power to negotiate also goes," an executive said, adding that taking Chinese vendors out of the equation would result in a duopoly of Ericsson and Nokia. Reliance Jio, which uses equipment manufactured by Samsung, was recently praised by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and FCC Chairperson Ajit Pai as a "clean telco". The company's president Mathew Oommen said in a recent webinar that as companies move towards deployment of 5G technologies in their respective countries, they must be wary of vendors which can bring a "digital pandemic".

Why in A Crisis We Need to Look at Absolute Level of GDP More Than Growth Rates

- ➔ Observers of the Indian economy found much to talk about last week as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) came up with its latest update. IMF's Chief Economist Gita Gopinath said, "We are projecting a sharp contraction in 2020 of – 4.5 per cent... a historic low". However, the IMF expects a sharp recovery of 6% in the very next year. Later in the week, S&P Global Ratings released a report that stated that "India's economy is in deep trouble". But it, too, stated that the economy will rebound sharply in 2021-22. Many (especially in the government) have suggested that the recovery has already started. The horticultural metaphor – "green shoots" – made a comeback in the national economic discourse. In fact, according to the latest quarterly review of the economy by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), it is even possible, under some ambitious assumptions, for India to achieve a positive GDP growth rate –1.3% – in the current financial year. The GDP or Gross Domestic Product, as you know, is nothing but the market value of all goods and services produced in an economy. As many of you have noticed, most of the talk of economic recovery is happening in terms of real GDP growth rate. Indeed, this was the variable that was being used until the Covid crisis to analyse the state of the economy. But there are compelling reasons why readers should focus on the absolute levels of GDP instead of GDP growth rates for the next few years if they want to truly understand where the economy stands at a particular point relative to where it was before the Covid crisis.
- ➔ Imagine the GDP of a country falling by 12% in a crisis – from Rs 100 trillion to Rs 88 trillion. Suppose, over the next two years, this country rebounds sharply and registers growth rates of 6% and 7%, respectively. Even then at the end of the third year, the absolute GDP of the economy – ₹99.8 trillion – will be less than what it was before the crisis. What further underscores why you should look at absolute GDP instead of GDP growth rates for a few years is the performance of absolute GDP per capita, which is an even more relevant marker for the wellbeing of a common Indian than the aggregate GDP. The US, Italy and Spain had their highest GDP per capita in 2007. The US took six years to breach that mark while Spain took 10 years; Italy had not managed to recover even until 2018. "Countries' income in per capita (or GDP per capita) terms, coming back to the old levels takes even longer than the



GDP coming back to the old levels, after a crisis," according to Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Adviser of State Bank of India. In short, accurate assessment of people's wellbeing requires evaluating green shoots of recovery in relation to the trees that were lost in the storm.

Why the Government Is Likely to Spend Much Less This Fiscal

- The government has extended its expenditure rationalisation for the second quarter of this financial year, giving rise to concerns that it may end up spending much lower than the budgeted levels resulting in a long drawn economic recovery. Lower revenue stream and the rising debt levels of central and state governments on account of enhanced borrowing to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic-related expenditure have also led to concerns of the debt-GDP ratio breaching the notional red line of 80 per cent from the levels of 70 per cent seen last fiscal. The concerns are, however, being questioned by some economists who emphasise on the need to concentrate on economic revival and growth rather than being solely focussed on the debt numbers, with the economic costs of reining in debt being seen high in terms of unemployment and loss of lives and livelihood.

Why This Expenditure Rationalisation?

The Finance Ministry last week released guidelines for expenditure control in the July-September quarter, extending an earlier order dated April 8 for cash management system. **The April order had categorised government departments and ministries into three, outlining their spending quota for the April-June quarter. Category A has ministries and departments such as Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Department of Health and Family Welfare, Department of Rural Development and Supreme Court of India with no restrictions. Ministries and departments in Category B such as those related to fertilisers, taxes, home affairs, election commission and road transport and highways are required to restrict expenditure within 20 per cent of the Budget estimate of 2020-21, while those in Category C such as petrochemicals, coal, commerce, telecommunications, culture, housing and urban affair can spend only 15 per cent of the budget estimate.** The expenditure rationalisation is being done presumably to allow enough headroom to dovetail the stimulus package announced last month, especially as revenues are expected to be sharply lower than estimates this year. **Direct taxes have declined by over 25 per cent in the first quarter, while GST collections have been only 45 per cent of the monthly target.** Economists point to several key elements of the stimulus package such as the distribution of funds to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises under the 100% Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme struggling to take off, thereby worsening the impact of the government expenditure compression that is currently underway.

What Are the Problems with Limiting Cash Outgo?

The government's fiscal stimulus in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has been restrained with limited cash outgo. Schemes that were part of the stimulus package such as the distribution of funds to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises under the 100% Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme are struggling to take off, with banks managing to disburse a little over 7 per cent of the amount earmarked under this head over the last one month. For MSMEs, hit hard by the pandemic lockdown, credit continues to be a challenge amid the slump in demand. Official data shows that as of June 18, state-owned banks sanctioned loans worth ₹40,416 crore under the scheme, of which ₹21,028.55 crore has been disbursed, which is a little over 7 per cent of the ₹3 lakh crore package under this head. **Several rating**



agencies and economists have projected the debt-GDP ratio rising to 84-85 per cent of the GDP. Even as debt sustainability and fiscal consolidation are always a matter of concern, some economists point out that holding down debt levels should not compromise on GDP growth, for which government expenditure is essential. An aggressive fiscal policy at this juncture is being seen as necessary for economic revival, with some economists emphasising that since the revenue slippage estimates are already high, fiscal deficit is anyway going to get pushed to significantly higher levels.

What Are Rating Agencies Likely To Look Out For?

The tight control over fiscal policy is being seen driven by the concerns of the debt levels, possibility of exceeding fiscal deficit target by a huge margin and the consequent actions by rating agencies. More than the deficit, though, rating agencies are watching the deterioration of India's fiscal metrics in 'the context of a prolonged or deep slowdown in growth', which "would invite a ratings downgrade", as ratings agency Moody's warned in their note on India's outlook on May 8. The effort to revive growth, thereby, is a more crucial metric given that practically **all countries are bracing for a worsening of their respective deficit positions**. The IMF's latest projections for debt numbers, published in April, showed that debt-GDP levels are expected to worsen for almost all emerging markets this year.

Fiscal Deficit At 58.6% Of Target in Two Months

- India's federal fiscal deficit in the first two months through May this financial year stood at ₹4.66 lakh crore (\$61.67 billion), or 58.6% of the budgeted target for the current fiscal year, government data showed on Tuesday. Net tax receipts during April-May period were ₹338.5 billion (\$4.48 billion), while total expenditure was ₹5.12 lakh crore the data showed, indicating the government was front-loading its budgeted spending to combat the impact of pandemic. India's federal fiscal deficit touched 4.6% of GDP in the 2019-20 fiscal year ended March, from the initial estimates of 3.3%.

External Debt Rises \$15.4 Billion To \$558.5 Billion In March

- India's external debt stood at \$558.5 billion in March, an increase of \$15.4 billion compared with the year-ago period, according to RBI data. Commercial borrowings remained the largest component of the external debt, with a share of 39.4%, followed by non-resident deposits at 23.4% and short-term trade credit at 18.2%. The data showed valuation gains due to the appreciation of the U.S. dollar against the Indian rupee and other major currencies were at \$16.6 billion. "Excluding the valuation effect, the increase in external debt would have been \$32 billion instead of \$15.4 billion at end-March 2020 over end-March 2019," it said. At the end of March, long-term debt, with original maturity of above one year, was placed at \$451.7 billion, a rise of \$17 billion over the level recorded in March 2019. Short-term debt on residual maturity basis constituted 42.4% of the total external debt and 49.5% of foreign exchange reserves at the end of March. "U.S. dollar-denominated debt continued to be the largest component of India's external debt, with a share of 53.7% at end-March 2020, followed by the Indian rupee (31.9%), yen (5.6%), SDR (4.5%) and the euro (3.5%)," the RBI said. The RBI also said debt service (principal repayments plus interest payments) increased marginally to 6.5% of current receipts at the end of March compared to 6.4% in the same period a year ago. This reflects higher interest payments on commercial borrowings and lower current receipts, it added.



How GST Can Be Tweaked to Prevent States Slipping into A Serious Financial Crisis

→ According to Sushil Kumar Modi, the Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime faces its toughest test as it enters its fourth year, thanks in particular to the Covid pandemic. Faced with an **unusually high benchmark of 14 per cent compound annual growth rate (or CAGR), GST was very productive in the first two years.** But with the economy slowing down in 2019, notes Modi, GST could not remain insulated. “Barring April 2019, no other month witnessed double-digit growth over the last year, with September, October and March clocking negative figures... As we head into 2020-21, the toughest challenge for the GST Council would be to devise ways to compensate the states. The usual compensation cycle got delayed and the situation is not likely to improve anytime soon with the collection for the first two months of the current fiscal at just 46 per cent of 2019-20 levels,” he writes. Clearly, it is time to take measures to prevent the states from slipping into a serious financial crisis. Many have speculated about the possibility of borrowing. But Modi believes that borrowing is not the solution to a crisis of this nature, particularly in view of the fact that the financial impact of COVID-19 defies quantification and more so in view of the assured 14 per cent CAGR guarantee to the states. “Many complex issues crop up in the context of borrowings. For instance, how and when will it be paid back... It would simply be deferring the crisis instead of really solving it,” he argues. Alternatively, it is being urged that the Centre may borrow long-term to finance the compensation. This would give the Centre enough breathing space and the situation would ease in the really long-term, casting little burden on the Centre’s finances. But Modi rules this out as well. “This idea too is not worth pursuing since there are borrowing limits and the Centre is as much bound by fiscal responsibility. Another variant suggests that the Council may borrow on the Centre’s guarantee. In my view, the Council is probably not an entity that can undertake any such venture”. That leaves the option of tweaking GST rates. Modi states that “GST was introduced with rates about 20 per cent lower than the effective tax burden (all existing central and state levies and the cascading effect)”. In other words, GST was not revenue-neutral to begin with. “This rate has been further lowered, mostly intermittently, but majorly on two occasions – in November 2017 and July 2018. With a tax base of around ₹60 lakh crore, a 1 per cent increase in the tax rates would yield additional revenue of ₹60,000 crore”. But he believes that “this is not the time to tinker with the rates. But the idea must be debated when the worst is behind us”. Another idea that may be considered along with the rate hike, or even independently, is re-arranging the GST rate structure wherein 60 per cent or 65 per cent of the total tax on a commodity is the state component and the remaining is the central component. For instance, the 18 per cent GST rate could be 11 per cent SGST and 7 per cent CGST or some such combination. “Historically, too, with the major cascading built into the states’ VAT rates, the states’ tax rates were higher than of the Centre. These adjustments in the GST rates would yield additional revenue to the states, thereby bringing down the compensation burden,” he states.

How the NCLT Ruling on Delhi Gymkhana Club Could Set A Precedent

→ The Principal Bench of National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has ruled that the Delhi Gymkhana Club was acting in a manner prejudicial to “public interest” and therefore must be probed. A single member bench of acting president B S V Prakash Kumar ruled that a five-member central government-appointed panel should look into the affairs of the club, including the land usage and various policies on member admissions it has had over the years.



Where Is the Delhi Gymkhana Club?

Located in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi, the 107-year-old Delhi Gymkhana Club is a colonial era institution spread over 28 acres. The club has always been extremely limited and exclusive, with waiting periods for membership stretching as long as 45 years. The club, registered as a company under Section 8 of Companies Act, claims a perpetual lease over the premises it is currently housed in and pays a nominal rent of ₹1,000 per year. Class I officers of the government who wish to be members of the club must submit an application with a demand draft of ₹1.5 lakh, while private citizens not working for the government must submit a crossed demand draft of ₹7.5 lakh. The club is run by a 16-member governing body, which consists of various retired government and army officers as well as other private citizens. In April this year, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) moved the NCLT claiming that the club was being run in a manner which was "prejudicial to public interest".

Why Does the MCA Want to Take Over the Delhi Gymkhana Club?

Among various other charges, the MCA alleged that the club had over the course of time become a den of nepotism and gave preferential treatment in membership only to existing members and their children. Due to various complex rules around admission to club, the membership was consistently denied to applicants, while the application fee they submitted was used by the club for its activities, the MCA had alleged. This, the ministry had claimed, was in violation of Companies Act, under which the club was registered and functioning. The MCA had then petitioned the NCLT that a 15-member body should replace the existing general committee of the club. It had then also suggested that the new committee would also undertake a "restructuring" so that the club "functions as per the terms of its memorandum and articles of association.

Facing Harassment as We Denied Membership to MCA Official

In its reply to the petition moved by the MCA, the Delhi Gymkhana Club had alleged that they were facing harassment at the hands of the central government as they had denied membership to Navrang Saini, a high-ranking official of the ministry. Saini, currently a whole-time member of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India, was serving as a Director-General during his last stint at the MCA. The Delhi Gymkhana Club also alleged that the report based on which the government claimed mismanagement by the general committee of the club was signed in a hurry by the official concerned "without application of mind". Asserting that there was "no element of public interest" as the Delhi Gymkhana Club was a "private club formed for the use of its members or other permitted persons", the management committee of the club had requested the NCLT to dismiss the management takeover petition filed by the MCA.

What the NCLT Says in Its Order?

Apart from holding that prima facie the club was conducting its affairs in a manner which was prejudicial to public interest, the NCLT also said that club should have "left its doors ajar for many if not all" so that everyone could take benefit of the bar, ballroom, the swimming pool, library and other sports facilities. The NCLT, in its order, also said that though the club had right to function as it chose to under Article 19 of the Constitution of India, the same could not supersede rights of common public under Article 14, which promises equality to all. "The shadow over the club is it is so obsessive of its privilege. Maybe it is because the club is of the view that its privilege will remain intact only if people of certain stature become members. Privilege and privileged are misconceived notions and they are all nothing but a



reminiscence of earlier legacy, which is a vanity in a democratic society,” the NCLT said. The NCLT has, until further orders, barred the club from undertaking any construction on its premises, take any policy decisions or deal with the funds received for admission of new members.

[Are Other Similar Clubs Also Under Any Threat?](#)

Though it is too early to say that, the order by NCLT does set a precedence, which gives the government the power to appoint committees to probe the affairs of such private clubs. Clubs like the Delhi Gymkhana Club, which run on lands leased to them by various state governments and the central government, are likely to be more careful in their approach to membership being denied to people and officials. The land usage and patterns, membership and other fee policies of such exclusive clubs could also come under public scrutiny in case the central or state governments decide to probe them for irregularities.

[What Is Fuelling The Auto Sector Recovery in India?](#)

- Coming out of lockdown, the Indian automobile sector is drawing a close parallel with the recovery trend seen in China. If the sale in April was nil for most manufacturers following stringent lockdown restrictions, almost all manufacturers reported 80 to 90 per cent dip in domestic sales in May. In June, however, the pace of decline slowed down and Maruti Suzuki and Hyundai Motors that together command nearly 70 per cent market share, announced 53 and 49 per cent decline in sales over that in June 2019. So, there has been a recovery in month-on-month numbers. While Maruti announced 3.8 times jump in June over May, Hyundai too reported over three times rise in sales in June.

[Here's A Look at What Is Leading to The Recovery and How Has It Been in China: What Is Leading to The Recovery in India?](#)

Demand for compact small cars mostly by first-time buyers is driving the car sales in India besides the pent-up demand due to stringent lockdown restrictions in April and May. Top executives at leading automobile companies say the new realities of social distancing and scare of contracting the virus is driving more and more individuals, who were earlier dependent upon public transport, to buy a car. Manufacturers are expecting the recovery trend to remain strong as the inquiries and booking are rising fast.

[Why Is Auto Sector Important?](#)

While the Indian automotive industry accounts for over 7 per cent of the country's GDP, it accounts for 22 per cent of the manufacturing GDP. According to the industry body Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers, the industry supports more than 3.7 crore employment and with GST collections of around ₹1,50,000 crore, it accounts for nearly 15 per cent of total GST collection of the country in a year. The auto sector is also one of the biggest recipients of foreign direct investment and between April 2000 and March 2020, the sector has received FDI amounting to \$ 24.2 billion.

[What Could Hinder the Revival Momentum?](#)

Given the fact that a Covid-19 vaccine is still some time away, a spike in Covid-19 cases in India both in rural and urban India may just derail the recovery momentum and force the centre and states to go slow on reopening the economy or to even close certain activities



that have been permitted. It may also limit the movement of workers, derailing the production revamp process for the industry. United States can be seen as an example. As the number of cases witnessed a jump over the last couple of weeks, several states have gone back on their course of reopening. So, as India reopens and continues from Unlock 1 to 2 to 3, it needs to closely monitor the case numbers and containment zones in order to avoid the community spread.

Why India Is Producing Less and Less Oil

- India's crude oil production fell 7.1% in May 2020 compared to May 2019 on the back of low demand due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Domestic production of crude has, however, been falling every year since FY 2012. Annual crude oil production has fallen at a compounded annual rate of 2.1% since to 32,169.3 thousand Metric Tonnes (TMT) in FY 2020 from 38,089.7 TMT in FY 2012. This has led to a steady climb in the proportion of imports in domestic crude oil consumption from 81.8% in 2012 to 87.6% in 2020.

Why Is Production Falling?

Experts say that most of India's crude oil production comes from aging wells that have become less productive over time. A **lack of new oil discoveries** in India coupled with a **long lead time** to begin production from discovered wells has led to a steady decline in India's crude oil production making India increasingly dependent on imports. **The output of these aging wells is declining faster than new wells can come up** according to experts. Domestic exploration companies are attempting to extend the life of currently operational wells. Crude oil production in India is dominated by **two major state-owned exploration and production companies, ONGC and Oil India**. These companies are the key bidders for crude oil block auctions and end up acquiring most of the blocks that are put up for auction in India, according to experts.

Why Are There Not More Private Players?

While there are some **private players** in the upstream oil sector including **Cairn India** and **Hindustan Oil Exploration Company** there has been a **lack of interest in exploration and production in India from major private players**, particularly those based abroad. According to experts, this is because of **long delays in the operationalisation of production even after an oil block is allotted due to delays in approvals**. Some of the key approvals which are required to begin production include, **environmental clearances and approval by the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons** after the allottee completes a seismic survey and creates a field development plan. "The best-case scenario from allotment to production is at least 5-7 years," said an industry expert noting that in many cases it was delayed beyond this timeline particularly in the case of public sector companies.

What Policy Changes Could Help?

Existing public and private sector players have asked for reduced levies of oil production including oil cess, royalties, and profit petroleum especially when crude oil prices are below \$45/barrel. Experts say the requirement to pay royalties to the government at low crude prices can make it unviable for these companies to invest in further exploration and production. The government introduced the **Open Acreage Licensing Programme (OALP)** in 2019 to allow companies to carve out blocks that they are interested in and with lower royalties and no oil cess. However, existing players are calling for a relaxation of royalties



and oil cess on block allotted under previous policies. One expert pointed out that the Chinese government offered a floor price to oil producers insulating them somewhat from any sharp falls in international crude prices. "This kind of policy at least allows for a company to have a fixed worst-case scenario for the sale of crude oil," said an expert noting that this incentivised more investment in exploration and production.

Why the High Price of Diesel Is A Dampener for A Rural-Led Economic Recovery

→ Retail sales of fertilisers are up over 79% year-on-year in June, marking the eighth straight month of double-digit growth. That, together with the area sown under kharif crops till June 26 being 104.25% higher compared to the coverage at this time last year, is clear indication of agriculture being the lone bright star in today's Covid-19 battered economy. There are two factors inducing farmers to increase plantings and invest more in productivity-enhancing inputs. The first is the monsoon: Last year, rainfall in June was 32% below the "normal" long-period average for the month. This time, the country has not only received 17.6% above-normal precipitation in June, but the surplus rains right from the second half of 2019 has led to a significant recharging of groundwater tables along with the filling of dam reservoirs to near capacity. As a result, farmers sowed 9.5% higher area even during the 2019-20 rabi (winter-spring) season, which is reflected in fertiliser sales registering double-digit growth rates since November (see table below). The improved soil moisture conditions have impelled them to expand acreages in the ongoing kharif season from mid-May as well. There is one potential dampener, though. And that has to do with diesel prices. Since June 6, retail prices of this fuel used for powering tractors, harvester combines and irrigation pumps have gone up more than ₹11 per litre (from ₹69.39 to ₹80.53 in Delhi). The impact of it can be understood by looking at just paddy, the most widely-grown kharif crop. Paddy requires a "minimum" of four ploughings. The first two primary dry ploughings, using tractor-drawn disc harrow and tiller/cultivator, consumes around 3 litres each of diesel per acre. The third and fourth ploughings are in wet condition, for which paddy harrow or "puddler" is employed. The diesel consumption in this case is higher, at 5 litres each per acre. The four ploughings are followed by one "planking" or smoothing and compacting of the soil surface, which consumes another 3 litres. **The total diesel consumption during field preparation before transplantation of the paddy seedlings, thus, comes to 19 litres per acre.** This is the bare minimum. More ploughings and even levelling may be required in the event of excessive weed growth or if the soil is uneven. **Burning of diesel also takes place during harvesting (a combine consumes 7-8 litres to cover an acre in roughly 40 minutes) and irrigation (especially in states with relatively poor electricity infrastructure).** A farmer from Emiliya village in Chandauli district of eastern Uttar Pradesh bordering Bihar, estimates that a 12-horsepower diesel engine will consume up to 1.5 litres in an hour. Further, it takes five hours for watering one acre of paddy. Most small farmers in our belt use diesel engines, as they do not have and cannot afford electric tube well connection for submersible pumps. **Paddy needs at least five irrigations even in a normal monsoon season, more so during the 30 days after transplanting, when you have to ensure continuous standing water.** The diesel use in such irrigation, then, works out to 37.5 litres per acre. All in all, **the consumption of diesel for paddy cultivation would range from 27 to 65 litres per acre. If the use in off-field operations – hauling produce to the market, bringing fertilisers, pesticides and other inputs to the farm, etc. – is added, it may go up to 35-70 litres per acre.** A ₹11/litre jump in diesel prices within a month, therefore, means an additional expenditure of ₹385-770 per acre. **On an average paddy yield of 25 quintals per acre, that translates into ₹15-31/quintal.** The Narendra Modi government, on June 1, hiked the MSP of the 2020-21 paddy crop from ₹1,815 to ₹1,868 per quintal for



common and from ₹1,835 to ₹1,888 for Grade 'A' varieties. To the extent that the ₹53/quintal MSP increase is offset by the extra ₹15-31 outgo on diesel – similar calculations can be made for other crops – it could act as a sentiment dampener. And that's not-so-good news in the present scenario, when all hopes of an economic recovery are being laid on agriculture and rural consumption.

Grain Aplenty and The Crisis of Hunger (Dipa Sinha Teaches at Ambedkar University Delhi)

- With the economic crisis continuing on the one hand and the health system crumbling under the burden of rising COVID-19 cases on the other, it is clear that it will take a long time for things to get back to "normal". Unemployment is high and it will take a while for lost livelihoods to be rebuilt, especially given the fact that India was already facing an economic slowdown along with high levels of inequality. Among other interventions to revive demand in the economy and create employment, it is absolutely essential that food support in the form of free/subsidised grains is made available to all without any disruptions.

An Inadequate Response

As a measure to address hunger, the central government announced as part of the ₹1.70-lakh crore relief package under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) in the last week of March that it would provide 5kg of food grains and 1 kg of pulses for free to all those who are beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) for three months. As it became obvious that many were not part of the NFSA, the government, in May, almost two months after the lockdown was initiated, announced its expansion to cover an additional eight crore individuals for two months to ensure that migrants are included under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package. This basically meant each State being given food grain to the tune of 10% more than what they normally get under the NFSA. Many States were already covering more beneficiaries than was allotted to them by the NFSA, and some States made additional temporary provisions for these two months.

What Needs to Be Done

As many have argued, this is an inadequate response. What is required is a universal Public Distribution System (PDS) to ensure that nobody is excluded. What is also an urgent need now is for the food support announced as part of the PMGKY and Atmanirbhar package to be extended for a longer period, as both end in June. The president of the Indian National Congress party, Sonia Gandhi, wrote to the Prime Minister last week seeking an extension in the distribution of free food grains until September (another three months). It has also been reported that the Union Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Ram Vilas Paswan, in a video conference with State food ministers/secretaries on June 18, said that "around 10 States have written to the Ministry to extend the distribution of free food grains under the PMGKY for three more months". However, the government has not yet announced any such extension. Rather, the government seems to be indicating that all problems of exclusion will be resolved once the One Nation One Ration Card scheme is expanded across the country, which is supposed to be achieved by March 2021. Under ONOC, a beneficiary can receive ration entitlements as under the NFSA from any fair price shop in the country using her/his Aadhaar number and biometric authentication. This will apparently be possible once the Aadhaar numbers of all members enlisted in ration cards are seeded, which will enable transactions under the Public Distribution System across the country to be



brought on to one digital platform. It has been announced that ONOC is operational in 20 States.

Biometric Authentication

Portability across States is an important and valid concern that needs to be ensured so that migrant workers can access their entitlements. ONOC, however, has a number of problems in the way it has been conceived, being Aadhaar-based. **The experience of biometric authentication using electronic point of sale (ePoS) machines so far suggests that it results in exclusion of some of the most marginalised because of multiple reasons including network issues, authentication failure and so on.** Keeping these concerns aside for now, it must be noted that ONOC is definitely not a solution to the immediate crisis of hunger that continues in the aftermath of the lockdown. The integrated management of PDS (IM-PDS) portal, which gives real time data on transactions under ONOC, shows that for the month of May, there were a total of 378 transactions (3,077 beneficiaries) under ONOC and 479 transactions (3,856 beneficiaries) in June (as on June 29, 2020). The figures for April are even lower. Ironically, Mr. Paswan is reported to have said in the same videoconference that, "in the time of Covid-19 pandemic, the scheme proved immensely beneficial for migrant labourers, stranded and needy persons to access their quota of food grains through ONOC portability". It must not be forgotten that lakhs of migrants were stranded in different places without access to food.

Overflowing Granaries

This emphasis on ONOC is an obfuscation, while the real issue is of burgeoning food stocks along with widespread hunger. If we include unmilled paddy, food grain stock in the Food Corporation of India has now risen to almost 100 million MTs while the buffer stock norms are 41 million MTs. This will increase even more as there is another week of procurement open in the rabi marketing season; there will be another round of procurement of kharif crop in a few months (49.9 million MTs of rice was the procurement during the kharif marketing season in 2019-20). **A universalised PDS giving 10kg of food grains per person per month for another four months requires about 47 million tonnes in total, assuming that nearly 85% of the population actually lifts their rations. It can be safely assumed that the rich will automatically self-select themselves out of the system. This is indicative and the actual requirements would most likely be lower. It is unfathomable why the PDS is not being universalised immediately especially when food stocks are at such a historic high. The government seems to be hoping to get rid of grain through the Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS) where it sells the grains at prices lower than the procurement cost but much higher than the issue prices under PDS, so that the fiscal consequences can be contained. Earlier experiences with the OMSS do not spell much hope that this plan of the government will be successful. In the period 2017-18 to 2020-21 (up to first week of June), only 16.6 million tonnes of rice and wheat have been sold under the OMSS. The quantity sold each year was less than the quantity offered. Moreover, one-third of all sales was to State governments (almost all the rice) thereby shifting the subsidy burden to State governments. If not OMSS to private buyers, the only other options left is to either export them or let the grain go waste. Needless to say, choosing any of these options while people go hungry is nothing less than criminal.**



How Stamp Duty on Mutual Fund Purchases Will Impact Investors

➔ Beginning July 1, all shares and mutual fund purchases will attract a stamp duty of 0.005 per cent and any transfer of security (MF units) will attract a stamp duty of 0.015 per cent. **The government had introduced changes to the Stamp duty Act last year by introducing a uniform rate of stamp duty on trading of shares and commodities. While all categories of mutual funds (except for ETFs) will attract stamp duty for the first time, shares purchased by individuals at stock exchanges were charged stamp duty at different rates by respective states.** While the execution of the same was earlier set for January 9, 2020, it was extended to April 1, 2020 and then again extended to July 1, 2020. Here's a look at what it means:

Where All Will It Be Applicable?

The stamp duty will be applicable on all transactions, including shares, debt instruments, commodities and all categories of mutual fund schemes. As for mutual funds, it will be applicable on all fresh purchases, including the fresh monthly purchases in previously registered Systematic Investment Plans. It will also be applicable if investors switch from one scheme to another and also in case of dividend reinvestment transactions. Transfer of units from one demat account to another, including market/off-market transfers, will also attract stamp duty.

How Does It Impact the Investor?

The impact on long-term investments by retail investor is nominal. Since the stamp duty will be charged as one-time charge, if an investor invests ₹1 lakh in a mutual fund scheme or in a stock and holds it for two years, he will have to pay a duty of only ₹5. In fact, it will be marginally lower as the stamp duty is applicable on the net investment value i.e. gross investment amount less than any other deduction like transaction charge. There is no duty at the time of redemption. However, the impact is higher for investors with short-term investment horizon such as banks and corporates who invest in liquid and overnight schemes of mutual funds. While the one-time charge is only 0.005 per cent, if an investor has only one-month investment horizon, the annualised cost would rise to 0.06 per cent. In case the investment horizon is one week, the annualised impact cost would be 0.26 per cent and on a one-day investment horizon, the cost works out to 1.82%. It will also impact share purchase by individuals in several states where the rates earlier were lower than the new uniform rate of 0.005 per cent.

How Much Revenue Can It Generate for The Government?

In the financial year 2019-20, the mutual fund industry mobilised aggregate funds of over ₹188 lakh crore. A high portion of that was in overnight funds or liquid funds. A 0.005 per cent stamp duty on this amount works out to ₹940 crore. If the industry continues to mobilise funds to the tune of ₹190 lakh crore or higher, it will generate revenues of nearly ₹1,000 crore for the government from mutual fund transactions itself. The annual turnover for NSE in FY20 was 89.98 lakh crore. A 0.005 per cent stamp duty on this would mean a total duty of nearly ₹450 crore as per the new rates (earlier different states charged different rates of stamp duty on share purchase).

What Should Investors Do?

Retail MF investors should not worry too much about it as the fee is nominal. However, they should be careful in selection of the right investment category. If they pick a wrong category



and then keep switching from one scheme to another, then they will end up paying stamp duty repeatedly on the same investment amount. Also, since a longer investment horizon reduces the stamp duty impact cost, investors should invest in a scheme for the long term.

Life & Science

Why US Corporates Like Unilever And Verizon Are Pulling Ads from Facebook

➔ Amidst a growing pressure campaign led by some of the world's most prominent corporates to boycott advertising on Facebook, its CEO **Mark Zuckerberg announced that the social media platform was tightening its content moderation policies to better tackle hate speech and misinformation online.** Zuckerberg's announcement, streamed live on Facebook on Friday afternoon, came less than an hour after global consumer goods giant Unilever added its name to the list of nearly 100 companies that had pulled their advertising dollars from the social network this past week. **Facebook's recent policy tweaks did little to suppress the growing revolt among advertisers worldwide, who have criticised the company for allegedly failing to contain the rampant spread of false information and incendiary content on the platform.** This became apparent when later that day, Japanese carmaker Honda Motor Co. and US chocolate manufacturer Hershey's Company joined the **global ad boycott campaign 'Stop Hate for Profit' – started by several US-based civil rights groups this month.** Coca-Cola Co., too, announced its decision to pause ads on all social media platforms, including Facebook, for at least 30 days. However, the beverage giant told Adweek that its decision was independent of the ongoing boycott campaign. "We will take this time to reassess our advertising standards and policies to determine whether revisions are needed internally, and what more we should expect of our social media partners to rid the platforms of hate, violence and inappropriate content. We will let them know we expect greater accountability, action and transparency from them," a statement from the company's CEO James Quincey read.

How the Facebook Ad Boycott Campaign Gained Momentum

In the wake of nationwide anti-racism protests sparked by the custodial killing of unarmed African-American George Floyd in Minneapolis, a number of prominent civil rights groups in the United States came together to urge businesses – big and small – to pull their ads from Facebook and Instagram. This movement came to be known as the 'Stop Hate for Profit' campaign. The coalition – comprising Colour of Change, National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), Sleeping Giants, Free Press, Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Common-Sense Media – accused Facebook of doing little to contain the spread of racist content online. "99% of Facebook's \$70 billion is made through advertising. Who will advertisers stand with? Let's send Facebook a powerful message: Your profits will never be worth promoting hate, bigotry, racism, antisemitism and violence," it says, urging businesses to pull their ads from the platform. In the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election, the organisers of the campaign fear that a highly polarised audience on social media could increase the potential for spreading misinformation and discriminatory content. The campaign gained significant steam with major brand names like US ice cream manufacturer Ben & Jerry's, movie distributor Magnolia Pictures, and outdoor apparel brand Northface joining the league of businesses boycotting ads on Facebook. However, it was when telecom giant Verizon announced that it was suspending advertising on the social media site that the



debate about Facebook's content moderation policy really began to take centre stage. Verizon's announcement came after an open letter was sent by ADL to Facebook advertisers, which cited an instance where the wireless carried an ad alongside a post which promoted "hateful and antisemitic rhetoric". With big household names like Unilever, Verizon, and Levis re-evaluating its relationship with the social media platform and major advertising agencies urging its clients to join the protest, the campaign hopes that Facebook will respond by committing to changing its policies and creating a safe, non-discriminatory online experience for its millions of users. The campaign's organisers have released a list of recommendations for Facebook to improve its content moderation policy. These include suggestions like: **Provide more support to people who are targets of racism, antisemitism and hate; Stop generating ad revenue from misinformation and harmful content; and Increase Safety in Private Groups on Facebook.**

Facebook's Response

Prior to Zuckerberg's public address Friday, Facebook had reached out to over 200 of its advertisers and held a conference call to inform them that they were working towards narrowing what they called a "trust deficit". In his 11-minute livestream Friday, Zuckerberg announced a number of initiatives that his company will soon be undertaking to quell growing concerns about hate speech. "I am committed to making sure Facebook remains a place where people can use their voice to discuss important issues," Zuckerberg said. "But I also stand against hate or anything that incites violence or suppresses voting, and we're committed to removing that content too, no matter where it comes from." He stated that **both Instagram and Facebook will up its efforts to protect the interests of marginalised groups and minorities – immigrants, migrants, refugees, among others. Additionally, he said the company would not necessarily take down posts that may violate its policies, but will instead begin to label them. Zuckerberg stressed that posts that "may lead to violence or deprive people of their right to vote" will be taken down regardless of who has shared it or whether it is newsworthy. Facebook will also introduce a link to its voting information centre on posts which mention voting – including those shared by politicians. Facebook has been facing mounting pressure ever since the platform chose not to take down a controversial post shared by US President Donald Trump about the nationwide anti-racism protests.** In his tweet, Trump's post allegedly threatened the use of force against demonstrators who had gathered to protest Floyd's death in Minneapolis. The companies' decision sparked widespread outrage and public condemnation. Hundreds of disgruntled Facebook employees even staged a 'virtual walk-out' to express their dissatisfaction.

The Campaign's Impact on Facebook

With advertising forming the foundation of Facebook's annual revenue of roughly \$70 billion, experts have said that the recent spate of companies withdrawing their ads from the platform could pose a significant threat to the business. Soon after Unilever announced that it would stop spending ad revenue on Facebook, the social media platform's shares plummeted by 8.3% – the biggest drop it has seen in three months. Last year, the consumer good giant poured in more than \$42 million into the platform, according to a report by CNN. Verizon too, spent around \$2 million on Facebook advertising, in the last month alone, CNBC reported. **The ongoing ad boycott campaign is not the first instance of protest against the social media platform in the recent past. Several attempts have been made, including the #deletefacebook trend in early 2018,** to challenge Facebook's handling of user data as well as its content regulation policies. However, the companies' revenue and growth has never been seriously



impacted by these protests, a Bloomberg report points out. The organisers of the boycott campaign claim that hurting Facebook financially is not their sole aim. Civil rights group Sleeping Giants, in a tweet shared Friday, wrote: “Remember that the **#StopHateForProfit campaign is not about damaging Facebook’s bottom line, it’s about a broader reckoning around the platform’s lack of moderation of hate and disinformation.**” Many have drawn parallels with a similar boycott campaign against YouTube in 2017. Then too, several big corporations had pulled their ad dollars over concerns that the platform’s algorithm placed their ads next to hate speech. However, most advertisers returned to YouTube soon after, Forbes reported.

Black Hole Merges with Unusual Compact Object

→ The LIGO Scientific and VIRGO Collaborations (LSC) have detected an unusual compact object whose mass falls in between that of a typical black hole and a neutron star. The absence of accompanying electromagnetic signatures such as flashes of light are compatible with both. This puzzling event was registered by the LIGO and VIRGO detectors on August 14, 2019. The work has been published in The Astrophysical Journal Letters. Since the first detection of gravitational wave signals emerging from the coalescing of binary black holes in 2015, the LIGO and VIRGO detectors have detected mergers of pairs of black holes, pairs of neutron stars and black hole-neutron star duo. From this experience and from the predictions of theory, the present merger detected on August 14, 2019, only posed a puzzle.

Inference from Signal

Looking at the signal waveform, it appeared that the primary object in this merger had a mass of about 23.2 times that of the Sun and the smaller, secondary object had a mass of about 2.6 times the solar mass. The pair joined to form a large black hole of mass 25.6 times the Sun’s mass, having radiated away 0.2 solar masses. This is unusual on many counts. For one thing, the mass ratio was approximately 1:9. This is the largest disparity in masses that has been observed till now between members of the coalescing pair. While at 23.2 solar masses, the primary is clearly a black hole, the calculated mass of the secondary object puts it in a dubious spot. It is too light to be a black hole and too heavy to be a neutron star, as far as observations go. “Theoretically, both the maximum mass of neutron star and minimum mass of a black hole will depend on the complex physics at the core of a neutron star, details of supernova explosion a star undergoes at the end of its stellar evolution and so on,”. “Further, the current observational uncertainties cannot confirm or rule out whether there is a ‘mass gap’ between the maximum mass of the neutron star and the minimum mass of a black hole.”

When the Indian Ocean’s Ancient Climate Patterns Return

→ About 19,000-21,000 years ago, ice-sheets covered North America and Eurasia, and sea-levels were much lower. This period, the peak of ice age conditions, is called the **Last Glacial Maximum**. Researchers analysed simulations of this past climate and predicted that the ongoing climate change could reawaken an ancient climate pattern of the Indian Ocean. They find that this could be similar to the El Niño phenomenon of the Pacific Ocean bringing more frequent and devastating floods and drought to several densely-populated countries around the Indian Ocean region. If current warming trends continue, this new Indian Ocean El Niño could emerge as early as 2050. The results were published in Science Advances.



Study on Shells

By studying microscopic zooplankton called foraminifera, the team had published a paper in 2019 which first found evidence from the past of an Indian Ocean El Niño. Foraminifera build a calcium carbonate shell, and studying these can tell us about the properties of the water. The team measured multiple individual shells of foraminifera from ocean sediment cores and reconstructed the sea surface temperature conditions of the past.

Over 350 Elephants Found Dead in Botswana

- Hundreds of elephants have died mysteriously in Botswana's famed Okavango Delta, the head of the wildlife department said on Thursday, ruling out poaching as the tusks were found intact. The landlocked southern African country has the world's largest elephant population, estimated to be around 130,000. He said the cause of the deaths was yet to be established with anthrax having been ruled out. "We do not suspect poaching since (the) animals were found with tusks," he said. Samples have been collected and sent to South Africa, Zimbabwe and Canada for testing.

Similar Deaths

Similar deaths were first reported in May when authorities found 12 carcasses in just a week in two villages in the northwest of the country. The latest discoveries were flagged by a wildlife conservation charity, Elephants Without Borders (EWB), whose confidential report referring to the 356 dead elephants, was leaked to the media on Wednesday. EWB suspects the elephants have been dying in the area for about three months. "There was good evidence to show elephants of all ages and sex appear to be dying," said the report penned by EWB director Mike Chase. Several live elephants appeared to have been weak, lethargic and emaciated, with some showing signs of disorientation, difficulty in walking or limping, EWB said. "One elephant was observed walking in circles, unable to change direction although being encouraged by other herd members," said the report.

Chickens Were First Domesticated in Southwestern China

- A recent study by scientists has revealed new details about the earliest domestication of chicken. The DNA sequencing of 863 genomes has showed the first domestication of chicken occurred in southwestern China, northern Thailand and Myanmar. A collaborated study, which involved sequencing of genomes from all four species of the genus Gallus, five sub-species of Red Jungle Fowl and various domestic chicken breeds collected worldwide, revealed single domestication from Red Jungle Fowl sub-species Gallus gallus spadiceus. The study also demonstrated that all five Red Jungle Fowl sub-species were genetically differentiated from each other approximately 50,000 years ago (much earlier than domestication), corresponding to their geographic ranges and taxonomic classifications. Mukesh Thakur, a scientist of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), who contributed to the study, said the results contradicted the earlier claim that chickens were domesticated in northern China and the Indus Valley. "The research assumes significance as despite the substantial role played by chickens in human societies across the world, both the geographic and temporal origins of their domestication remain controversial," Dr. Thakur said. Scientists across the world contributed to the study in which DNA from indigenous village chicken, four species of wild jungle fowl and domesticated chicken were collected and analysed.
- The question of domestication of chickens has intrigued scientists for centuries. Charles Darwin postulated that chickens were domesticated around 4,000 B.C. from a single Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur.



ancestor, **Red Jungle Fowl in the Indus Valley**. The study showed that following their domestication, chickens were trans-located across South-east and South Asia where they interbred with Red Jungle Fowl sub-species and other jungle fowl species. ZSI Director Kailash Chandra said the efforts by Dr. Thakur and other scientists in unveiling the mystery over chicken domestication would help in identifying ecological adaptation and phenotypic plasticity among the five sub-species of Red Jungle Fowl.

Two More Species Added to India's List of Butterflies

- Lepidopterists in Arunachal Pradesh have helped add two species to India's expanding list of butterflies. One of them, the **Striped Hairstreak**, was first recorded by Japanese entomologists in Hainan province of China. The other, **Elusive Prince**, has a Vietnamese connection and was thought to be the more familiar Black Prince found in the Eastern Himalayas. The Striped Hairstreak (*Yamamotozephyrus kwangtugenesis*) was located in Vijayanagar bordering Myanmar while the Elusive Prince was found in Miao on the periphery of the Namdapha National Park.
- "The Rohana genus had been represented in India by two species – the Black Prince (*Rohana parisatis*) and the Brown Prince (*Rohana parvata*). In the former, the male is black and the female is brown while in the latter, both male and female are brown. We have only had a male specimen of the Elusive Prince, so named because it is very difficult to find," Mr. Smetacek told The Hindu. The scientific name of the Elusive Prince is *Rohana tonkiniana*, named after Tonkin in north Vietnam, where it was first recorded. It was believed to exist in Bhutan, but studies of the specimen found there have not been conclusive.
- The discovery of the Striped Hairstreak, whose genus was broken into several genera by Japanese researchers, was more intriguing for the lepidopterists. "The place where it was found borders northern Myanmar, where three males were recorded earlier. But there's a huge gap between this area and Hainan island in south-eastern China," Mr. Smetacek said.

Rich Biodiversity

The recording of the two butterflies follows the "rediscovery" of the Assam Keelback, a non-venomous snake from the Gelling area of Arunachal Pradesh after 129 years.

The Assam Snake That Was Lost and Found 129 Years Later

- More than a century after it was first seen, the **Assam keelback** – a snake species endemic to the region – was rediscovered in 2018 by a team from Wildlife Institute of India (WII) near a reserve forest on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. A look at the **Herpetoreas pealii**, its uniqueness, and its journey from being near-lost to rediscovered.

When Was the Snake First Seen?

It was discovered 129 years ago by Samuel Edward Peal, a British tea planter based in Upper Assam. The planter collected two specimens of the **small brown non-venomous snake** from the evergreen forests that made up what is now Assam's Sivasagar district, and deposited them in the museum. "In 1891, William Lutley Sclater, a British zoologist, formally recorded the snake as a new species in a half-page description and named it after the collector (Edward Peal) and commonly after the place where it was found," said Abhijit Das, the scientist with Dehradun-based WII, who was part of the team that rediscovered the species. The two specimens were kept in the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Kolkata, and the Natural



History Museum, London. “The species has never been reported since then – nobody knew where it lived, how it looked, and everyone considered it a lost species,” said Das.

How Was It Rediscovered?

In 2018, five scientists from WII retraced the route of the **Abor Expedition – a punitive expedition in the North-Eastern Frontier Agency (which corresponds to parts of present-day Assam and Arunachal Pradesh) from October 1911 to April 1912.** “As much as it was a military expedition, it was a zoological and botanical expedition,” said Das, “The biologists on board at the time discovered a variety of species.” In September 2018, Das was among the five scientists who undertook the month-long expedition along the same route. “And we just happened to find this harmless snake while we were surveying the **Poba Reserve Forest (RF) located at the interstate boundary of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh,**” said Das, adding that Poba RF is a contiguous forest falling both in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. “The snake was collected from the Arunachal part of Poba,” he said. Subsequently, Das collaborated with the Natural History Museum, London to establish and identify it. “The specimen kept in ZSI Kolkata was destroyed so we could not gather any data from it,” he said. The rediscovery of the Assam keelback was published in international journal Vertebrate Zoology on June 26, co-authored by Das, and David J. Gower and V. Deepak of the Natural History Museum, London.

Why Was It Considered ‘Lost’ For So Many Years?

As per Das, the snake’s ‘lost’ status has a lot to do with the habitat it occupies – in this case, a lowland evergreen forest. “These forests have been selectively degraded during the last 100 years: tea plantations have been made, selective logging has taken place, and many other activities such as oil exploration and coal mining,” said Das, “Most of the habitat has already disappeared. And in that case, there is hardly any scope to do research activity.” Das said there is another snake – *Stoliczka khasiensis*, or the Khasi Earth Snake – which was discovered in Meghalaya’s Khasi Hills 150 years ago, but has not been seen after that. Guwahati-based herpetologist Jayaditya Purkayastha said one should not be quick to classify such species as ‘extinct’. “We must remember that snakes and other reptiles are cryptic creatures, which basically means that they are not as easy to spot compared to say, a tiger,” he said, “A tiger will be more visible because of its sheer size but you might pass by the area, and not spot the snake hiding in the bush, unless you have specifically come looking for it.” He added that the lack of surveys, especially in the herpetological field, was a contributory factor. “Very few people are doing work on it but that does not mean that the species is ‘extinct’ – it may just be because no proper survey has been done,” he said.

Is the Snake Unique?

When the British had discovered the snake, they had classified it as belonging to the larger keelback species. “But through DNA studies, we found that this particular keelback does not belong to the generalised keelback snake of India but is rather a unique genus (*Herpetoreas*) belonging to a smaller group of four species, found in Eastern and Western Himalayas, South China and Northeast India.

Is the Snake Under Threat?

Das said the habitats are a good indicator of the status of the species. The Poba RF, where the snake was found, is one of the last remaining patches of low elevation tropical wet forest in the upper Brahmaputra valley. “Most snakes and other reptiles are categorised as ‘data

[Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



deficient' in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list," said Das, "This is the worst category because there is practically no information available about it and it is difficult to determine its status."

How Many Snake Species Are There in The Northeast?

As per Purkayashta, approximately 105 snake species are found in the Northeast. "Out of these, seven are endemic," he said, adding that these figures were approximate since the field of herpetology is marred by the lack of funds.

Plant Thought to Be Extinct for More Than 135 Years Found in Sikkim Himalayas

→ A team of researchers from Pune and Kerala have "rediscovered" a rare and critically endangered plant species called *Globba andersonii* from the Sikkim Himalayas near the Teesta river valley region after a gap of nearly 136 years. The plant, known commonly as 'dancing ladies' or 'swan flowers' was thought to have been extinct until its "re-collection", for the first time since 1875 "The earliest records of the collection of this plant were dated between the period 1862-70 when it was collected by Scottish botanist Thomas Anderson from Sikkim and Darjeeling. Then, in 1875, the British botanist Sir George King, had collected this taxon from the Sikkim Himalayas," said Dr. Punekar. Since then, the plant had not been collected for over 135 years, until chanced upon by Dr. Punekar during a field trip to the Sevoke hill forest region in Darjeeling in July 2011. *Globba andersonii* are characterised by white flowers, non-appendaged anthers (the part of a stamen that contains the pollen) and a "yellowish lip". Classified as "critically endangered" and "narrowly endemic", the species is restricted mainly to Teesta River Valley region which includes the Sikkim Himalays and Darjeeling hill ranges. Given the endangered nature of this species, the four researchers recommend total protection be given to the natural habitat of this taxon. "Micro-propagation, tissue culture of this taxon and multiplication of this species and its re-introduction in the natural habitat could be the key for it to survive and thrive in the future," said Mr. Hareesh.

Rare Biological Phenomenon Spotted in Dragonflies

→ When Renjith R.V and Vivek Chandran spotted a peculiar dragonfly, the Scarlet Skimmer (*Crocothemis servilia*), in the Puzhakkal area of the Kole wetlands in Thrissur last year, little did they know that they were documenting a very rare biological phenomenon. Even though the dragonfly was perched in the deep marsh, Mr. Renjith managed to take a photograph of it. They were puzzled by its appearance as male dragonflies typically have a prominent blood-red colouration in almost all the body parts, including the head, thorax, abdomen and legs, and the female is pale yellow in colour with a dark brown thorax and legs. But the one they spotted on July 14 as part of the Kole Odonata Survey 2019, conducted by the Society for Odonate Studies and Kole Birders in association with Kerala Agricultural University and the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, was "part red and part yellow". Later, while compiling data, they were thrilled to find that they had recorded 'gynandromorphism' – a very rare biological phenomenon. Their finding has been published in the latest issue of the Journal of Threatened Taxa under the title 'A Record of gynandromorphism in the Libellulid Dragon fly *Crocothemis Servilia* from India'.



Genetic Aberration

Gynandromorphs are chimeric individuals having both male and female tissues and it is viewed by the scientific community as a genetic aberration. Even though common in some arthropod taxa such as Crustacea and Arachnida, the paper says it is very rare in odonates and only 30 individuals from seven families have been reported with the condition worldwide. The spotted individual showed bilateral gynandromorphism of only the thorax, half of which showed blood red colouration as in males and the other half pale yellow characteristic of females. The base of the wing of the red half was marked with rich amber, in contrast with the other wing base which was paler. The head, legs and abdomen showed typical female morphology. It had mixtures of male and female external characters ranging from almost entirely female to about equally divided. They were symmetrical in development with normally dimorphic structures mostly having characters intermediate between the typical male and female conditions. Further research has to be undertaken to investigate the influence of environmental factors on this phenomenon. The Society for Odonate Studies has been conducting surveys at Kole wetlands since 2018 and 37 species of dragonflies and damselflies have been reported from the wetlands so far.

Big Flap: Golden Birdwing Is India's Largest Butterfly

→ A Himalayan butterfly named *golden birdwing* is now India's largest, a record the *southern birdwing* held for 88 years. With a wingspan of 194 mm, the female of the species is marginally larger than the southern birdwing (190 mm) that Brigadier William Harry Evans, a British military officer and lepidopterist, recorded in 1932. But the male golden birdwing (*Troides aeacus*) is much smaller at 106 mm. The new measurements of this and 24 other species of butterflies were published in the latest issue of Bionotes, a quarterly newsletter for research on life forms. Shristee Panthee of the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences in Yunnan and Peter Smetacek of the Butterfly Research Centre at Bhimtal in Uttarakhand are the authors of the study.

While the female golden birdwing was recorded from Didihat in Uttarakhand, the largest male was from the Wankhar Butterfly Museum in Shillong. According to the authors, the only measurement used in the study of Lepidoptera is wingspan – a simple concept with various interpretations of the term. “Some older authors measured a straight line between the forewing apices (pointed ends or tips) of pinned specimens. This was controversial, since the same butterfly could have different wingspans, depending on the position of its forewings in relation to each other,” the study says.

More Reliable Method

Brigadier Evans followed a more reliable method. He measured a butterfly from the centre of the thorax to the tip of the forewing apex and doubled the result. His contribution was to provide the wingspans of all butterfly species then known from the Indian subcontinent and his book is still the standard work on the subject. The updated wingspan of three species – all from Uttarakhand – after the golden birdwing are the common windmill (*Byasa polyeuctes*) at 98 mm, the great windmill (*Byasa dasarada*) at 96 mm, and the common peacock (*Papilio bianor*) at 78 mm. The smallest is the quaker (*Neopithecops zalmora*) with a wingspan of 18 mm and forewing length of a mere 8 mm. The largest female golden birdwing's forewing length is 90 mm.



How A Fungus Grows Inside A Bug, Goes on To Kill and Feed on It

→ When you are an **Ophiocordyceps fungus**, your life is straight out of a sci-fi movie: Infect a bug, eat from inside, kill it, sprout out and target the next bug. Researchers have now found this fungus (*Ophiocordyceps nutans*) for the first time in central India and show how it infects a stink bug. They also explore **the potential of using these fungi as biopesticide and medicine**. The fungus was found on its specific host insect *Halyomorpha halys*. Also called the stink bug, this insect is a pest to forest trees and agricultural crops. **The simple but scary modus operandi of the fungi involves infecting the insect when alive, developing fungal mycelium inside its thorax, and when it is time for the spores to come out, kill the bug. The fruiting body sprouts out from between the insect's thorax and head, and it continues to take nutrition from the dead body. The fungi are very host-specific, so the spores travel and infect many more stink bugs.** Dr. Paul adds that more studies are needed to understand in detail about the behaviour, mode of action, and exact interaction of the fungus with the insect. **Previous studies have shown that these fungi can be used as a biological pest control agent. The stink bug is known to damage the flower and fruits of soybean, green beans, apple, pear, and the team write that exploring these fungi as a pesticide will help reduce the harmful effect of chemicals in our fields.** "The more interesting and important point to note is that several species of the **Ophiocordyceps fungi have medicinal properties**. Reports have shown that China has been traditionally using it. Also, in the Western Ghats, the local people use these fungi as an immune stimulator," adds corresponding author Professor S.K. Jadhav. The authors say that studies from across the globe have noted that **these fungi are rich in biologically active metabolites, vitamin C, phenolic compounds, and also has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties**. They also claim that it contains **a component called 'cordycepin' which has anticancer properties**. The fungi can be grown in lab settings and explored further, says the team.

The Secret of How Caterpillars Tame Ants

→ Scientists from the National Centre of Biological Sciences (NCBS) in Bengaluru have got fascinating insights into the relations of caterpillars and their ant hosts using advanced X-ray MicroCT technology. The intriguing caterpillar-ant associations have been a subject of study for decades. **Butterflies of the family Lycaenidae, known as Blues and Hairstreaks, have over millions of years evolved a range of adaptations that have tamed their ferocious ant predators into protectors and providers.** In fact, caterpillars of this family closely associate with ants, becoming strange bedfellows. **Not only do ants not eat these caterpillars and pupae, they actually care for them and aggressively protect them from other predators and parasitoids,** thus creating an enemy-free space for the butterfly's early stages. The study using X-ray MicroCT technology describes the **association between caterpillars of the Lilac Silverline *Apharitis lilacinus* butterfly and cocktail ants.** This butterfly was rediscovered in India a few years ago after a gap of almost 100 years by a student Nitin Ravikanthachari. This species has an obligate association with a single species of cocktail ant called *Crematogaster hodgsoni*. Scientists who have been studying the relationship between the two species, found that **females of the Lilac Silverline deposit eggs at the entrance of cocktail ant nests, sometimes on sand and away from plants. Caterpillars are completely dependent on the ants after hatching from eggs, and they are constantly attended by their hosts. The caterpillars live inside the ant nests, often among the ant broods, and are cared for by the tending ants just like the rest of their own brood. The organs of caterpillars primarily studied by the scientists are called dew patches in some species and nectar glands in others.** These



organs produce **carbohydrate-rich secretions** to attract and reward the tending ants. For the most part, **these sugary secretions, which ants drink readily, keeps the ants interested in tending and protecting the caterpillars.**

Covid-19 Lockdown Cleared Up the Air, But Harmful Ozone Levels Increased. Here's

Why

- Around the world, Covid-19 lockdowns cleaned up the air as a plethora of economic activities were brought to a standstill. However, new research shows that while NO₂ and PM2.5 levels plummeted during this period, pollution from ozone shot up. The New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) said since the starting of the national lockdown on March 25, pollution from ozone in 22 mega and metropolitan cities in India “increased and even breached standards in several cities”.

Ozone as A Pollutant

The highly reactive ozone gas (O₃) helps protect life when it is in the Earth's stratosphere. There, it forms the ozone layer, which filters ultraviolet radiation from the sun. In the troposphere (meaning at ground-level), however, ozone acts as a pollutant that can trigger several health problems among vulnerable groups, and is known to be associated with **respiratory and cardiovascular diseases**. Along with nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), tropospheric ozone is responsible for many of the ill effects caused by outdoor air pollution.

So, Why Have Ozone Levels Increased?

In many parts of the world, ozone pollution is known to increase during warmer months. It also builds up in cleaner areas. As per the CSE, this happens because ozone is not directly emitted by any source but is formed by photochemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and gases in the air under the influence of sunlight and heat. “A high NO_x level can again react with ozone and mop it up. The ozone that escapes to cleaner areas has no NO_x to further cannibalise it – and as a result, ozone concentration builds up in these areas,” the study explains, “Ozone can be controlled only if gases from all sources are controlled.” In India, as the lockdown was enforced during the summer months, this effect appears to have compounded, with lower than usual NO_x levels at already high temperatures. A study conducted by the University of Manchester in May observed similar trends in the UK, where levels of nitrogen oxides decreased by 20 to 80 per cent during the lockdown, but ozone levels increased. The Manchester team speculated that photochemical production of ozone may become more important in urban areas during summertime in these low conditions of oxides of nitrogen. **As nitrogen oxides reduce, photochemical production may become more efficient and can lead to higher ozone concentrations in the summertime as higher temperatures increase emissions of biogenic hydrocarbon from natural sources such as trees, significantly affecting urban ozone levels.**

Why This Information Is Important

Across the world, due to lockdowns and social distancing, NO_x and particulate matter levels have fallen, clearing up the air. While this is a positive consequence, the high levels of harmful ozone indicate that even the “improved” present conditions can still impact human health. Anumita Roychowdhury, executive director-research and advocacy, CSE, said, “This



pandemic has shown that big reduction is possible only if all regions clean up together and at a scale and with speed across all critical sectors including vehicles, industry, power plants, waste, construction, use of solid fuels for cooking and episodic burning. “There is a need for an agenda for a ‘blue sky and clear lungs’ for the post-pandemic period to sustain the gains. This action must also ensure the co-benefit of reducing both particulate and gaseous emissions, including ozone,” she added.

The G4 Flu Virus With ‘Pandemic Potential’, Found by Chinese Researchers?

→ In a new research, scientists from China – which has the largest population of pigs in the world – have identified a “recently emerged” strain of influenza virus that is infecting Chinese pigs and that has the potential of triggering a pandemic. Named G4, the swine flu strain has genes similar to those in the virus that caused the 2009 flu pandemic. The study was published Monday in the US science journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PANS).

What Have the Scientists Said?

The scientists identified the virus through surveillance of influenza viruses in pigs that they carried out from 2011 to 2018 in ten provinces of China. During this time, more than 29,000 nasal swabs were collected from slaughtered pigs and over 1,000 swabs or lung tissues were collected from farmed pigs that had signs of respiratory disease. Out of these samples, the researchers isolated 179 swine flu viruses, the majority of which belonged to the newly identified G4 strain. They also found that the G4 strain has the capability of binding to human-type receptors (like, the SARS-CoV-2 virus binds to ACE2 receptors in humans), was able to copy itself in human airway epithelial cells, and it showed effective infectivity and aerosol transmission in ferrets.

But Why Study Pigs?

The scientists report that the new strain (G4) has descended from the H1N1 strain that was responsible for the 2009 flu pandemic. “Pigs are intermediate hosts for the generation of pandemic influenza virus. Thus, systematic surveillance of influenza viruses in pigs is a key measure for pre-warning the emergence of the next pandemic influenza,” states the study. It cannot be said if this new strain, if transmitted from pigs to humans, can transmit from one human to another. The scientists suggest that controlling the prevailing G4 Eurasian-Avian like (EA) H1N1 viruses in pigs and closely monitoring human populations, especially workers in the swine industry, should be “urgently implemented”.

The 2009 Swine Flu Pandemic

The WHO declared the outbreak of type A H1N1 influenza virus a pandemic in 2009 when there were around 30,000 cases globally. The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines swine flu as, “a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses that regularly cause outbreaks of influenza in pigs. Influenza viruses that commonly circulate in swine are called “swine influenza viruses” or “swine flu viruses”. Like human influenza viruses, there are different sub-types and strains of swine influenza viruses”. Essentially, swine flu is a virus that pigs can get infected by. While humans typically do not get infected by such a virus that circulates among pigs, when they do, it is called “variant influenza virus”. Human-to-human transmission among variant influenza viruses is limited. As per the CDC, most commonly, humans may get infected by such viruses due to exposure from infected



pigs. The 2009 pandemic was caused by a strain of the swine flu called the H1N1 virus, which was transmitted from human to human. The symptoms of swine flu include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headaches, chills and fatigue.

Covid's Kawasaki Symptoms

→ Around the world, including in India since recently, children with Covid-19 infection have often shown some symptoms similar to those associated with a rare illness called Kawasaki disease – such as rashes and inflammation – while other symptoms of Kawasaki disease have been absent. In fact, such symptoms have also shown in children who tested negative for Covid-19. The first such cases started getting reported since April, from the US and Europe. Doctors in India have started seeing such cases over the last few weeks. Last month, the World Health Organization (WHO) termed this new illness “multisystem inflammatory disorder”.

What Is Kawasaki Disease?

It affects children. Its symptoms include red eyes, rashes, and a swollen tongue with reddened lips – often termed strawberry tongue – and an inflamed blood vessel system all over the body. There is constant high fever for at least five days. The disease also affects coronary functions in the heart. The disease derives its name from a Japanese paediatrician, Tomisaku Kawasaki, who reported the first case in 1961 – a four-year-old boy – and later found similar cases in other children. The doctor, 95, died on June 5 this year in Tokyo. What causes Kawasaki disease is not yet known. “What we do know is that it is an immunological reaction to an infection or a virus. A child’s immunity system responds to a particular infection and develops these symptoms,” said Dr Mukesh Agrawal, Head, Paediatrics Department in KEM Hospital, Mumbai.

What Is the Link with Covid-19?

Children with Covid-19 are mostly asymptomatic or develop mild symptoms. It has been in rare cases that children with Covid-19 have shown symptoms similar to those of Kawasaki disease, 2-3 weeks after getting infected with coronavirus. In India, too, the cases (including some children who tested negative for Covid-19) that have been coming up have shown some of the symptoms associated with Kawasaki disease, but with some differences.

What Have These Symptoms Been?

A 14-year-old girl, admitted to Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital in June, came with high fever and rashes. She tested Covid-19 positive. One June 26, she was admitted to the ICU and was critical, but has since recovered and was discharged on Saturday. Dr Tanu Singhal, paediatric infectious disease expert at the hospital, had said (before the teen recovered): “She has rashes and high fever like Kawasaki, but other symptoms like red eyes, red tongue are not present. Her heart is swollen but coronary functions are not affected like in Kawasaki.” In June, Singhal treated two other similar cases in children with Kawasaki-like symptoms in Mumbai, but they tested Covid-19 negative. In Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital, paediatric cardiologist Dr Biswa R Panda has come across four cases in the last three months with Kawasaki-like symptoms, of whom two required ventilator support. “But all four were negative for Covid-19. That does not rule out Covid-19 – it is possible that by the time we did RT-PCR test for the throat sample, it came negative and antibodies had been developed.” The four children had rashes, inflammation in entire blood vessel system, but



again “did not entirely fit in Kawasaki disease definition”, Panda noted. **Kawasaki typically affects children aged under five. In Covid-19 cases, even adolescents are presenting these symptoms. While Kawasaki involves coronary changes, this has not been the case with all Covid-19-positive children with Kawasaki-like symptoms. The strawberry tongue may or may not be present in those with Covid-19.**

So, It Is Not Exactly Kawasaki?

The Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health (RCPCH) has observed that this syndrome shares symptoms with other inflammatory syndromes in children like “Kawasaki disease, staphylococcal and streptococcal toxic shock syndromes, bacterial sepsis and macrophage activation syndromes”. “It can also present with unusual abdominal symptoms,” it says. The RCPCH says that in multisystem inflammatory syndrome, children may or may not test positive for Covid-19 and show inflammation, persistent fever, single or multi-organ dysfunction. The cases seen in Wadia Hospital match these criteria. **“It is currently unknown if multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS) is specific to children or if it also occurs in adults,”** states the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US. The CDC has taken note of cases in the UK and New York, where children with recent or current Covid-19 infection developed inflammation. “There is limited information currently available about risk factors, pathogenesis, clinical course, and treatment for MIS-C,” CDC says. A few things are clear— **it is seen in patients aged less than 19; inflammation, abdominal pain, diarrhoea is common; heart attack and septic shock may happen. The WHO says there also will be a history of contact with a positive case of Covid-19.**

What Is the Treatment?

At Kokilaben Hospital, Dr Singhal put the 14-year-old on steroids to reduce inflammation, at a dosage 10 times higher than usual. She also treated the teen with the drug Tocilizumab for Covid-19 management. “Antivirals may not work in such cases,” she said. Dr Panda, of Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital, said two of the four children he saw were kept on ventilator support for 10 days. The two were in septic shock, unable to breathe, their heart functions were poor, and they could not pass urine due to kidney problems. “In such syndromes where very little is known, we can only provide **symptomatic therapy**. We gave supportive therapy for each organ. If lungs can’t work, we put them on ventilator, if kidney doesn’t work, we give medication,” he said. **Steroids remain a key treatment to reduce inflammation.** India is not yet maintaining any registry on Kawasaki-like disease or multisystem inflammatory syndrome to know how many children have it along with Covid-19.

Covid Causes Hyperactivity in Blood-Clotting Cells

- ➔ **Scientists have flagged yet another way in which Covid-19 can affect the body: It causes changes in blood platelets that can, in some patients, contribute to the onset of heart attacks, strokes, and other serious complications.** University of Utah Health researchers found that **inflammatory proteins produced during infection significantly alter the function of platelets, making them “hyperactive” and more prone to form dangerous and potentially deadly blood clots.** In their paper published in Blood, an American Society of Hematology journal, the researchers describe a study of 41 Covid-19 patients at University of Utah Hospital. They compared blood from these patients with samples taken from healthy individuals matched for age and sex. **Using differential gene analysis, the researchers found that SARS-CoV-2 appears to trigger genetic changes in platelets. The researchers did not, however, detect**



evidence of the virus in the vast majority of platelets. This suggested that it could be promoting the genetic changes within these cells indirectly.

What Works in Covid-19 Treatment (Dr Zarir Udwadia - Consultant Chest Physician, PD Hinduja Hospital & Medical Research Centre, Mumbai. Dr Satchit Balsari - Assistant Professor in Emergency Medicine and In Global Health at Harvard University's Medical and Public Health Schools)

→ **Azithromycin:** This must be the most widely prescribed and misused antibiotic in this pandemic. Azithromycin, as with all other antibiotics, does not work in viral infections. Antibiotics are only warranted in patients who have evidence of a secondary bacterial infection as some hospitalised patients will have in the later stages of their disease. Indiscriminate use (as was the case even before the pandemic) in the hope that they will prevent bacterial infection only worsens antibiotic resistance, to which India is a frequent contributor.

Blood Thinners: Hospitalised Covid-19 patients have been observed to have a very high incidence of blood clots. There is current global consensus that all hospitalised Covid-19 patients will benefit from blood thinners injected daily just under their skin (like insulin injections). Though there is sound mechanistic reasoning, randomised controlled trials are awaited.

BCG & Other Existing Vaccines: While the world eagerly awaits a new and SARS-CoV-2-specific vaccine, the use of existing vaccines (BCG, Polio, MMR vaccines) in the hope they will work is inappropriate. Trials are under way to see if they will boost innate immunity. We know that **BCG has already been given at birth to all Indians, and it does not seem to have helped keep our case numbers low.**

Vitamin C: More vitamin C may have been consumed than oranges since Covid-19 began! It doesn't work.

Vitamin D: A large meta-analysis just released shows that Vitamin D does not protect against Covid-19.

Favipiravir: This is an oral antiviral drug which was fast tracked by the Indian Drug Controller but is not yet approved in the EU or US. Its use should be restricted to mild or moderate infections only. Available data to support its use is sparse but Indian trials have just been completed and the results are awaited.

Hydroxychloroquine Sulphate (HCQS): We now have compelling data from multiple large clinical trials including WHO's SOLIDARITY and the UK's RECOVERY trials to categorically say: HCQS does not work. Even Donald Trump may have stopped taking it by now – and so should you.



Ivermectin: This is an anti-parasitic drug widely prescribed in India and parts of South America to treat infections from worms. There is no evidence it has any role in Covid-19. It should not be used.

Miscellaneous "Cures": The state machinery has been used to distribute unproven herbal and Ayurvedic potions (Ukalo), homeopathic drops (Arsenicum album), and "treatments" peddled by god-men. Anecdotes and observations do not constitute scientific evidence. In the absence of evidence generated from rigorously vetted clinical trials, the distribution of these substances must be condemned. Pushing unproven and supposedly harmless "treatments" and distributing them to hundreds of thousands is not only disingenuous, but provides people false hope, and risks them lowering their guard. **There are no magic pills to boost immunity to fix years of malnutrition, stunting, obesity, and chronically inflamed lungs.**

Oseltamivir: This is an antiviral agent prescribed for tempering symptoms from the virus that causes influenza. It has no role in treating Covid-19 infection which is caused by a coronavirus.

Plasma: Our blood is composed of cells and plasma. Plasma from those who have recovered from Covid-19 carries naturally acquired antibodies, and, when transfused to critically ill patients with Covid-19, may help improve outcomes. This form of therapy is being used across the globe and trials to assess its efficacy are under way.

Remdesivir: An intravenously administered antiviral medication, it has been shown to be effective in well-designed studies. It seems to shorten recovery time and hospital stay but does not reduce the chance of death. It is currently to be used only in hospitalised patients with severe disease.

Steroids: The only drug so far shown to have a striking impact on mortality is an old and inexpensive one. Current evidence shows that dexamethasone can reduce deaths by one-third in patients with severe Covid-19 infection who need oxygen therapy or ventilators. Their use should, however, be restricted to hospitalised patients. **If they are given too soon in the course of an infection, or given to someone with only a mild infection, they could prevent the body's own immune system from fighting the virus effectively.**

Tocilizumab: This drug is an injection originally used in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. It is being widely used to counter the severe inflammation (cytokine storm) that occurs in some Covid-19 patients. Its use can increase the risk of bacterial infections, and it must therefore be used with caution, if at all, in carefully selected patients.

Zinc: This mineral is also commonly prescribed, despite there being no evidence that it is effective. In conclusion, six months into the pandemic, we must therefore acknowledge four facts: There are few proven treatments for Covid-19 to date, and most will help sicker patients. Dexamethasone, remdesivir, and blood thinners are all proving beneficial: each under very specific circumstances.

The majority of patients will get well on their own without any treatment. In most, a healthy immune system will mount its own defence against the virus and overcome the disease. It



is, however, said that **physicians in India have always felt compelled to prescribe medications to their patients, because patients expect it. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with other bad habits during the pandemic, now is a good time to break it, once and for all.**

Most current Covid drug studies are anecdotal reports or observational studies, which are not the same as, and inferior to, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) where impact on the disease is studied in two comparable groups with and without intervention. The mere announcement of a trial, anywhere in the world, even if an RCT, is not a green light for us to start prescribing these medications in the desperate hope that they will work.

Some of the drugs in current use are likely to end up doing more harm than good. Now, more than ever, let us not abandon the primary Hippocratic injunction of Medicine: 'primum non nocere' – first, do no harm.

- Reliable "Almost every television channel and newspaper seem to be gushing over the miraculous effects of the antiviral drug remdesivir, and that other "cure", plasma therapy. Barring a few honourable exceptions, even some of the so-called experts are not hesitant to overstate their benefits". Level-headed advisory from institutions like the ICMR, that plasma therapy is still an experimental treatment, are lost in the din. So, it is very likely that people are, in general, convinced that the only two currently available treatments for COVID-19 are plasma therapy and remdesivir. But, Karthikeyan argues that a study of dexamethasone in the United Kingdom deserves prominence. For one, this is the first study to show an unequivocal, and large benefit in sick patients with COVID-19, on the outcomes that matter most – the risk of death and the risk of needing ventilator support. Second, dexamethasone is cheap and readily available, with several "branded generics" available in the Indian market. "A course of treatment at the prescribed dose would cost less than ₹10 per patient. On the other hand, remdesivir, even the brands marketed by Indian companies, would cost tens of thousands of rupees per course," writes Karthikeyan. It is naïve to expect that the pharmaceutical industry and for-profit healthcare providers will fill this information gap to their detriment. "The responsibility to rescue the media, the general public and our policymakers from the 'remdesivir effect', therefore, falls squarely upon physicians and public health agencies,".

Doubts Over Herd Immunity

- A new study published in The Lancet has concluded that herd immunity against Covid-19 is difficult to achieve at this stage, while a separate commentary describes it as unachievable. The conclusion is based on estimates of seroprevalence for the entire Spanish population.

What Is the New Study?

It is a large-scale seroepidemiological study, and concluded that just five per cent of the Spanish population has developed antibodies in response to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19. This implies that an estimated 95 per cent continues to be susceptible to the virus. The study, which included 66,805 participants, was conducted between April 27 and May 11. It found that seroprevalence for the entire country was 5% by the point-of-care test and 4.6% by immunoassay. In seven provinces in the central part of Spain, including Madrid, seroprevalence was "greater than 10 percent"; and in provinces along the coast, seroprevalence was greater than 5% only in Barcelona. In age-specific findings, "according to the point-of-care test, seroprevalence was 1.1 percent in infants younger than 1 year and 3.1 percent in children aged 5-9 years, increasing with age until plateauing around 6 percent in people aged 45 years or older".



How Significant Is the Study?

It is the largest serological study conducted so far in Europe and captures the true number of Covid-19 infections, which isn't captured by laboratory tests. It provides an estimate for the population of the entire country. Based on an overall seroprevalence range of 3.7% to 6.2% and accounting for the proportions of seropositive individuals who were asymptomatic, the study estimated that "between 3,76,000 and 10,42,000 asymptomatic individuals went undetected in the non-institutionalised Spanish population".

What Are the Implications of The Study?

While a seroprevalence study largely provides information only about previous exposure to the virus, this study strengthens the line of argument that in the absence of treatment or a vaccine against Covid-19, achieving herd immunity at this stage is not possible.

"In light of these findings, any proposed approach to achieve herd immunity through natural infection is not only highly unethical but also unachievable. With a large majority of the population being infection naive, virus circulation can quickly return to early pandemic dimensions in a second wave once measures are lifted." Beyond Spain, the study sends signals to other countries: that even in countries that have reported high prevalence of Covid-19, the pandemic is far from coming to an end; therefore, these countries have to be cautious about easing of restrictions.

Why Does the Study Suggest That Herd Immunity Is Difficult?

At the beginning of the pandemic, the United Kingdom had hinted at a strategy that would allow the novel coronavirus to infect 60 per cent of the country's population so that a degree of herd immunity could be achieved. Now, the data from Spain shows that in a country that has reported community transmission, only an estimated 5% have developed antibodies in response to the virus. Hence the conclusion. In their commentary, the German virologists have raised two important issues: At present, **immunity after SARS-CoV-2 infection is thought to be incomplete and temporary, lasting only several months to a few years; second, it is unknown whether these patients are protected by other immune functions, such as cellular immunity.**

Could the Covid-19 Virus Be Airborne?

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Thursday (July 9) published an updated version of its March 29 scientific brief, 'Modes of transmission of virus causing COVID-19: implications for infection prevention and control (IPC) precaution recommendations', which it said included "new scientific evidence available on transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19". In the brief, the WHO has formally acknowledged the possibility that the novel coronavirus can remain in the air in crowded indoor spaces, where "short-range aerosol transmission... cannot be ruled out". The updated brief has come three days after a group of 239 scientists from 32 countries published a commentary titled 'It is Time to Address Airborne Transmission of COVID-19', in which they issued an "appeal to the medical community and to the relevant national and international bodies to recognize the potential for airborne spread of COVID-19". Earlier, on Tuesday (July 7), a day after the scientists' open letter was published, Maria van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on the pandemic, had told the daily Covid-19 news briefing that "we have been talking about the possibility of airborne transmission and aerosol transmission as one of the modes of transmission" of the virus.



What Does This Mean?

A respiratory infection such as Covid-19 is transmitted through droplets of different sizes. If the droplets particles are larger than 5-10 microns in diameter, they are referred to as respiratory droplets; if they are smaller than 5 microns in diameter, they are referred to as droplet nuclei. "According to current evidence, Covid-19 virus is primarily transmitted between people through respiratory droplets and contact routes," the WHO states. However, the letter written by the scientists suggests aerosol transmission too can happen. In other words, the WHO's viewpoint is that droplets containing the virus, produced during speech, coughing, sneezing etc, are larger than 5-10 microns in diameter and eventually succumb to gravity and fall to the ground after travelling less than 1 metre. The 239 scientists, on the other hand, are citing evidence that the virus can be present in droplet nuclei (less than 5 microns in diameter) that do travel distances longer than 1 metre, and can remain in the air for a longer time. If this can be established, it will mean that the risk of transmission is higher than previously thought.

Is This A New Revelation?

As per the WHO, airborne transmission may be possible in specific circumstances and settings. These include settings in which procedures that generate aerosols are performed; endotracheal intubation; bronchoscopy; open suctioning; administration of nebulised treatment; manual ventilation before intubation; turning a patient to the prone position; disconnecting a patient from the ventilator; non-invasive positive-pressure ventilation; tracheostomy; and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Referring to the NYT report, the WHO has stated that "initial findings need to be interpreted carefully." If the evidence being cited has to be examined, researchers will look at the specific settings in which the virus was found airborne, the duration for which the virus was found staying in the air, and, most importantly, whether the virus continues to be infectious throughout this duration.

So, What Has the WHO Said in Its Updated Brief?

Referring to several recent studies, the WHO has said that some outbreaks that have occurred in crowded indoor spaces suggest "the possibility of aerosol transmission", although "combined with droplet transmission". Such situations have arisen "during choir practice, in restaurants or in fitness classes". According to the WHO, "in these events, short-range aerosol transmission, particularly in specific indoor locations, such as crowded and inadequately ventilated spaces over a prolonged period of time with infected persons cannot be ruled out". There is, however, a caveat – the WHO does not think that even in these situations, the virus was transmitted exclusively by the aerial route. The WHO brief still says that "the detailed investigations of these clusters suggest that droplet and fomite transmission could also explain human-to-human transmission within these clusters". Transmission through respiratory droplets – when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or sings – is still understood to be the primary mode of transmission of the virus. Fomite transmission on the other hand, refers to transmission through infected surfaces – such as doorknobs, elevator buttons, handrails, phones, switches, pens, keyboards and, if not disinfected, even a doctor's stethoscope. But what is important is that the WHO has previously maintained that airborne transmission of the virus is not a concern outside of situations in which healthcare workers are engaged in certain medical procedures that generate aerosols. And while it still continues to stress that "current evidence suggests that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 occurs primarily between people through direct, indirect, or close contact with infected people through infected secretions such as saliva and respiratory



secretions, or through their respiratory droplets”, the new brief acknowledges that aerosol transmission can occur “outside of medical facilities” as well. The new brief does not, however, address the question of the relative contributions of transmission by droplets, fomites, and aerosols to the spread of Covid-19. There isn’t enough evidence yet, it suggests. It says: “Urgent high-quality research is needed to elucidate the relative importance of different transmission routes; the role of airborne transmission in the absence of aerosol generating procedures; the dose of virus required for transmission to occur; the settings and risk factors for superspreading events; and the extent of asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission.”

How Does Life Change for You and Me Now? What Does the Fact That Airborne Transmission Is Possible, Mean?

It basically means that wearing a mask becomes even more important than earlier. It might be possible that N-95 masks, which are used by clinicians in hospital settings, could now be recommended to prevent aerosol transmission, subject to availability, and depending on the health condition of a person. In its section on ‘How to prevent transmission’, the WHO brief said that apart from hand washing and physical distancing, one should “avoid crowded places, close-contact settings and confined and enclosed spaces with poor ventilation”, and “wear fabric masks when in closed, overcrowded spaces to protect others; and ensure good environmental ventilation in all closed settings and appropriate environmental cleaning and disinfection”.

What Is the Evidence So Far on The Aerosol Transmission?

One of the first studies, published in Nature, was conducted in Renmin Hospital and Wuchang Fangcang Field Hospital in Wuhan. It investigated the aerodynamic nature of the virus SARS-CoV-2 by measuring its viral RNA in aerosols. The study found that the concentration of the virus in aerosols detected in isolation wards and ventilated patient rooms was “very low”, but it was “higher in the toilet areas used by the patients”. “Levels of airborne SARS-CoV-2 RNA in the most public areas was undetectable, except in two areas that were prone to crowding,” the study stated. “Although we have not established the infectivity of the virus detected in these hospital areas, we propose that SARS-CoV-2 may have the potential to be transmitted through aerosols.”

In April, a correspondence published on NEJM by researchers from the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the United States evaluated the stability of SARS-CoV-2 (and SARS-CoV-1, which causes SARS) in aerosols and on various surfaces. It found that SARS-CoV-2 “remained viable in aerosols” throughout the duration of the experiment that lasted for three hours. “Our results indicate that aerosol and fomite transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is plausible since the virus can remain viable and infectious in aerosols for hours,” the study said. WHO, disagreeing with the findings of NEJM article, said, “... The finding of COVID-19 virus in aerosol particles up to 3 hours does not reflect a clinical setting in which aerosol-generating procedures are performed—that is, this was an experimentally induced aerosol-generating procedure.”

In May, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), published a study titled “High SARS-CoV-2 Attack Rate Following Exposure at a Choir Practice”. The researchers, who studied “superspreading events”, found that following 2.5-hour choir practice attended by 61 persons, including a symptomatic index patient, 32 confirmed and 20 probable secondary Covid-19 cases occurred; three patients were hospitalised, and two died. The study noted that “the act of singing” itself – might have contributed to “transmission through the



emission of aerosols, which is affected by the loudness of vocalization". "Certain persons, known as super emitters, who release more aerosol particles during speech than do their peers, might have contributed to this and previously reported COVID-19 superspreading events," it said.

"... Aerosol emission during speech has been correlated with loudness of vocalization, and certain persons, who release an order of magnitude more particles than their peers, have been referred to as super emitters and have been hypothesized to contribute to superspreading events. Members had an intense and prolonged exposure, singing while sitting 6–10 inches from one another, possibly emitting aerosols," it said.

Does Asthma Raise Covid-19 Risk? Study Suggests It Does Not

→ A new study suggests that patients of asthma do not seem to be at increased risk of contracting COVID-19, or of more severe illness than someone who is not suffering from asthma. The study, conducted by researchers of Rutgers University in New Jersey, is published in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. While older age and certain conditions – such as heart disease, high blood pressure, COPD, diabetes and obesity – are recognised as risk factors for development and progression of Covid-19, the study found that people with asthma (even those with diminished lung function) seem to be no worse affected by SARS-CoV-2 than a non-asthmatic person. "There is limited data as to why this is the case – if it is physiological or a result of the treatment to manage the inflammation," Reynold A Panetteri Jr, director of the Rutgers Institute for Translational Medicine and Science and co-author of a paper, said in a statement. Among possible reasons, Panetteri proposed that because of increased attention on the effects of Covid-19 on people in vulnerable populations, those with asthma may become hyper-vigilant about personal hygiene and social distancing. "Social distancing could improve asthma control since people who are self-quarantined are also not as exposed to seasonal triggers that include allergens or respiratory viruses. There is also evidence that people are being more attentive to taking their asthma medication during the pandemic, which can contribute to overall health," he said. While a person's vulnerability to severe illness caused by Covid-19 increases with age, asthma sufferers tend to be younger than those with reported high-risk conditions, Panetteri noted. As such, "age-adjusted studies could help us better understand if age is a factor in explaining why asthma patients may not be at greater risk for infection". Again, SARS-CoV-2 infects human cells by interacting with an enzyme (ACE2) attached to the cell membranes in the lungs, arteries, heart, kidney and intestines. This enzyme, which is increased in response to the virus, is also thought to be beneficial in clearing other respiratory viruses, Panetteri said.

What (And How Long) Does It Take to Make A Vaccine; What's the Covid Timeline?

→ The August 15 target for launching Covaxin, India's Covid-19 vaccine, is being described as a fast-track effort. This is because the development of a vaccine is usually a long, uncertain process. It is also expensive, with funding playing an important role. There is no fixed period but the process can typically run into decades – and still yield no results. For instance, after three decades of research, the vaccine for HIV is still in phase III of clinical trials. One of the fastest developed vaccines is the one used for mumps, which received approval in four years after trials began in 1963. In March, Antony Fauci, Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told the Senate Committee: "We would not have a vaccine that would even be ready to start to deploy for a year and a half. That is the time frame." However, even this ambitious target can only be achieved when regulators give



emergency authorisation, and not through the usual process that is followed for approvals. In general, a vaccine is developed and tested over a number of stages. For Covid-19, this has been fast-tracked in various ways.

Stage I: R&D

This typically takes two to four years. For Covid-19, this stage has been progressing fast for two reasons. First, a large number of candidates are based on the virus's genetic code instead of its protein, and Chinese researchers globally shared the genetic sequence in January itself. The second reason is technology. For instance, Moderna is using m-RNA technology, which involves injecting genetic instructions to human cells for creating proteins to fight the virus. However, it is still unproven technology.

Stage II: Pre-Clinical

This is when scientists test the vaccine on cell cultures and animals. They first inactivate the virus, pull out parts of the genetic sequence, and test if it triggers an immune response. More critically, they check if vaccine candidate continues to harm the cell. If there is no immune response and if the candidate harms the animals, the researchers return to stage 1. This stage can take two to three years. For Covid-19, this stage is being shortened by performing various sub-stages simultaneously. However, most vaccine candidates are still in the pre-clinical stage.

Stage III: Clinical Trials

On the basis of data submitted from the pre-clinical phase, regulators allow testing in humans. Very few candidates enter this stage. This phase consists of three phases and usually takes more than 90 months.

PHASE I: The vaccine is given to a small group of people – this takes about three months – and scientists measure antibodies in their blood.

PHASE II: If found safe, it moves to the next phase (6-8 months). The vaccine is given to several hundred people. Three aspects are assessed: reactogenicity (ability to produce common, adverse reactions), immunogenicity (ability to provoke an immune response) and safety. There is also a control to compare how the vaccine works in different variables. This stage has been shortened in Covid-19 vaccine development. Moderna took just 63 days to reach clinical trials. The Oxford Vaccine Group researchers, which began phase I trials of Astra Zeneca's vaccine in April, has now entered phase III.

PHASE III: Thousands of people are enrolled. This takes 6-8 months. This assesses how the vaccine works in larger populations.

Stage IV: Regulatory review

The manufacturer submits the data to receive a licence. In the US, approval typically comes after 10 months. However, this is fast-tracked during emergencies. The regulators allow a rolling review: the vaccine candidate submits sections of the application for review as and when they are completed.



Stage V: Manufacturing

This requires immense resources — funds running into millions of dollars, infrastructure, raw material, and scientific expertise. Pharma giants like Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Merck and Astra Zeneca, all trying to develop a vaccine, will have a clear advantage to scale up manufacturing if their product is found successful.

Stage VI: Quality Control

The safety of the vaccine is monitored by both the regulator and the manufacturer.

ICMR Claims It Wants to Launch Covaxin By August 15, Here's What You Need to Know

- India's top drug regulator, the **Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation**, has allowed Bharat Biotech India (BBIL) to conduct human clinical trials for 'Covaxin', making it the first indigenous Covid-19 vaccine candidate to receive this approval, the firm said. These trials are scheduled to start across India in July.

What is Covaxin?

It has been developed by the company Bharat Biotech India (BBIL) in collaboration with ICMR's National Institute of Virology (NIV). It is an "**inactivated**" vaccine — one made by using particles of the Covid-19 virus that were killed, making them unable to infect or replicate. Injecting particular doses of these particles serves to build immunity by helping the body create antibodies against the dead virus, according to BBIL.

When Does ICMR Aim to Launch It?

Aiming to make it available for public use by August 15, Bhargava wrote to the 12 trial sites to ensure "all" clinical trials were conducted by then. While BBIL's application with the **Clinical Trials Registry of India (CTRI)** shows it plans to complete enrolment of trial participants by July 13, Bhargava has directed the sites to complete enrolment by July 7.

Is This Achievable?

A vaccine usually goes through three phases of human trials. The **Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation** has given approvals for phase I and II trials so far. According to details from CTRI, BBIL in its application estimated phase I and II trials to take a year and three months, including at least a month for phase I alone. Experts have questioned how all three phases can be concluded within a month and a half. "I would find it very surprising if it is done. Even the most ambitious companies in the world that are in more advanced stages of development for their Covid-19 vaccines have a longer time-frame. Even having all the trial results, with safety and efficacy data, by August 15 is difficult. This raises several questions,". "This should not be done at the cost of efficacy and safety,". While vaccine trials can be fast-tracked, it still takes over a year to launch the product, experts said. In a pandemic, emergency-use approval can be given if data from the first two trial phases is compelling enough, said an expert on condition of anonymity. This would allow the launch without the third phase being conducted, but this approval would likely be given with riders to submit additional data and adverse event reports.



Why Is There A Stress on Randomised Controlled Trials?

→ What Is the Place of RCTs Place in Clinical Trials?

As per definition, a randomised controlled trial, or RCT, is a study in which people are allocated at random, entirely by chance, to receive one of several clinical interventions. One of these interventions is the standard of comparison or control. The control may be standard practice/treatment options, a **placebo** (a drug without an active substance, or a 'sugar pill'), or no intervention at all. The idea is to measure and compare the outcomes against the control after the participants receive the treatment.

The problem with simple descriptive studies is that there are no comparisons. In well-designed RCTs, researchers, after random assignment of participants, assess whether randomisation was done sufficiently to eliminate the influence of **confounding factors**, and avoid **selection bias**. Researchers follow the groups over days, weeks, years and observe major clinical end points. In the end, all other things being equal, it will be possible to measure what benefit a particular group X got, in comparison to Y group. It is possible to estimate if there were any differences between the two groups, say, in mortality, and if this was because of strategic effect of the cause, or due to pure chance. RCTs remove the impact of chance in **cause and effect relationships**. But ethically, an RCT can only be employed when researchers think/hope that the interventions will offer benefits. **Participants can be enrolled in a randomised controlled trial that is expected to leave them better off. The dexamethasone study where mortality was reduced by a third, is a classic example here.** The Solidarity and RECOVERY (or Randomised Evaluation of COVID-19 tHERapY) trials are examples of large-scale RCTs done with multiple partners at many locations, bang in the middle of an epidemic. **They have already been instrumental in setting the standard of care – for instance, hydroxychloroquine was hyped up as a drug but studies conclusively proved no ameliorative effect in using it. The Remdesivir study, on the other hand, showed some improvement in reducing intensive care unit stay, while there was no great impact on mortality, says Dr. Kalantri.**

Novel Coronavirus Infection Might Trigger Type-1 Diabetes

→ **Diabetes poses one of the key risk factors for developing severe COVID-19, and chances of dying are elevated in people with diabetes. Now, there is growing evidence that novel coronavirus might actually be triggering diabetes in some people who have so far remained free of it. These patients typically develop type-1 diabetes. The virus seems to be causing diabetes spontaneously in people. These patients typically develop **type-1 diabetes**, which is caused when the body's immune system plays rogue and begins to attack and destroy the beta cells, which produce the hormone insulin in the pancreas. With the destruction of beta cells, the amount of insulin produced is reduced, and hence, the ability of the body to control blood sugar is compromised leading to type-1 diabetes. The 2002 SARS coronavirus, too, caused acute-onset diabetes in patients. Like the 2002 SARS coronavirus, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, too, binds to ACE2 receptors that are found on many organs involved in controlling blood sugar, including the liver and pancreatic beta cells, and subsequently infects the cells in the organs.**



Permanent or Transient

However, more evidence is needed to conclusively prove that COVID-19 indeed causes type-1 diabetes. It is also not clear if the acute-onset diabetes in COVID-19 patients will be permanent or transient. There is no clarity whether people who are borderline type-2 develop the disease. The COVID-19 patients who develop diabetes have extremely high levels of blood sugar and ketones. When there is insufficient insulin produced, breaking down the sugar present in the blood is compromised leading to high levels of sugar. At the same time, the body begins to turn to alternative sources of fuel, which in this case are ketones. A study found 42 of 658 patients presented with ketosis on admission. Patients with ketosis were younger (median age 47). Ketosis increased the length of hospital stay and mortality, the researchers found. Using human pluripotent stem cells, researchers grew miniature liver and pancreas and found that both the organs were permissive to SARS-CoV-2 infection. In particular, they found the pancreatic beta cells were infected by coronavirus. ACE2 is expressed in human adult alpha and beta cells. While the beta cells produce insulin which reduces the sugar level in the blood, the alpha cells produce glucagon, which increases the blood sugar. A fine balance between the two helps maintain the blood sugar level.

Tested in Mice

The researchers transplanted the miniature pancreatic endocrine cells produced using human stem cells into mice. Two months later, they examined the xenografted pancreas and found ACE2 receptors on beta and alpha cells. When the mice were infected with coronavirus, they found the beta cells were infected by the virus. Thus, the virus is capable of damaging the cells that control blood sugar thus triggering acute-onset of type-1 diabetes. According to Nature News, a global database to collect information on people with COVID-19 and high blood-sugar levels who previously do not have a history of elevated blood sugar levels has been initiated. "The researchers hope to use the cases to understand whether SARS-CoV-2 can induce type 1 diabetes or a new form of the disease," Nature News says. Researchers want to use the database to understand if the acute-onset diabetes is permanent and people who are borderline type-2 develop the disease.

MMR Vaccine Can Help Fight Sepsis in Covid Patients

- A new paper suggests that live attenuated vaccines such as MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) may prevent the severe lung inflammation and sepsis associated with Covid-19 infection. The paper is published online in the journal mBio. A live attenuated vaccine is derived from a disease-causing pathogen, which has been weakened in the laboratory so that it does not cause severe illness when a person is vaccinated with it. The new research paper refers to growing evidence that live attenuated vaccines can activate certain immune cells to train leukocytes (the white blood cells of the immune system) to mount a more effective defence against unrelated infections. The researchers used a live attenuated fungal strain and demonstrated, in the lab, that vaccination with it trained innate protection against sepsis (blood poisoning) caused by a combination of disease-causing fungi and bacteria. The authors proposed that the protection is produced by cells called MDSCs. They stressed that this live attenuated MMR vaccine concept is not suggested to be directed against Covid-19, but instead an immune preventive measure against the severe inflammatory symptoms of Covid-19. "The use of childhood live attenuated vaccines such as MMR given to adults to induce bystander cells that can dampen or reduce severe complications associated with Covid-19 infection is a low risk – high reward preventive measure during a critical period of the pandemic. These bystander cells are long-lived but not life-long. Anyone who had an MMR



vaccination as a child, while likely to still have immune antibodies directed against measles, mumps, or rubella, will not likely still have the immune cells directed against sepsis. So, it could be important to get the MMR vaccination as an adult to protect better against Covid-related sepsis.”

Testing on Throat Secretions Reduces False Negatives

- False negatives – when a person carrying a pathogen tests negative – have been reported several times during the Covid-19 pandemic. These results have come up during nasal swab testing of patients who have seemingly recovered from the disease – but have later been found to be still carrying the virus. Now, researchers have reported that testing of **oropharyngeal secretions – secretions from the part of the throat at the back of the mouth** – may reduce the number of false negative results. They have published their findings in the Journal of Dental Research. The study was led by Jingzhi Ma of Tongji Medical College, Wuhan. **A small number of patients who had tested negative through nasal swabs were found to be positive through the testing of oropharyngeal secretions.** The study included 75 ready-for-discharge Covid-19 patients who tested negative using nasal swabs. Because of detection of potential false-negatives in that cohort, a second study paired oropharyngeal and nasopharyngeal samples collected from 50 additional Covid-19 recruits during their recovery stage. Oropharyngeal secretions obtained from 2 of the 75 subjects in the first study yielded positive results for SARS-CoV-2. In the second study, **oropharyngeal samples missed only 14% of positive cases, compared with 59% for the nasal samples. Sampling of oropharyngeal secretions is a simple procedure that can be performed in any quarantine setting. It minimises contact between healthcare workers and patients, thereby reducing the risk of virus transmission,** the researchers said.

Covid Testing of Entire Town in Italy Finds 40% Cases Asymptomatic

- A large number of Covid-19 cases are asymptomatic, but researchers have differed on what percentage these constitute of all cases. Now, a team has studied almost the entire population of a small, quarantined town – Vò in Italy, population 3,200 – and found that **40% of its cases were asymptomatic.** The study was published in Nature. The town of Vò experienced Italy’s first Covid-19 death on February 21. It was put into immediate quarantine for 14 days. During this time, researchers tested most of the population for Covid-19, both at the start of the lockdown (86% tested) and after two weeks (72% tested). The testing revealed that at the start of the lockdown, 2.6% of the population (73 people) were positive for Covid-19. After a couple of weeks, only 1.2% (29 people) were positive. At both times, around 40% of the positive cases showed no symptoms (asymptomatic). The results also show it took on average 9.3 days (range of 8-14 days) for the virus to be cleared from someone’s body.



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