



## Current Affairs, 5<sup>th</sup> July to 11<sup>th</sup> July, 2020

### International

#### Late Entrant

- Rapper and hip-hop star Kanye West have announced that he will join the U.S. presidential race in November, a move that would in theory position him as a challenger to incumbent Republican President Donald Trump and Democratic rival and former Vice-President Joe Biden. Mr. West has earlier alluded to having presidential ambitions, including when he explicitly indicated, at the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards, his interest in standing for elections in 2020, and in November 2019, when he spoke about a bid in 2024. Nevertheless his latest declaration – as a vague Twitter post to “realise the promise of America by trusting God, unifying our vision and building our future” – is a bolt out of the blue considering that Mr. West is a self-confessed admirer of Mr. Trump, has no known formal party affiliation or comprehensive policy agenda, and would have to scramble to file the paperwork necessary to get on to the ballot in the less than four months left to Election Day. Little surprise then that his announcement has elicited more confusion than enthusiasm, barring the case of Tesla Inc. CEO Elon Musk who promised Mr. West his “full support”. Even in the country that has seen a movie star, Ronald Reagan, rise to the highest office in the land, the idea of a rap artist with zero political experience entering the Oval Office must appear far-fetched to many Americans.

#### How Brooks Brothers Survived Two Centuries but Not the Pandemic

- **Brooks Brothers, America's clothier** that has dressed men **since 1818**, **filed for bankruptcy** as it struggled with debts amid the coronavirus crisis. With clients ranging from Abraham Lincoln, Andy Warhol to Barack Obama, the Brooks Brothers suits were almost always present when history was being made. A look at how the iconic retailer survived two centuries but eventually succumbed to the pandemic.

#### The Ultimate 'Made in America' Brand

The clothing giant has its roots in a small family-run business, which started from a corner store in Manhattan, New York in 1818. Initially called H. & D. H. Brooks & Co, by Henry Sands Brooks, the clothing store's mission statement was “To make and deal only in merchandise of the finest body, to sell it at a fair profit, and to deal with people who seek and appreciate such merchandise”. In 1850, when the founding patriarch passed away, the name was changed to Brooks Brothers by his four sons who took over the mantle. The brand took great pride in using cotton – which at that point in time was harvested by slaves. They also made uniforms for some of the more high-profile regiments of the New York National Guard and officers of the Union during the American Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was dubbed a ‘loyal customer’ by Brooks Brothers and, at his second inauguration, Lincoln wore a custom-made frock coat, whose lining had a hand-sewn design of an eagle and the words ‘One Country, One Destiny’ inscribed. Lincoln was wearing the very same coat when he was assassinated in 1865 while watching a play.



## Falling Out of Fashion, Finally

Facing stiff competition from online brands and a larger, global shift to a more casual style of clothing, Brooks Brothers saw their sales plateauing in recent years. With more and more people opting for business casual and casual chic as their go-to work attire, the need for stiff, formal work wear began declining. Between 2017 and 2019, the retailer made a total of one-billion USD. The brand had 210 stores in the US and 70 across the globe. In May 2020, there were talks of the clothing retailer seeking a buyer, and there were also rumours about them closing their three American factories. On July 8, they filed for bankruptcy under the Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy code. They had attributed the move to the increasing decline in their sales and the economic slump caused by the pandemic.

The Brooks Brothers, who survived two World Wars, the Great Depression and 41 US presidents, could not survive the economic fallout of the pandemic. Brooks Brothers is one of the many brands to be hit. Neiman Marcus, the luxury department stores chain, filed for bankruptcy protection in March, which resulted in them shutting down many stores. World over, luxury fashion houses are considering something they had never done before – a sale on their premium products. Victoria's Secret and Nordstrom, though they haven't filed for bankruptcy, have plans to close many of their stores.

## Getting America To Recognise Caste: Previous Efforts, Renewed Push

- The California Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against Cisco Systems, accusing the tech multinational company of allowing caste discrimination against a Dalit Indian-origin employee at its San Jose headquarters. So, does American law recognise caste? No. But could this case change that? The federal Civil Rights Law 1964, under which the lawsuit was filed against Cisco and two "upper-caste" Indian managers, bars discrimination only on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex and national origin. *In choosing to litigate, the California government is pushing to expand the ambit of discrimination to include caste.* "It is the first civil rights case in the United States where a governmental entity is suing an American company for failing to protect caste-oppressed employees, leading to a hostile workplace," said Thenmozhi Soundararajan of Equality Labs, an advocacy group for the "caste-oppressed" in California. For close to two decades now, attempts have been ongoing at various levels to get institutions overseas to recognise the peculiar challenge of caste, a system of inequality and oppression that is unique to the subcontinent and is recognised by the Constitution of India. In 2018, several Hindu organisations forced the British government to backtrack on recognising caste as a structure of discrimination. The case against Cisco, amid the momentum of #BlackLivesMatter, which has spotlighted all kinds of discrimination, is extremely significant.

## The First Immigrants

Caste has been mentioned in an American courtroom earlier. In 1913, A K Mozumdar, an immigrant from Bengal to Washington, applied to become an American citizen. US citizenship at the time was determined by race, and given only to whites. Mozumdar argued that as a "high-caste Hindu" of "Aryan descent", he shared racial origins with Caucasians. His application was accepted – and he became the first South Asian American to become a US citizen. In 1923, a similar argument that claimed caste was a way to whiteness was put forward by Bhagat Singh Thind, a Sikh writer who had served in the United States Army during World War I, and who argued that he was technically "white", given his "pure Aryan blood". In his petition, Thind argued that the high-caste Hindoo (a blanket term used then for all Indian immigrants) "regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American



regards the negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint". Thind's arguments were rejected in the US Supreme Court, which decided that he was not white, and hence not eligible for citizenship. A few months later, Mozumdar became the first Indian to lose his citizenship as a consequence of that judgment. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, itself a result of the civil rights campaign in the US, overturned restrictions of race and colour, and allowed a whole generation of Indian skilled labour (mostly upper-caste) to take a shot at the American dream. A steady flow of "lower-caste" Indians has also followed, as they accessed educational opportunities in technical institutions via reservations. One such example is of the REC Warangal-educated Sujatha Gidla, whose 2017 book 'Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India', was published in the US to great acclaim. Gidla believes that accounts such as hers make it harder to deny the reality of caste. In New York, she recalls facing discrimination from many Indians, the least humiliating of which was from a Brahmin cashier at a bank, "who wouldn't accept money from my hands. She would demand that I place it on the counter." But Gidla is sceptical about an anti-caste movement taking root in the US. "Of Indian immigrants, 90 per cent are Brahmins and 1.5 per cent are Dalits. Indians in America are a minority, and Dalits among them are a minority. How can issues of such a tiny community make a big enough impact to be called a movement?" Scholar-activist Suraj Yengde argues that a Dalit consciousness has been present in the US from the 1970s or 1980s, away from the bright lights of media activism. "People have resisted in private and in public in their own ways. Even hiding one's caste is a way of fighting caste," says Yengde, who works with community-based Ambedkarite organisations in the US, some of which are close to 20 years old.

### The California Textbook Debate

In some ways, it is not a surprise that the Cisco case has come up in California, where the last pitched battle on caste and history was fought about five years ago. In 2015, as part of a regular evaluation, the California board of education asked scholars to help it come up with a framework for history and social science textbooks. What followed was a bitter contest over several aspects of Indian history, including caste, and the critique of caste embedded in religions such as Buddhism and Sikhism. The suggestions of the South Asian Histories for All Coalition (SAHFAC), a collective of scholars and historians, were met with opposition from the Hindu American Foundation and other Hindu groups, who objected to narratives that portrayed "Hindu civilisation" negatively, and warned they might lead to the bullying of Hindu children. The SAHFAC objected to airbrushing contentious portions of Indian history relating to caste atrocities, the attempt to erase the word "Dalit" from history textbooks as demanded, and the attempt, allegedly, to portray Muslims as oppressors. "At the end of that difficult campaign, one of the directors of the board of education said to me directly, 'The stories of Dalit families are compelling... but you have no data about caste in the United States,'" Soundarrajan said. In 2018, Equality Labs carried out a survey of South Asian-Americans on their experience of caste to fill that gap. It showed that 67 per cent of Dalits faced caste discrimination at the workplace, 40 per cent in schools, and 40 per cent at temples. That report was cited in the lawsuit filed against Cisco.

### The Road Ahead

In Silicon Valley, California, the Cisco case is a potential gamechanger. "We believe this case will set a precedent. We have supported many Dalits who have come forward to complain about casteist discrimination. But the lack of having caste as an explicit category has meant that prosecutors have to shoehorn the issue of caste within protections of religion, race, and



ancestry. This case will open the door for more such civil rights litigation,” Soundarajan said. Yengde agreed: “The Cisco case can be monumental. Silicon Valley has a global footprint. Whatever is legislated there will have an impact on company workplaces in India and elsewhere too. The message will go out to thousands of workers.”

## How US Visa Move Affects Indian Students

- The United States announced that international students might have to leave the country or risk deportation if their universities moved classes entirely online in the upcoming fall semester. Students attending schools offering “normal in-person classes” can stay, but they cannot take more than “one class or three credit hours online”.

## What Do the New Regulations by The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Mean for Indian Students?

This, in effect, means Indians currently enrolled in schools or programmes that are entirely online for the fall semester will have to come back home. They can stay back only if they take alternative steps such as a move to a school that offers “in-person instruction” (read contact classes) or choose “appropriate medical leave”. Students, who had come back to India after the pandemic forced American campuses to shut down, will not be permitted to enter the US if their classes are entirely online. The same applies to prospective (or new) students who were going to join in the fall semester. “One thing is very clear, students who are going to start an online course will not get a (US) visa till they are actually going on campus,” Sumeet Jain, co-founder of Yocket, told The Indian Express. Yocket is an online platform for students planning to study abroad.

## What About Indian Students Enrolled in Universities That Have Announced A Hybrid Blend of In-Person and Online Classes for The Fall Semester?

Such students remain in the US, and those who returned to India will be allowed to re-enter the US. They will even be allowed to take more than one class or three credit hours online. However, the university or college will have to “certify” to the US government that “the student is not taking an entirely online course load for the fall 2020 semester, and that the student is taking the minimum number of online classes required to make normal progress in their degree programme”. This exemption does not apply to F-1 visa students in English language training programmes or M-1 visa students, who are not permitted to enrol in any online courses. International students with F-1 visas pursue academic coursework and students with M-1 visa pursue vocational coursework while studying in the US.

## Why Has the US Government Announced These Changes After Giving International Students the Flexibility to Take More Online Classes During Campus Shutdown?

International students in the US are required to do most of their learning through contact classes. The pandemic and the subsequent campus shutdowns forced the government to provide temporary exemptions for international students to take more online classes. However, these exemptions were made only for the spring and summer semesters. The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), under the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), did not say much on the reasons behind revisiting the above exemptions. Its press statement only said there is “a concordant need to resume the carefully balanced protections implemented by federal regulations” as many universities and colleges are



planning to reopen for the fall semester. Some are seeing this as a pressure tactic to get universities to reopen for the fall semester. The Trump administration has insisted that schools and colleges return to in-person classes as soon as possible. "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!" Trump wrote in a Twitter post on Monday shortly after SEVP released its new guidelines.

### [How Will This Affect International Enrollment Across US Universities?](#)

US universities have already made admission offers to international students. The SEVP announcement could encourage prospective students to defer their joining to the next semester. As for the active or enrolled students, they may even consider dropping a semester. Indians are the second-largest group of international students in the US, after the Chinese. "It's not going to be easy for universities to now convince students to join (fall semester) online. Anyway, most of the students were planning to defer their admission to the next term," Jain said. A QS survey of international students in June showed that over half the respondents intended to defer or delay their entry into foreign universities until next year due to the Covid-related uncertainties. The revised US guidelines are only going to cement such intent further, which means revenues of US universities, especially those which have announced an online fall semester, are bound to get hit.

### [How Have the US Universities Reacted to The New Guidelines?](#)

Some universities have been quick on the uptake and changed their fall semester plans in less than a day of the government announcement. According to news website Poets and Quants, the Harvard Business School has decided against a fully online MBA programme this fall. It will bring all of its students back for classes offered in the hybrid format (in-person and online instruction). Columbia University reached out to all its international students via email within hours of the SEVP announcement saying its International Students and Scholars Office or ISSO is "parsing the advance notice and is working closely with the schools on its implications".

### [What Options Do Indian Students Enrolled in US Schools Have Before Them?](#)

"The thing we must do now is put pressure on our individual universities and the international student offices housed in those universities for them to do two things: either create a structure that complied with the three different requirements that ICE has given, or ask the universities to lobby extensively for this measure to be rescinded and take this to court, where there's a big chance it will be contested. These are the things that parents, students and alumni can do sitting at home," Sudhanshu Kaushik, Executive Director of the North American Association of Indian Students (NAAIS), told /The Indian Express/. NAAIS is the largest and the oldest association of Indian students in the US.

- The past several decades has seen an ever-increasing relative withdrawal of public funds from universities globally, even as demand for higher education access has grown. The perception of college as a means to higher income, combined with the emphasis on competition-driven efficiency, has meant a global trend of replacing college grants with loans and tuition fees, or other private forms of funding. Proponents of this process have also argued that this helps increase the autonomy of universities. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced in the U.S. — tuition costs have been steadily rising and a greater share of the cost of education is placed on students and their families with some supplementation by federal, state or private loans. Unlike domestic students, international students (with a few exceptions) are not eligible for federal college loans and rely on payment



either out of pocket or from private loans. There is also less domestic pressure to reduce tuition rates or provide concessions for them, and the risk of advocacy from the students themselves is somewhat less given their precarious visa status. In a normal year, the pool of international college applicants for a given school is much larger than the number of positions available, so a rise in tuition cost will still likely see all these seats filled. Finally, the college route has proven highly popular for those seeking to eventually immigrate. The ultimate outcome of these factors is that international students can in general be relied on to pay much more than their domestic counterparts, making them attractive for universities looking to boost their revenue streams. Indeed, the U.S. Department of Commerce estimated that international students contributed about \$44.7 billion in 2018 to the U.S. economy (including tuition, housing, and other private consumption). COVID-19 has already wrecked any financial planning revolving around international students. The shuttering of campuses and restricted international travel have made the fall semester a less attractive prospect for both returning and new students uninterested in paying the full price for a curtailed college experience. The ICE regulations add several further wrinkles. By adding additional visa-related questions over and above everything else, universities find themselves in an even more uncertain position. Committing to an online-only model risks reducing international student intake even further. Conversely, having in-person classes to secure revenue streams puts students at risk and could anyway lead to potentially costly shutdowns mid-semester. There will also likely be increased friction between university administrations and campus unions.

### Trump Is A Child in An Adult's Body: Niece

- U.S. President Donald Trump's niece describes him in a much-awaited tell-all book as a child in an adult's body, someone psychologically brutalised and damaged by his "sociopath" father and who developed defences of anger and distrust to mask his own chronic insecurities. *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man*, by Mary L. Trump, presents a portrait of the President familiar to readers of other books as a transactional narcissist and accidental commander in chief. But Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist, offers a particularly dark picture of Donald Trump's father and her grandfather, Fred Trump Sr. "From the beginning, Fred's self-interest skewed his priorities," Mary Trump writes. "His care of his children, such as it was, reflected his own needs, not theirs. Love meant nothing to him, and he could not empathize with their plight, one of the defining characteristics of a sociopath; he expected obedience, that was all." Fred Trump Sr. wanted his eldest son, Fred Jr. — Mary's father — to be a "killer," a high form of praise that the President himself has often used to describe people he respects. Fred Trump Sr. helped establish a competition between his elder son and the future President that went on for decades, Mary Trump writes, until Donald Trump ultimately prevailed and her father died an alcoholic at age 42. The book was scheduled for release by its publisher, Simon & Schuster, after a New York State judge ruled that it was not bound by a confidentiality agreement that Mary Trump signed as part of a settlement over a legal battle over a grandfather's estate. The President's brother, Robert Trump, had gone to court in an attempt to block publication of the book on the grounds that his niece had violated terms of the agreement in writing it. A hearing is scheduled. Among the new disclosures in the book is Mary Trump's claim that Donald Trump paid someone to take his college entrance examination.



## Why 'Coronavirus Parties' Have Become A New Worry in the US

- Recently, reports that college students have been organising 'Covid parties' in Alabama, the US, created an uproar on social media. The aim behind such parties is quite simple: **whoever gets infected first, wins the prize money. The students have intentionally been inviting already infected patients so they can infect others.** Over the past few weeks, there have been several parties in the city of Tuscaloosa and surrounding areas, with authorities only recently beginning to crack the whip. However, the Alabama Department of Health has stated that it "has not been able to verify such parties have taken place". The developments come at a time when Alabama is one of several states reporting record increases in new coronavirus cases in the past week in what has raised fears of a "second wave" of infections.

## None Gains

- After accusing WHO of being "China-centric" on multiple occasions, this unfortunate development is one more attempt by Mr. Trump to deflect blame for gross mismanagement of the crisis. In a May 18 letter, he officially demanded that the WHO make "major substantive improvements" in 30 days while charging that the global body lacked "independence" from China, was slow to respond to the threat, and had "repeatedly made inaccurate or misleading claims" about the virus. **Since the decision has apparently been taken without the approval of Congress, and as the withdrawal will become effective only on July 6 next year, there is a possibility that Congress or courts might reverse the withdrawal. Already, Democratic challenger Joe Biden has promised to revoke it if elected President. There is much at stake and unsurprisingly Congress is already under pressure from academia and medical associations to reject the withdrawal.** The capricious decision to withdraw from WHO will have dire consequences for global public health. The departure of the U.S. will be a significant blow to the WHO in terms of loss of technical expertise and, according to Mr. Trump, an annual funding of about \$450 million.

The pandemic has clearly brought to the fore several shortcomings and weaknesses in the global health body. For instance, the 2005 revision of the International Health Regulations made it mandatory for countries to notify the WHO of all events that may constitute an international public health emergency and to "respond to requests for verification of information regarding such events". Yet, the WHO has limited power to ensure compliance by member States, including limitations in independently verifying member states' official reports. **If the U.S. was majorly involved in the 2005 IHR revision, it will now have no role to play in strengthening the WHO. It will lose a seat at the table to determine the virus strain to be used for developing influenza vaccines (flu killed over 34,000 people in the U.S. in 2018-19), and have no access to new influenza virus samples for research. With no more U.S. scientists embedded in the WHO in key roles, including outbreak response teams like the one that visited Wuhan, it will lose out on health intelligence that will compromise the country's response to international disease outbreaks. In the end, none gains from a further weakened WHO.**

## What China Security Law Means for Hong Kong And the Global Internet

- Days after China passed a national security law giving it wide-ranging powers over Hong Kong, major technology companies have suspended their responses to Hong Kong government requests, saying they will first reassess the law's new controls. Much of Hong Kong's future identity and the global Internet hinges on what the technology companies decide to do next in the region.



### What's the context?

Hong Kong was under British rule until 1997, when the territory was given to China under the condition that it retains some autonomy, including its economic system, for 50 years. As the Chinese firewall took hold, several technology companies were shut out, including Google and Facebook. But with the quasi-independence afforded by "one country, two systems", Hong Kong was integrated into the global Internet. Global technology companies were able to operate close to China without being subject to the country's laws. Hong Kong has been embroiled in protests after its legislature tried to pass an extradition bill that would allow the Chinese government to detain Hong Kong residents. Although the bill was eventually withdrawn, the demonstrations had already developed into a larger fight for democratic institutions.

### What Is the New National Security Law?

Announced by China in May, it was put into effect on July 1, without the involvement of local institutions. On the technology front, the new surveillance and censorship rules could subsume the territory into China's Great Firewall. Indeed, experts have found the new law reminiscent of the mainland's own cybersecurity laws. The law criminalises four activities: "secession, subversion, organization and perpetration of terrorist activities, and collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security". Some specific offences include damaging government buildings and lobbying against the Chinese government. The law also allows for a National Security Committee to investigate and prosecute violators. The Hong Kong Police are given extensive new controls to censor Internet content, track people online, and seize electronic records. They can investigate Internet platforms and their data as well as order its deletion, and penalties for the companies include fines up to nearly \$13,000- and six-months jail time.

### Why Others Might Follow Suit

**Under the new national security law, internet companies and individuals have to remove or stop access to online content deemed dangerous for national security.** With a court warrant, police can seize electronic devices, and failure to comply can invite a fine of HK\$ 100,000 (around 97 lakh INR) and imprisonment for one year. Internet providers can be punished with a fine of HK\$ 100,000 and six-month prison. According to the new law, authorities have been explicitly given the power to jail those who refuse to provide user data. Notably, as the rules are applicable around the world, employees at internet companies in Hong Kong could get arrested if they refuse to share information about people who are writing from any other country. The law would apply even if the identification record or decryption key related to national security is not located in Hong Kong, the South China Morning Post reported. American companies such as Facebook and Google, who have currently adopted a wait-and-watch policy, face a conundrum. If they continue operating in Hong Kong, they would be going against the prevailing political climate at home, where Chinese overtures in the city-state have caused widespread bipartisan anger. Additionally, their employees working in Hong Kong, or even those who transit through its borders, could face detention in case they refuse to comply with Hong Kong authorities over data-sharing requests. Also, while US-based firms such as Facebook and Google are immensely popular in Hong Kong, the local market itself is relatively small for these companies, which have a massive international footprint.





### How Have Technology Companies Reacted?

The shift puts tech companies in a bind as to whether to accept the new data-sharing and censorship requirements of the Communist Party or leave the territory altogether. Their decisions will have significant weight on Hong Kong's future as an international business hub, and on digital free speech as a whole. Facebook, Twitter, Google, Telegram, Zoom, and Microsoft have suspended all requests for data from Hong Kong, pending their own review of the new legislation. Apple is still "assessing" the law. Telegram was the first to make the move, saying it never had shared data with the Hong Kong authorities and will wait for an "international consensus". Twitter's statement said the company has "grave concerns regarding both the developing process and the full intention of this law". Facebook, which owns WhatsApp and Instagram, said it will conduct a "human-rights" assessment. Signal said that it never had turned over user data to the HK police and that it has no data to hand over anyway. TikTok is pulling out of the territory completely, but it is in a different situation. Owned by China-based ByteDance, TikTok doesn't operate in China. ByteDance operates a similar application called Douyin in mainland China, and now onlookers have speculated whether Douyin would make inroads into Hong Kong (ByteDance told Reuters there are no such plans). Others have contextualised the move as self-protective, considering the fact that non-compliance with the law would irk Beijing. TikTok has only 150,000 users and little revenue in Hong Kong. ByteDance has repeatedly distanced itself from the Chinese government and positions itself as a global company. Its leadership has said its data is not stored in China and it would not censor for or provide data to the Chinese government. Experts say tech companies could move operations to Taiwan to stay close to mainland China, or consider other Asian locations, or decide to forgo their espoused values and stay in the territory.

### How Have Technology Companies Responded to China's Moves in The Past?

Apple has consistently received the most flak for not resisting China enough. It's one of the few Silicon Valley giants that isn't blocked in mainland China with a large customer base and manufacturing operations. Apple has also complied with most of the Hong Kong government's requests before the law came into force. It had also removed an app used by Hong Kong protestors to coordinate movements as well as hid its Taiwan flag emoji in the territory last year. Microsoft does significant business in the country and has complied with requests before. Facebook and Twitter stay out of the country. Google pulled its operations in 2010, but beginning 2018, conversation arose about a potential re-entry. CEO Sundar Pichai later put those rumours to rest.

### What Is the Key Takeaway?

This mark yet another step of national border dispute erecting new virtual walls between territories. The Internet's pioneers, who had envisioned a global community online, say these government decisions lead to the creation of a "splinternet".

### What This Could Mean for Hong Kong

This could paint a grim picture for Hong Kong residents, who, like those in mainland China, would then only have access to applications behind the so-called 'Great Firewall'. On its part, the Hong Kong government has defended the new law, calling it comparable to national security legislations in other free societies.



## Australia Ends HK Extradition Treaty

→ Australia said, it was suspending its extradition treaty with Hong Kong in response to a new security law imposed there and announced measures to attract businesses from the Asian financial hub, provoking an angry response from Beijing. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the law introduced last week in Hong Kong was a fundamental change of circumstances and Australia would suspend the extradition agreement. "There will be citizens of Hong Kong who may be looking to move elsewhere, to start a new life somewhere else, to take their skills, their businesses," Morrison said, outlining changes to visa programmes. Mr. Morrison said Hong Kong students, graduates and workers in Australia on temporary visas will have the opportunity to stay and work for an extra five years and apply for permanent residency after that time. Future student visas would also be offered for five years, however, Mr. Morrison said they were "not expecting large numbers of applicants any time soon". Speaking in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Mr. Morrison's government should stop interfering in Chinese affairs, warning that China, the biggest customer for Australian exports, reserved the right to take retaliatory action. Two-way trade between the countries was worth A\$235 billion last year. Earlier, the Chinese Embassy in Canberra warned that Australia's "meddling will lead to nothing but lifting a rock only to hit its own feet". There are 10,000 Hong Kong citizens in Australia on student visas or temporary work visas, with a further 2,500 outside Australia and 1,250 applications on hand, as per the government. Hong Kong applicants would be prioritised under Australia's Global Talent Scheme and business visa programme. "There is so much talent in Hong Kong. There are great businesses in Hong Kong," said Acting Immigration Minister Alan Tudge.

## More Sabre-Rattling, More Isolation (Jayant Prasad, A Former Diplomat, Served as Director General Of The Institute For Defence Studies And Analyses)

→ The Philippines invoked the dispute settlement mechanism of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2013 to test the legality of China's 'nine-dash line' regarding the disputed Spratlys. In response, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague decreed in its July 12, 2016 judgment that the line had "no legal basis." China dismissed the judgment as "null and void." The South China Sea (SCS) is important not just to its littoral countries. It has been a transit point for trade since early medieval times, contains abundantly rich fisheries, and is a repository of mineral deposits and hydrocarbon reserves.

### The PCA Verdict

The PCA award undermined the Chinese claim. It held that none of the features of the Spratlys qualified them as islands, and there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights and to the resources within the 'nine-dash line'. The UNCLOS provides that islands must sustain habitation and the capacity for non-extractive economic activity. Reefs and shoals that are unable to do so are considered low-tide elevations. The award implied that China violated the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). It noted that China had aggravated the situation by undertaking land reclamation and construction, and had harmed the environment and violated its obligation to preserve the ecosystem. China dismissed the award as "a political farce under the pretext of law." Given the power equations, the Philippines did not press for enforcement of the award and acquiesced in the status quo. Not one country challenged China, which agreed to settle disputes bilaterally, and to continue work on a Code of Conduct with countries of the ASEAN. Given that their economic ties with



China are deepening, it may appear that the ASEAN countries are bandwagon with China. In reality, there is growing discontent. While avoiding military confrontation with China, they are seeking political insurance, strengthening their navies, and deepening their military relationships with the United States. Vietnam has added six Kilo-class, Russian-origin submarines to its navy. France, Germany and the Netherlands, respectively, have supplied Formidable-class stealth ships to Singapore, patrol boats to Brunei Darussalam, and corvettes to Indonesia. Japan is partially funding the upgradation of the Indonesian coast guard. Indonesia and the Philippines are in early stages of exploring procurement of the BrahMos missile from India. The other ASEAN countries that have shown interest are Thailand and Vietnam. Growing Chinese muscularity in the SCS is visible in the increased patrolling and live-fire exercising by Chinese naval vessels; ramming and sinking of fishing vessels of other claimant countries; renaming of SCS features; and building of runways, bunkers, and habitation for possible long-term stationing of personnel on the atolls claimed by China. Chinese exploration and drilling vessels compete aggressively with those of other littoral countries in the disputed waters. Petronas has been prospecting for oil in the Malaysian EEZ. A Chinese spokesperson claimed in early June that its own survey vessel in the same area was conducting "normal activities in waters under Chinese jurisdiction." The festering regional resentment against China resulted in the unmuting of the ASEAN response to the growing Chinese footprint in the SCS at its 36th Summit on June 26, 2020. **China might have overreached by showing its aggressive hand prematurely. There is a growing chorus of protest against China. Having Vietnam, Japan and the U.S. riled up about its actions is nothing new for China. The Philippines and the ASEAN beginning to protest is new, even if their criticism is restrained.** This does China little credit, and points to its growing isolation. Indonesia protested to China about Chinese vessels trespassing into its waters close to the Nantua islands, towards the south of the SCS. The Philippines protested to China earlier this year about violations of Filipino sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea. It also wrote to the UN Secretary General (UNSG) in March disputing China's claim of "historic rights in the South China Sea." Two months later, Indonesia too wrote to the UNSG on this issue. It expressed support for compliance with international law, particularly the UNCLOS, as also for the PCA's 2016 ruling. President Rodrigo Duterte said he had not followed up on the PCA judgment because the Philippines could not afford to fight China. Yet, when a Chinese firm bid to develop the Subic Bay, this was disallowed on the grounds that the use of archipelagic waters was exclusively reserved for Filipinos and that foreign investment regulations prohibited foreign equity for the utilisation of marine resources in archipelagic waters. **Another recent decision, to extend the Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S. for six months "in light of political and other developments in the region," as expressed by the Philippines Foreign Secretary, is a strategic setback for China.** Only this June, the Philippines commissioned a beaching ramp on the Pag-Asa Island. A Filipino C-130 landed on its runway, which is being repaired. The Philippines is about to induct its first missile-capable frigate, built in South Korea, into its navy. A complicating factor for China is Russia's growing military and economic equities in the SCS. Russia and Vietnam have a defence cooperation relationship, which they are committed to strengthening. China has objected to Rosneft Vietnam BV prospecting within the Chinese defined 'nine-dash line.' Rosneft has also been invited by the Philippines to conduct oil prospecting in its EEZ.

### India's Relevant Options

From India's perspective, foreign and security policy in its larger neighbourhood covers the entire expanse of the Asia-Pacific and extends to the Persian Gulf and West Asia. India straddles, and is the fulcrum of, the region between the Suez and Shanghai, between West



and East Asia, and between the Mediterranean and the SCS. The SCS carries merchandise to and from India. It follows that India has a stake in the SCS, just as China has in the Indian Ocean. India must continue to actively pursue its defence diplomacy outreach in the Indo-Pacific region: increase military training and conduct exercises and exchanges at a higher level of complexity, extend Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief activities, share patrolling of the Malacca Strait with the littoral countries, etc. **The Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships that India has concluded with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, the U.S., and Vietnam could be extended to Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.** India must also buttress the military capacity of the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command. According to one of its early Commanders-in-Chief, Lt. Gen. Aditya Singh, the manner in which the 368 islands, have been neglected “can only be termed as criminal.” These have immense geo-strategic value, as they overlook Asia’s maritime strategic lifeline and the world’s most important global sea lane. In this time of turbulence, India cannot afford to continue undervaluing one of its biggest assets.

### Why China’s Rise Could Spell the End of The Asian Century

→ China once used to talk about the “Asian century”. Its current focus is on building the “Chinese century”. But C Raja Mohan, Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express, reminds the readers that “the deepening conflict between India and China is bound to complicate the prospects for an Asian century, as well as the Chinese century”. But he cautions: “As China privileges nationalism, it is bound to compel its Asian neighbours to do the same”. The idea of Asian unity was among the many transcendental political notions that emerged in the late-19th and early-20th centuries as the eastern civilisations struggled to rediscover themselves amidst the domination of the West. “The current president of China, Xi Jinping continues to talk about Asian unity. But for a very different purpose. For Deng, Asian unity was central to his strategy of rebuilding China. At home, he was determined to heal the scars from Mao’s blood-letting under the Cultural Revolution that lasted from the mid-1960s to the 1970s. Deng also put an end to Mao’s external adventurism that destabilised the neighbouring states in the name of promoting revolution...Deng rightly saw peace on its frontiers and cooperation with the rest of the world as a precondition for modernising China,” he says. “Xi has a very different objective. He is leading a country that has emerged as a great power, thanks to the sweeping reforms under Deng. For Xi, Asian unity is about getting Beijing’s neighbours to acquiesce in China’s regional primacy”. However, Raja Mohan points out, it is in an unfortunate paradox that the phenomenal rise of China may have created the very conditions for the demise of the Asian century. “That China has become far more powerful than all of its Asian neighbours has meant Beijing no longer sees the need to evoke Asian unity”. But if powerful nationalism is driving China to seek more territory from its neighbours and dominate the region, equally intense nationalist forces in Asia will react against CCP’s assertive policies, he argues. “To be sure, an India that is smaller in economic size than China will pay a price for being the first to challenge the Chinese century. But Delhi may be strong enough to extract a cost from Beijing which is discounting the enormous power of the nationalist sentiment that the CCP is unleashing in China’s neighbourhood,” he concludes.



## Why 160-Year-Old Vladivostok Has a Chinese Connection

→ When Vladivostok, the main city of the Russian Far East, marked the 160th anniversary of its founding on July 2, it resulted in a wave of abuse from Chinese social media users across various platforms who claimed that the territory of Primorsky Krai of which Vladivostok is the administrative capital, historically belonged to China. While these claims were not officially endorsed by China's foreign ministry, they come at a time when the country has been particularly aggressive in the context of its territorial disputes in the region. At present, China is embroiled in **fresh disputes involving Bhutan**, in addition to its ongoing territorial disputes involving India, Tibet and the South China Sea. **Before Primorsky Krai became Russian territory in 1860, it was a relatively small Manchu settlement under the sovereignty of the Qing dynasty.** At that time, Vladivostok was called Haishenwei or the Bay of Sea Slugs. Artyom Lukin, Deputy Director for Research, School of Regional and International Studies, Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, explains that during the **First Opium War** that occurred between September 1839 and August 1842, fought between Britain and the Qing Dynasty, the former began exploring and mapping this stretch of the coast. During that time, Lukin says the Vladivostok harbour was named Port May by the British. In discussions concerning the Opium Wars, the focus is mostly on Britain, France and China under the Qing dynasty, while Russia is often neglected. However, it is because of its unique role, particularly during the **Second Opium War**, that Russia acquired a significant amount of former Manchu territory, including Vladivostok that is its largest port on the Pacific coast. **The south eastern part of Russia, that borders North Korea and China, has historically been a bone of contention between Russia and China, in part because of China's claims that this region once formed 'Outer Manchuria'.** Some researchers believe that the term 'Outer Manchuria' was coined by China in an attempt to lend credence to their territorial claims over this region.

## Why Finland's Air Force Stopped Using Swastika Symbol

→ University of Helsinki academic Teivo Teivainen noticed that Finland's Air Force Command had suddenly stopped using an old emblem that featured a swastika with a pair of wings, replacing it with a new emblem featuring a golden eagle. unit emblem, which had caused misunderstandings from time to time." While the use of the swastika was stopped on planes of the Finnish Air Force after the Second World War, unit emblems, unit flags and uniforms had continued to feature the symbol. The revised emblem had been in use since at least 2017.

### Why Was This Symbol Used?

The symbol arrived in Finland in 1918 when Swedish Count Eric von Rosen gifted a Thulin Typ D plane to the Finnish air force, long before the symbol became associated with the Nazis. The plane featured a symbol of a blue swastika on a white background that Rosen would consider a good luck charm and at that time was in no way associated with anti-Semitism or the crimes of the Nazis. This symbol then began to be more widely used by the Finnish air force as a representative insignia. Incidentally, Rosen's sister Carin von Kantzow later married Hermann Göring, who was one of the most prominent and powerful members of the Nazi party. Despite the use of this insignia, researchers say its continued use was not an endorsement of the Nazi party. Finland itself was aligned with Nazi Germany during the Second World War.



## The Strange Case of Turkmenistan, The Country With 'No COVID-19 Cases'

- Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Turkmenistan in Central Asia is among the few countries that have not recorded any case of coronavirus infections. Experts believe it is unlikely that the country has been left untouched by the pandemic and chalk it up to the Turkmen government not being forthcoming about the global health crisis and its impact in the country. After months of discussions with the country's government, on July 6, WHO Europe's regional director Hans Kluge tweeted that a special team was finally on its way to Turkmenistan to assess the situation in the country.

### What Has Been Turkmenistan's Stance On COVID-19?

In early February, Turkmenistan cancelled flights to China and other nations with high rates of COVID-19 infections. It also diverted all incoming international flights to Turkmenabat, the country's second-largest city where a special quarantine zone was created to check passengers for symptoms. However, according to the BBC, locals had reported that some passengers had been able to bribe their way out of the quarantine zone and avoid the mandatory two-weeks of isolation. Then, in March, Turkmenistan reportedly closed most of its land borders as well to curb the entry of incoming passengers. Due to strict government controls over the dissemination of information, it is difficult to assess the ground situation in context of COVID-19 in the country.

## Ethiopia's Bloody Mayhem

- The gruesome death of at least 80 protesters following the cold-blooded murder of Ethiopian political singer Haacaaluu Hundeessaa shows that tensions in Ethiopia continue to fester. **The iconic musician, who belonged to the largest but highly marginalised Oromo ethnic community, was killed on June 29. Haacaaluu, a cultural icon, used to sing about the enduring nature of state-sponsored Oromo marginalisation.**

### Unrest Since 2015

Since 2015, there have been protests in Oromia, sparked by the decision to extend the administration of the capital into Oromia Region, the territory of the Oromos. They subsequently morphed into a broader resistance against the autocratic Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime and left hundreds of people dead. The expression of dissent has become more normalised from 2018. **Months after Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn tendered his resignation in February that year, the government lifted the state of emergency and eased its repressive measures. Thousands of political prisoners were released and bans against prominent government critics in the media and other sectors were lifted. The most significant concession was the EPRDF coalition's decision to appoint the new Prime Minister from the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (later called the Oromo Democratic Party), one of its constituents. The current incumbent, Abiy Ahmed, the 2019 Nobel Laureate for Peace, is the first Oromo to be appointed to the nation's highest office in years. Comprising a third of the population, the Oromos are challenging the Tigrayans, who make up a mere 6% but continue to wield political power and influence disproportionate to their number. The Amharas, the second largest ethnic community, have rallied behind the Oromos, setting aside mutual differences, to demand greater political representation and better opportunities. The growing assertiveness of the two numerically largest groups has predictably provoked a backlash from the traditional power elites. Mr.**



Abiy's cabinet overhaul and the removal of the heads of the army and intelligence services soon after he assumed office were criticised as targeting the Tigrayans.

### An Inclusive National Identity

Meanwhile, commentators began to speculate whether the continued eruption of violence was an unfortunate corollary to the new dawn of freedom in 2018. Last November, over 70 people were killed when a prominent media mogul alleged that he was under threat of attack by the security forces. Amid this internecine conflict, **Mr. Abiy is keen to promote his version of an inclusive Ethiopian national identity as distinct from the ethnicity-based model of federalism as per the 1995 constitution.** To that end, he disbanded the EPRDF, which represented the four major ethnic communities, in November 2019 and launched the Prosperity Party, risking the alienation of not just the Tigrayans but also the Oromos who once backed his ascent. This bold move, and the substitution of the state-driven developmental approach with economic liberalisation, can bear fruit only through a strict enforcement of the rule of law. Last week's deadly protests following Hundeessaa's murder symbolise the Oromo's fury that one of their own should have been cruelly removed from their midst when the traditional fault-lines in Ethiopian society are being redrawn. Mr. Abiy was awarded the Nobel Prize for brokering the historic 2018 peace agreement with neighbouring Eritrea, ending a two-decade military stand-off. His reputation for promoting reconciliation at home would have been tested next month, but that general election has been postponed indefinitely in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reassure the citizens of Ethiopia, Mr. Abiy must shed the General's instincts in him that critics suspect. He must expeditiously bring to justice those behind the tragic shooting of Haacaaluu which has led to a bloody mayhem.

### Who Was Hachalu Hundessa, Whose Death Triggered Protests in Ethiopia?

- Over 80 people have been killed in clashes with security forces in Ethiopia following the murder of popular singer Hachalu Hundessa. The musician was shot Monday night by unidentified assailants in the Galan Condominium area of capital city Addis Ababa. The motive for the murder remains unclear. The local police have arrested some individuals in connection with the case. A Human Rights Watch report stated the government cut internet services across the country on Tuesday morning, making it difficult to access information on those who were killed and injured in the protests. Significantly, just before his death, on June 22, Hundessa gave an interview to the Oromia Media Network (OMN), which had sparked outrage on social media. During the interview, he criticised the government and spoke out against the marginalisation faced by his community, the Oromos. Following his death, OMN was raided by the police and several journalists were detained. Jawar Mohammed, who owns the network, was also taken into custody. Hundessa was buried in his hometown Ambo.

### Hachalu Hundessa And the Oromo Community

Hundessa, 34, was a musician and activist. Born into the Oromo community, he sang about their struggle for freedom. The Oromo community is the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, making up more than 50 per cent of the country's population. In an interview to the BBC in 2017, Hundessa said he starting writing songs when he was imprisoned for political activities between 2003 and 2008. "I did not know how to write lyrics and melodies until I was put behind bars. It is there that I learned," he said. Hundessa gave voice to the anti-government protests that emerged in 2014 and culminated in the resignation of prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn in 2018. The protests began after the government announced a plan

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to expand the boundaries of the capital into the Oromia region. The community was concerned that the expansion would displace farmers living in the outskirts. While the plan, called the “Addis Ababa Master Plan”, was eventually dropped, the protests continued, signalling the growing frustration of the ethnic group that felt marginalised by the government. Separately, anti-government protests also emerged in the Amhara region, home to another ethnic community called the Amharas. Tensions in Oromia and Amhara escalated after October 2, 2016 when, during the Oromo thanksgiving holiday, over 55 people were killed in a stampede. After fresh protests broke out following the incident, the government declared a state of emergency and established a special unit to “rehabilitate” those who had been arrested for participating in violence or unrest in the past year. According to Amnesty International, following the events of October 2016, the government security forces arrested tens of thousands of people in Amhara and Oromia among other regions. Those arrested included political activists, protesters, journalists and members of the Human Rights Council among others. In 2018, Desalegn was succeeded by Abiy Ahmed to become the first prime minister from the Oromo community. Ahmed won the Nobel peace prize in 2019 for his efforts towards resolving the border dispute with neighbouring Eritrea. A recent report published by Amnesty claims that despite reforms that led to the release of thousands of detainees following Ahmed’s prime ministership, Ethiopian security forces have committed “grave” violations between December 2018 and December 2019. The report claims that since March 2019, security officers have forcefully evicted over 60 families from Oromia’s East and West Guji zones. It adds that in order to mobilise support ahead of the now postponed elections, politicians have been trying to stir up ethnic and religious animosities, “sparking inter-communal violence and armed attacks in five of the country’s nine regional states.”

### A Highly Versatile Artiste Who Composed Music Across Genres

- ➔ Italian composer Ennio Morricone, known for his soundtracks in classics such as ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’ and ‘Once Upon a Time in the West’, died in Rome Monday. Morricone, 91, died in a hospital after suffering a fracture a few days ago. He is survived by his wife Maria Travia. Italy’s Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte tweeted, “We will always remember, with infinite gratitude, the artistic genius of the Maestro #EnnioMorricone. It made us dream, feel excited, reflect, writing memorable notes that will remain indelible in the history of music and cinema.” President Sergio Mattarella, in a condolence message to the composer’s family, wrote: “Both a refined and popular musician, he left a deep footprint on the musical history of the second half of the 1900s.” Born in 1928, Morricone (pronounced more-ee-cone-ay) studied at Rome’s prestigious Santa Cecilia conservatory before beginning his career as a trumpet player in jazz bands in the 1940s. He also worked as a studio arranger and did ghost-writing for films in his initial years. The maestro’s success arrived in the 1960s and 70s, when he composed for Westerns – a subgenre of films set in the late 19th century United States (or the “Old West”), where gun-toting cowboys run into adventures ending in revenge or retribution. His music for Sergio Leone’s Dollar trilogy (‘A Fistful of Dollars’, 1964; ‘For a Few Dollars More’, 1965; ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’, 1966) brought Morricone international fame.





## Foreign Affairs

### India Must Not Cast Anchor In 'Enrica Lexie' (Vivek Katju - Former Diplomat)

- Italy has achieved its basic objective in the **Enrica Lexie-St. Antony** matter. All through this sorry saga, it wanted its two marines, Massimiliano Latorre and Salvatore Girone, to stand trial for killing two Indian fishermen, Ajeesh Pink and Valentine Jelastine, not in India but in Italy. The marines were part of a security contingent on the Enrica Lexie, an Italian commercial oil tanker while Pink and Valentine were on the Indian fishing boat, **St. Antony**. The incident took place on February 15, 2012, in India's **Contiguous Zone**, 20.5 nautical miles off the Kerala coast.

#### Present and Past

The operative part of the Annex VII arbitral tribunal's decision, made public, on July 2, 2020, gave Italy full satisfaction on this crucial point although in a split 3-2 verdict, and on shaky grounds. **The tribunal, established by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) under the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, held that the marines were "entitled to immunity in relation to the acts that they committed during the incident of 15 February, 2012, and that India is precluded from exercising its jurisdiction over the Marines". **India had opposed Italy's request for an arbitral tribunal but ITLOS ruled in Italy's favour**. ITLOS had asked both countries to "suspend all court proceedings" and "refrain from initiating new ones" that may "aggravate the dispute" or prevent the implementation of the Arbitral Tribunal's decision. Accordingly, the judicial proceedings against the Italian marines in India were suspended. In May 2016, the Supreme Court of India allowed Girone who was on bail in India to return to Italy pending the decision of the Tribunal; Lattore was already there because of medical reasons.

#### The Small Print

Italy will now continue with the case it had registered against Lattore and Girone. It is highly unlikely though that any Italian court will convict Lattore and Girone for Pink and Valentine's unjustified killing. The reported humanitarian assistance that the Italian authorities gave their families can never be taken as justice for the lives snuffed out by two trigger-happy members of the Italian armed forces who, without any justification, considered the fishing boat to be a pirate skiff. Only the operative portion of the tribunal's award is available till now. The detailed award is being scrutinised by India and Italy for redactions of those portions either country feels are confidential, and therefore cannot be publicly disclosed. Besides, the tribunal's hearing, except for the opening statements of the two countries' agents, was held confidentially. It is unlikely then that Italy would allow facts prejudicial to its version to be made open. The legal points on the jurisdiction of the two countries to try the marines and the immunity issue should become available hopefully somewhat soon. They would enable a full assessment to be made of the reasoning adopted by the majority to reach its conclusions on these important issues.

#### A Dangerous Precedent

**India's stand that UNCLOS is not concerned with issues relating to immunity was strong. Immunity of state officials has to be governed by specific multilateral or bilateral treaties or agreements. It should not be tangentially brought in to settle issues of jurisdiction. Besides,**



even if Italian marines are considered as state officials, they were deployed on an Italian commercial vessel. Italy did so unilaterally without the cover of any multilateral or bilateral arrangement. There is no convention that such persons as the marines in such cases are immune from local criminal jurisdiction; only heads of states, heads of governments and foreign ministers customarily enjoy immunity abroad apart from accredited diplomats who are covered by the Vienna Convention. Thus, the tribunal's decision on the marines' immunity sets a dangerous precedent. Countries may now be tempted to enact specific laws to give immunity to their military and para-military personnel and others by declaring them state officials and thereafter place them on different kinds of commercial craft and use them for adventurous purposes. This can lead to an increase in tensions generally and especially between inimical states, and more so if there are problems relating to fishermen between contiguous states.

### New Delhi Must Be Focused

India can take satisfaction that the tribunal found that by firing on the St. Antony, Italy was guilty of "violating India's freedom and right of navigation". Consequently, it held that "India is entitled to payment of compensation in connection with loss of life, physical harm, material damage to property and moral harm" perpetrated by Italy. Now it is incumbent on the government to ensure that Italy is made to pay fully for the loss of life and the suffering it has caused in this matter. Any lapse on this count will be inexcusable. Considerations of good relations with Italy or with the European Union (EU) which had stood beside Italy throughout this matter should not be allowed to influence these specific negotiations. The government should also ensure that it closely monitors the case proceedings in the Italian court against Lattore and Girone. This is notwithstanding, as mentioned earlier, that Italy would be inclined to only go through the motions of a fair trial. The government should instruct the Embassy in Rome that a diplomat should always be present during court proceedings. It should not accept Italy's pleas that this would not be possible when confidential information is being presented before the court. If the Italians had gone to the extreme in supporting the marines, India must not show any laxity in securing justice for Pink and Valentine even in an Italian court.

### For Executive and Judiciary

This is also a time for the executive and judicial branches of the Indian state to introspect on how they handled the whole affair politically, diplomatically and legally. A number of questions arise. Some of these are: Was it prudent to appoint the National Investigation Agency to handle the case after the Supreme Court had ordered for a special court to be set up to try the marines? Should virtually terrorism charges have been levelled against the marines only to be dropped later? Should the Supreme Court not have decided the jurisdiction and immunity issues ab initio instead of leaving them open? Should not have ways been found to counter Italy causing deliberate delays to thwart the trial from commencing? This is especially important, for it used these delays to build sympathy for the marines in the EU. As a good international citizen, India has accepted the tribunal's award. Now it must ensure that Italy fully honours it. The matter remains open.

### India To Take Call on Australia's Inclusion in Malabar Exercises

- ➔ India will take a decision on whether to include Australia in the Malabar exercises with Japan and the U.S. at a Defence Ministry meeting early next week, according to a defence source. The decision, if taken, could bring all Quad countries together as part of the annual war

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games. "The general consensus is that Australia should join. A discussion is going to happen in the Defence Ministry on this issue next week," the defence source said on condition of anonymity.

### LAC Stand-Off

As reported by The Hindu on June 3, after years of reluctance, India said it was open to Australia's inclusion in the Malabar as an observer. The move comes in the midst of the ongoing stand-off with China on the border, the biggest crisis along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in over five decades. Australia's inclusion would be seen as a possible first step towards the militarisation of the Quad coalition, something Beijing has opposed in the past. Once the government takes a decision to include Australia, as per procedure, the other partner nations – Japan and the U.S. – have to be informed to secure their consent, after which a formal invitation would be extended to Australia. Japan and the U.S. have been keen on Canberra's inclusion for and have been pushing India to consider it. The Malabar exercise, which has been delayed this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, should take place towards the end of 2020, the source said. The inclusion of Australia in the exercises would mark a major shift for India's Indo-Pacific plans.

### Started in 1992

Malabar began as a bilateral naval exercise between India and the U.S. in 1992, and was expanded into a trilateral format with the inclusion of Japan in 2015. Since then, Australia has made repeated requests to join the exercises and in January 2018, former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had said talks on the Malabar exercises were "progressing well". However, India did not include Australia in the exercises in 2018 and 2019.

### Patrolling Points: What Do These Markers on LAC Signify?

→ The standoffs between Indian and Chinese troops in Ladakh on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), where initial steps towards disengagement have taken place, are around a number of patrolling points or PPs in Galwan, Hot Springs and Gogra areas.

### What Exactly Are Patrolling Points?

PPs are patrolling points identified and marked on the LAC, which are patrolled with a stipulated frequency by the security forces. They serve as a guide to the location of the LAC for the soldiers, acting as indicators of the extent of 'actual control' exercised on the territory by India. By regularly patrolling up to these PPs, the Indian side is able to establish and assert its physical claim about the LAC.

### Are All The Patrolling Points Numbered?

No. Some of the PPs are prominent and identifiable geographical features, such as a pass, or a nala junction where no numerals are given. Only those PPs, where there are no prominent features, are numbered as in the case of PP14 in Galwan Valley.

### Are All on The Patrolling Points Bang on the LAC?

Mostly, yes. Except for the Depsang plains in northern Ladakh, where PP10, PP11, PP11A, PP12 and PP13 – from Raki Nala to Jivan Nala – do not fall on the LAC. These are short of the LAC, on the Indian side.



### Are These Patrolling Points Not Manned?

The PPs are not posts and thus not manned. Unlike on the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan, the border with China is not physically held by the Army all along. They are just physical markers on the ground, chosen for their location and have no defensive potential or tactical importance for the Army.

### If the Patrolling Points Are Not Manned, How Is the Claim Actually Asserted?

The claim is asserted by the Army or joint Army-ITBP patrols as they show more visible presence in these areas. This is done by physically visiting PPs with a higher frequency, as the deployment has moved closer to the LAC and due to improved infrastructure. As the Chinese may not see when the Indian patrols visit these PPs, they will leave come cigarette packets or food tins with Indian markings behind. That lets the Chinese know that Indian soldiers had visited the place, which indicates that India was in control of these areas.

### Who Has Given These Patrolling Points?

These PPs have been identified by the high-powered China Study Group, starting from 1975 when patrolling limits for Indian forces were specified. It is based on the LAC, after the government accepted the concept in 1993, which is also marked on the maps with the Army in the border areas. But the frequency of patrolling to PPs is not specified by the CSG – it is finalised by the Army Headquarters in New Delhi, based on the recommendations made by the Army and ITBP.

### What Is This Frequency?

The frequency of reaching various PPs are given in the annual patrolling programme. Based on the terrain, the ground situation and the location of the LAC, the duration for visiting each PP is specified – it can vary from once a month to twice a year.

### Which Patrolling Points Are Currently Under Dispute?

PPs 10 to 13 in Depsang sector, PP14 in Galwan, PP15 in Hot Spring, and PP17 and PP17A in Gogra are currently being disputed by both sides, where the standoffs have taken place in the past nine weeks.

## Lesson on De-Escalation from Doklam Stand-Off

- The government must not agree to de-escalate the situation at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh without an agreement on returning to “status quo ante” or the situation before the stand-off began, said experts, who pointed to the outcome of the Doklam stand-off in 2017 as a marker. “The lesson for us in Doklam is that disengagement is not enough in order to declare an end to tensions at the LAC. It is necessary that we define end points up to where the troops must withdraw to and no understanding should be reached without the restoration of status quo ante,” said Ashok Kantha, former Ambassador to China and the Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies.

### Monday's Statement

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a statement detailing a phone conversation between National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and his Chinese interlocutor Foreign Minister Wang Yi over which it was decided to disengage and de-escalate the military mobilisation at



the Galwan Valley and other points of conflict between the Indian Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) that has lasted more than two months. The three-paragraph statement issued was considerably longer than the MEA statement issued after the Doklam stand-off that lasted two-and-a-half months, from June 16 to August 28, 2017. At the time, the "Press statement on Doklam disengagement understanding" had said only that the "expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is on-going", as a result of diplomatic talks. Since then, the MEA has said in response to questions in Parliament, that the "status quo" has been maintained at the stand-off point, below the Indian post at Doko-La. According to experts, however, while the disengagement brought an end to hostilities between India and China over China's attempt to build a road near the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction area, transgressing into Bhutanese territory, it did not stop the PLA's construction work right across the Doklam plateau. "If the military only agrees on disengagement and de-escalation, it may end up at a disadvantage," Mr. Kantha told The Hindu. "Today, the PLA has constructed major infrastructure and consolidated its position in Doklam.." "My sense is that the variances in [Indian and Chinese statements] reflects the potential for future trouble for India à la Doklam," said Lieutenant General (Retd) Prakash Menon, Director, Strategic Studies Programme, at Takshashila Institution, who formerly was a military adviser at the National Security Council Secretariat. Maps accessed from Google Earth show that the development of the road towards the Torsa Nullah, at one end of the Jampheri ridge, which is Bhutanese territory, continued between December 2017- December 2019. The images, part of a study released in May 2020 called "Doklam Update" by scholar Anirudh Kanisetti at the Bangalore-based Takshashila Institution, also traces images from 2009, when there was only vegetation on the plateau and surrounding areas, and now, when roads, buildings and trenches can be seen. Government sources who did not wish to be identified said that the satellite pictures and ground reports show PLA troops had resumed construction activity in the Doklam plateau a few months after the disengagement, and had consolidated positions across the 90 sq. km. Doklam plateau by the end of 2018. The sources said that the PLA has made two "black-top" or asphalt roads inside the disputed territory with Bhutan, which are extensions of two Chinese roads, to the east and to the south.

### 'Road Work Completed'

"The southern one has now reached up to the junction of Amo Chu and Torsa Nullah, thereby extending the Chinese Claim Line well into the territory," said the sources. Effectively this means that the Chinese have gone around India's objections and used a more circuitous route, but completed their road building project, the sources said. Given the precedent, China's latest claim on eastern Bhutan that abuts Arunachal Pradesh, where another tri-junction exists, should be watched closely as well, they said.

### What Is Winter Diesel and How Will It Help Indian Army in Ladakh?

- India's armed forces may soon be using winter diesel for operations in high altitude areas such as Ladakh, where winter temperatures plummet to extremely low levels. State-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), which is the largest oil marketing company in the country, has sought approval from the Directorate General of Quality Assurance (DGQA) of the armed forces to approve **winter diesel that is said to be usable at temperatures as low as -30° Celsius.**



### What Is Winter Diesel?

Winter diesel is a specialised fuel that was introduced by IOCL last year specifically for high altitude regions and low-temperature regions such as Ladakh, where ordinary diesel can become unusable. SV Ramakumar, director of research and development at IOC said the flow characteristics of regular diesel change at such low temperatures and using it may be detrimental to vehicles. Ramakumar noted that winter diesel which contains additives to maintain lower viscosity can be used in temperatures as low as -30°C and that besides a low pour point, it had higher cetane rating – an indicator is the combustion speed of diesel and compression needed for ignition– and lower sulphur content, which would lead to lower deposits in engines and better performance. Ramakumar noted that before the launch of winter diesel, consumers in areas that reached such low temperatures were using kerosene to dilute diesel to make it usable, which would lead to more air pollution.

### What Are the Armed Forces Using in This Area Currently?

IOCL and other oil marketing companies, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd, provide the armed forces with Diesel High sulphur Pour Point (DHPP -W) to armed forces for operations in these areas which also has a pour point of -30°C. IOC may begin supplying winter diesel to the armed forces once its use is approved by the Controllerate of Quality Assurance for petroleum products under the Directorate General of Quality Assurance of the armed forces.

### Has Demand for Fuel Suitable for Such Temperatures Increased Given Border Tensions with China In Ladakh?

While experts expect that demand may rise given the border tensions, the demand for DHPP-W from the armed forces has not increased significantly since the clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers in the Galwan valley in Ladakh on June 15.

### Why the New Crop of Apps Should Worry Indian Users?

- Instagram launched its short video feature called Reels in India. But it is not the only app trying to slip into the space vacated by TikTok. In fact, less than a fortnight after the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTY) banned 59 Chinese apps, Google Play Store and Apple's App Store are teeming with alternatives to these platforms and software applications. Not all of them are new. For instance, Roposo, which has an offering similar to TikTok, has been around for a few years. This app from the InMobi Group, however, has seen an exponential increase in user base recently and now claims over 100 million users. A lot of the new entrants are nowhere near these numbers, nor are they able to offer the privacy features of the established apps, making them prone to hacking or stealing of critical user information, experts said.

### What Are These New Apps?

According to experts, there are two kinds of apps which have rushed to fill the vacuum created by Chinese apps. There are established apps which have been around for a very long period of time and were already competing with the Chinese offerings. Others, however, are like 'fly-by-night operators', which have downloaded entire app codes from online market places such as Codecanyon and are trying to take advantage of the anti-China sentiment, cyber-security experts warned. "These apps can be bought from online marketplaces for as



little as Rs 3,000. These scripts are easy to buy, and even the owner of the apps does not know how the app works. Now, if 10 people buy the same script, all the apps will have the same flaw," independent security researcher Indrajeet Bhuyan said. This is exactly what happened with TikTok clone Mitron, which a Pakistani coding company claimed was brought from it for just \$34. The app is back now after Google Play store removed it for a while because of privacy policy violations.

### What Are the Issues with These Apps?

One of the major issues, cyber-security experts said, is the lack of data privacy norms and guidelines in these apps. "The nationality of an app isn't enough to guarantee its safety. One source of vulnerability of course is the app on the phone, but also where is it centrally stored, and how it is kept also matters. The location of the data by itself does nothing," Raman Chima, Asia-Pacific policy director at AccessNow explained. With the newer apps from small developers, there is also no clarity on why certain permissions are being sought on the device. For example, most of the alternatives launched over the past 10 days seek permissions to view contacts and gallery. A Pune-based cyber-security researcher warned that with little knowledge about who owns these platforms and whether the app's code also scans and stores private data of a user, no one is likely to be held accountable in case of a breach. "For well-established apps, their reputation is at stake and therefore will seek only enough data to run the programme. These new apps, which have rushed to take benefit of the vacuum, have nothing to lose. Even if the app is reading and storing your private chat, there is no way to know because nobody has any idea of what their codes contain," he said. Usually a new app such as these take months to get a decent number of users. However, in the present wave even such apps are getting tens of thousands of downloads. Even for some of the older apps, the sudden increase in their user base will create vulnerabilities because of a lack of data handling capacity or safety measures, the experts said.

### Do Such Apps Bode Well for The Indian App Ecosystem?

Despite the surge, experts don't see this being a long-term phenomenon, or any of these apps developing into world class products. "They (users) will quickly move on to easily available alternatives. In the short term, some knockoffs might appear but in the longer run, it is a chance for the ecosystem to mature and take the place left vacant," technology research firm Counterpoint said in a note. Other experts, however, highlighted that India cannot benefit from creating a walled garden in which only domestic apps are allowed to function. "There are many other apps which are international and perhaps for a good reason. That is always going to be the case. The system will mature only when you have domestic apps which are globally or even regionally competitive. A lot of Indian apps are not aggressively marketed," Chima said.

## The Impact of The Chinese Apps Ban

### → What Has China's Response Been to The Ban?

China has said that it suspects India's actions could be in violation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. In a statement, the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi said, "India's measure selectively and discriminatorily aims at certain Chinese apps on ambiguous and far-fetched grounds, runs against fair and transparent procedure requirements, abuses national security exceptions, and [is suspected] of violating the WTO rules. It also goes against the general trend of international trade and e-commerce, and is not conducive to consumer



interests and the market competition in India.” The Chinese government’s comments indicate that it could file a formal complaint at the WTO.

### Will the Move Hurt India?

It could, in terms of investments and employment. ByteDance Ltd. had talked of upcoming investments worth \$1 billion in India. That will probably remain suspended till further clarity emerges, potentially impacting job creation.

### What Legal Options Does the Indian Government Have?

In terms of process, there are two options available to the government **under Section 69A of the IT Act to issue ban orders – normal and emergency**. In the case of the ban on the 59 apps, based on the use of the phrase “interim order” in the statement issued by TikTok, it appears that the **government may have adopted the emergency route**. The emergency route allows content to be blocked on the **directions of the Secretary, Department of IT**, who must consider the impugned content and record his reasons for doing so. In the normal course, an order to block content requires: (a) a decision to be made by a government committee (b) relevant intermediary to be given an opportunity to be heard by this committee. These processes are not required when emergency provisions are used. **However, in the case of emergencies, the order of the Secretary, Department of IT, must be placed before the government committee within 48 hours. Based on the recommendations of this committee, the order can then be finalised or vacated.**

### Does the Government Necessarily Have to Publish the Order?

The legal order that empowers the designated authority to implement the ban is yet to be made public. Rule 16 of the Blocking rules requires strict confidentiality to be maintained regarding blocking requests, complaints received, and actions taken. However, policy experts such as Rishab Bailey, a technology researcher with the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, believe that this provision primarily applies to intermediaries (through whom blocking is implemented). He points out that the government ought to disclose the orders passed (subject to relevant redactions that may be required) in the interests of transparency and accountability. Also, and as recognised by the Supreme Court recently in the Anuradha Bhasin case (in the context of Internet suspensions ordered under Section 144 of the ‘The Code of Criminal Procedure’), publishing such orders is the only way in which the reasons and rationale for the decision can be judged. Challenging the decision-making process requires the reasoning to be made public, Mr. Bailey said.

### Can the Order Be Challenged in An Indian Court?

Though it is unlikely that the companies concerned may take such a step immediately, either they or any affected individual in India could challenge the blocking orders in court. The courts will then decide whether the government has provided sufficient explanation as to the nexus between what these apps are alleged to be doing and the reasons adduced by the government such as protection of national security and strategic interests. Courts will also consider if the ban is a proportionate and necessary step to be taken, given the facts at hand. According to Mr. Bailey, another factor to be considered is whether the process for blocking under Section 69A of the IT Act contemplates blocking of content (or apps) on grounds of privacy violations.





## Nation

### How Pakistan Offers Professional Courses to Kashmiri Students

→ The resignation of Syed Ali Shah Geelani from the Hurriyat Conference as its life-time chairman has brought the spotlight on the alleged sale of medical seats in Pakistan. In his letter dissociating himself from the Hurriyat Conference, Geelani accused its Muzaffarabad chapter of “open rebellion” and “financial irregularities”. “For the past some time, and specifically for the last two years, many complaints were received about this AJK chapter of APHC. Recently, after an investigation, some [members] were dismissed, and some more are under investigation... To circumvent the process of transparency and accountability, your representatives started non-cooperation with the Convenor,” Geelani said in his resignation letter. The investigation, Hurriyat sources say, was over an alleged sale of medical seats in Pakistan.

### What Does Pakistan Offer to Kashmiri Students?

For over two decades, the Pakistan government has been reserving a special quota for the students of Jammu and Kashmir in all its professional courses, especially medical and engineering. The students also could take admission for higher education. Students from Jammu and Kashmir are broadly classified in two categories: a) those applying for admission under foreign student seats through the ministry of education, Pakistan, and b) the students applying for admission under the scholarship programme. The students applying through foreign student seats have to pay the normal fee that any foreign student pays. But under the scholarship programme, the students are provided 100 per cent scholarship, free accommodation and per diem. The students, whose parents or close relatives have been killed by the security forces in Kashmir or have suffered “at the hands of Indian forces”, are given preference for seats under the scholarship programme. Every year, around 50 students go to Pakistan under the scholarship programme for MBBS alone while a similar number of students get admission in other courses. The students are distributed in different colleges of Pakistan. This year, the Pakistan government had announced 1,600 scholarships for Kashmiri students. This was disclosed in a meeting of Pakistan National Assembly’s Standing Committee for Federal Education and Professional Training. However, due to the pandemic and ban on international travel no student has been able to go to Pakistan this year so far.

### Who Determines the Eligibility of The Students?

While there is a cut-off percentage for admission to various courses, the recommendation for the students under the scholarship programme is given by the separatist leaders. Over the years both factions of the separatist conglomerate Hurriyat Conference have been issuing recommendation letters to the students for admission in professional courses in Pakistan. However, the Hurriyat led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani stopped issuing the recommendation letters two years ago after allegations of corruption surfaced.

### What Is the Controversy?

Over the years, there have been allegations that some separatist leaders, especially in Pakistan, are demanding monetary benefits from the students before issuing them a recommendation letter and the basic criteria set by the Pakistan government is being flouted.



There were allegations that even wards of some police officers have managed recommendation letters from the separatist leaders. In 2019, another controversy surfaced when the National Board of Examination refused to allow a student to take foreign medical graduate examination/screening test, mandatory for any Indian who obtains a medical degree from a foreign country. The students had studied medicine in Mirpur in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, a part of undivided Kashmir claimed by India. The student approached the Jammu and Kashmir High Court that asked the Ministry of External Affairs to consider recognising the medical degree of the student. "There should be no dispute that the area known as PoK, where the medical college is situated is part of India though it is on the other side of LoC and is under the occupation and administrative control of Islamic republic of Pakistan," ruled the court. "If that be the admitted position, a medical institution operating in the area can't be expected to seek any recognition from the Medical Council of India (MCI)".

### Why Do Kashmiri Students Prefer to Go to Pakistan For Studying Professional Courses?

The parents of Kashmiri students prefer medicine as a career for their wards, especially girls. As Kashmir has very few professional colleges, the students would move to foreign countries for studying medicine – first to Russia and now Bangladesh and Pakistan. While the courses in Pakistan are relatively cheap and better, the number of students going to Pakistan increased after Kashmiri students faced attacks in different parts of the country.

### Quorum Not Needed for Routine Panel Meetings

→ Contradicting the Opposition's argument for virtual meetings of standing committees to ensure quorum during deliberations, officials at the Rajya Sabha Secretariat have said that quorum is essential only when the committees take decisions or adopt reports and not during routine deliberations. Sources said this issue came up at a meeting on Wednesday chaired by Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu. Congress leader and Chairman of the Standing Committee on Science and Technology Jairam Ramesh had written to Mr. Naidu demanding a virtual meeting citing lack of quorum. Quorum for these meetings is generally 11 out of 30 members. The officials, sources said, told Mr. Naidu that out of 281 meetings of the eight department-related Standing Committees that are headed by Rajya Sabha members, 16% were held without quorum. "The committee on Science and Technology & Environment and Forests held 32 meetings during the past three years, of which 22% were without quorum. In respect of the 38 meetings of the committee on Home Affairs, 21% were without quorum," a senior RS official said. Mr. Ramesh has been heading the committee only since September last year. He said that during his tenure, 11 meetings were held and quorum was complete in each one of them. According to sources, eight of the 30 members of the standing committee on Science and Technology which is to deliberate on "Preparedness for COVID-19" have confirmed attendance. Of them, other than Mr. Ramesh himself, one member from the Samajwadi Party and one from Bahujan Samaj Party, the remaining are from the BJP. All the members who have confirmed are either from Delhi or Uttar Pradesh, their constituencies within driving distance to Parliament. "Point isn't about quorum alone. It's about facilitating those MPs who want to attend and are unable to because of containment zones and quarantine restrictions in their home states," Mr. Ramesh said.



## Postal Ballots and Why They Are Fast Turning into A Political Controversy

→ The Election Commission has announced that it will allow those above the age of 65 as well as those under home or institutional quarantine to vote using postal ballots during the Bihar elections. Opposition parties are unhappy with the move and termed it unconstitutional. Here is a look at what are postal ballots and the controversy around it.

### What Is Postal Voting?

A restricted set of voters can exercise postal voting. Through this facility, a voter can cast her vote remotely by recording her preference on the ballot paper and sending it back to the election officer before counting.

### Who Can Avail This Facility?

Members of the armed forces like the Army, Navy and Air Force, members of the armed police force of a state (serving outside the state), government employees posted outside India and their spouses are entitled to vote only by post. In other words, they can't vote in person. Voters under preventive detention can also vote only by post. Special voters such as the President of India, Vice President, Governors, Union Cabinet ministers, Speaker of the House and government officers on poll duty have the option to vote by post. But they have to apply through a prescribed form to avail this facility. Recently, the Law Ministry, at the Election Commission's behest, introduced a new category of 'absentee voters', who can now also opt for postal voting. These are voters employed in essential services and unable to cast their vote due to their service conditions. Currently, officials of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, Northern Railway (Passenger and Freight) Services and media persons are notified as absentee voters. Last month, senior citizens above the age of 65 and voters who test positive for COVID19 or are suspected to be COVID-affected were allowed to cast their vote by post.

### How Are Votes Recorded by Post?

The Returning Officer is supposed to print ballot papers within 24 hours of the last date of nomination withdrawal and dispatch them within a day. This is done so that the ballot papers reach the concerned voter well before the polling date and she has enough time to send it back before the counting day. Postal ballot papers for members of the Armed Forces are sent through their record offices. For members of the armed police force of a state (serving outside the state), government employees posted outside India and their spouses, the ballot paper can be sent through post or electronically. For remaining categories ballot papers can be delivered personally or through post. After receiving it, the voter can mark her preference with a tick mark or cross mark against the candidate's name. They also have to fill up a duly attested declaration to the effect that they have marked the ballot paper. The ballot paper and the declaration are then placed in a sealed cover and sent back to the Returning Officer before the time fixed for the commencement of counting of votes.

### Why Have So Many Political Parties Written to Election Commission on Postal Ballots Recently?

Opposition parties are not against postal ballots. The Congress, CPI, CPI(M), Trinamool Congress and the RJD have objected to the EC's decision to allow voters aged 65 and above and those infected or suspected to be infected with COVID19 to vote via postal ballots. CPI(M) was the first to object to the change on the ground that the change was affected



without consulting political parties. TMC has described it as an “arbitrary, malafide, unconstitutional” move against free and fair elections and CPI has said the move “will lead to malpractices and foul play by those parties which are in power and having resources”. The Congress has argued that allowing those aged 65 and above to vote by postal ballot violates secrecy in voting as **a large segment of the population is uneducated and they might seek assistance from others at numerous stages, ending up disclosing their preferred candidate.** This also exposes them to “administrative influence or influence by the Government or the ruling party”. The RJD echoed these concerns and said changes to established democratic procedures should be made only after building broad consensus among all stakeholders. The EC has only responded to the CPI(M) till date. In its letter to party general secretary Sitaram Yechury, **the Commission defended itself saying senior citizens are at a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 infection and the decision to allow them to vote via postal ballots was made to “minimise their exposure in public”.**

### Re-Enfranchise the Forgotten Voter (C.R. Kesavan - Former Member of The Prasar Bharati Board. M.V. Rajeev Gowda - Former Member of Parliament and Chairman of The Congress Party’s Research Department)

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has made it possible for senior citizens above the age of 65 to vote by postal ballot, given that they are at greater risk from exposure to the novel coronavirus. Hitherto, this option was available only to disabled citizens and those above 80 years. However, postal ballots may not minimise the risk of infection and it may be better instead to provide separate voting booths for senior citizens.

### Migrants on The Margins

Well-thought-out initiatives that facilitate voting and remove obstacles to voters exercising their franchise must be welcomed. We would urge that the same empowering approach be extended to another group which faces enormous difficulties in exercising its franchise: migrant workers. The novel coronavirus cataclysm and the subsequent national lockdown brought to centre stage the magnitude of internal migration and hardships that migrant workers endure in their quest for livelihoods. The stark indignity that many of them endured on their long march home suggests that they are perceived as being politically powerless. Internal migrant workers constitute about 13.9 crore as in the Economic Survey of 2017, that is nearly a third of India’s labour force. They travel across India in search of an economic livelihood, in the construction sector, as domestic work, in brick kilns, mines, transportation, security, agriculture, etc. Many never intend to settle down and wish to return to their native villages and towns once their work is completed or the working season ends. Often, they toil in exploitative low-wage jobs, lacking identity and proper living conditions, without access to welfare and unable to exercise their voting rights. **Migrant workers become quasi-disenfranchised, forgotten voters because they cannot afford to return home on election day to choose their representatives. The callous attitude toward the plight of migrants exhibited by some State governments leads to the conclusion that this group does not constitute a vote bank worthy of attention. Internal migrant workers do not enrol as voters in their place of employment since they find proof of residence hard to provide. Many are seasonal migrants who would rather vote in their villages if they could afford to return home. Since**



they do not have a vote where they work, their concerns are easy to ignore in their host State. Sometimes, they are targeted for allegedly taking jobs away from the local population.

### Task Before the ECI

Ensuring that every Indian who is eligible to vote can do so must be a central mission for the ECI. It is a matter of pride that India currently has over 91.05 crore registered voters and in the 2019 general election, a record 67.4%, i.e., 61.36 crore voters, cast their vote. The ECI would do well to focus attention on the one-third, a substantial 29.68 crore, who did not cast their vote. National Election Study surveys have shown that about 10% of registered voters refrain from voting due to a lack of interest in politics. That leaves approximately 20 crore voters who want to vote but are unable to do so. Of these there are about three crore Non Resident Indians (NRIs). Only about one lakh NRIs have registered to vote, presumably because voting requires their physical presence in India. Of them, about 25,000 voted in the 2019 elections. To enable NRIs to exercise their franchise, the government brought in legislation in the previous Lok Sabha to enable voting through authorised proxies. While the legislation lapsed, it is interesting to contrast the concern for NRIs with the lack thereof for poor migrant workers.

### Yes, There Is A Model

Does our system enable any form of voter portability that can serve as a model for re-enfranchising migrant workers? Yes. Service voters (government employees) posted away from home can vote through the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS). Classified service voters (e.g., military personnel) can do so through their proxies. The ECI has said that it is testing an Aadhaar-linked voter-ID based solution to enable electors to cast their votes digitally from anywhere in the country. It will be some time in the future before this becomes a functional reality. While developing this solution, we must ensure that the linkage with Aadhaar does not result in the exclusion of eligible individuals. To facilitate voting by migrant workers, the ECI could undertake substantial outreach measures using the network of District Collectories. Migrants should be able to physically vote in their city of work based on the address on their existing voter IDs and duration of their temporary stay. In an age where banking transactions have gone online seamlessly, it is technologically feasible to record and transfer votes to their respective constituencies without compromising on the credibility of the election process. The COVID-19 crisis mobilised governments and non-governmental organisations to set up registers and portals to reach out to migrant workers. A 'One Nation One Ration Card' is being ushered in to enable migrant workers and their family members to access Public Distribution System benefits from any fair price shop in the country. Similarly, voting must be viewed not just as a civic duty but as a civic right. We must demonstrate the political will to usher in 'One Nation One Voter ID,' to ensure native ballot portability and empower the forgotten migrant voter. **Once migrant workers get to exercise their franchise, we expect that we will see a change in how they are treated.** A quote attributed to Thomas Jefferson goes: "We... do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate." Ensuring that every Indian voter can participate in elections is imperative to ensure a democratically inclusive India.

### Will 'Samadhaan-Se-Vikas' Help Recover Hundreds of Crores Builders Owe?

- ➔ Several real estate giants in Haryana have not deposited hundreds of crores of rupees worth mandatory External Development Charges (EDC) and Infrastructural Development Charges (IDC) for the residential and commercial colonies they have built across Haryana. In a bid to Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



recover this massive sum – which the government further uses for infrastructure development – Haryana had been issuing notices to such defaulters. Over 350 such real estate developers are already on notice.

## How Much Do Real Estate Developers Owe the State Government Towards EDC/IDC?

Official documents show an outstanding EDC/IDC worth nearly Rs 10,000 crore. The documents also reveal that in certain cases, the bank guarantee for several developers is nil, while their outstanding EDC is in crores. The outstanding amount continues to get accumulated over the years. Colony licenses, for which these developers owe money to the government, were issued by the Town and Country Planning Department between 2007 till December 31, 2018.

### What are EDC and IDC?

The developer is supposed to pay **External Development Charges (EDC)** to civic authorities for maintenance of civic amenities within the periphery of the developed project including construction of roads, water and electricity supply, landscaping, maintenance of drainage and sewage systems, waste management etc. **The EDC is decided by the civic authorities.** In many cases, the developer collects it from home buyers, but does not pay it to civic authorities. **Infrastructure Development Charges (IDC)** is **collected by the state government** for development of major infrastructure projects across the state. These funds are utilised for socio-economic growth including construction of highways, bridges, and transportation network etc.

### Where Are Major Defaulters Located?

A large number of the colony licenses on which the developers have defaulted are for commercial and residential colonies developed in Gurgaon, Faridabad, Sonapat and Panchkula, while a few are in Rohtak, Karnal, Jhajjar, Bahadurgarh and Yamunanagar.

### What Does the Rules Say?

As per terms and conditions of the LC-IV and the bilateral agreement executed at the time of issuance of license in terms of Rule 11 of Haryana Development and Regulation of Urban Areas Rules, 1976, a licensee has to pay the EDC as per schedule of payment. If the licensee neither deposits the EDC and/nor IDC as per the terms and conditions of the agreement nor avails the EDC Reschedulement Policy, a show cause notice in the form of a public notice is issued by the Town and Country Planning Department warning such defaulters of further action of revocation/encashment of BG (bank guarantee) on account of non-payment of EDC/IDC.

### What Is the New One-Time Settlement Policy?

The new scheme is called 'Samadhaan se Vikas'. It is modelled on the central scheme of 'Vivad se Vishwas-2020'. The scheme will be applicable to the full outstanding EDC including interest as well as penal interest. In case a coloniser deposits 100 per cent of the outstanding principal amount against EDC as well as 25 per cent of the accumulated interest and penal interest within six months from the date of notification of this scheme, the balance 75 per cent of the accumulated interest and penal interest shall be waived off. In case a coloniser deposits at least 50 per cent of the outstanding principal amount against EDC as well as 50



per cent of the accumulated interest and penal interest, within six months from the date of notification of this scheme, the balance 50 per cent of the accumulated interest and penal interest shall be waived off. The remaining 50 per cent of outstanding principal amount shall be recoverable in four six-monthly instalments along with interest at the rate of 8 percent per annum on the delayed period and an additional 2 percent interest per annum on the default period. The first six months period for deposit of first instalment shall start from the date of deposit of 50 per cent principal plus 50 per cent interest and penal interest component. In case the coloniser does not clear alle EDC dues within the said two-year period, the waiver of balance 50 per cent of the accumulated interest and penal interest will stand annulled and the original EDC schedule shall come into play. However, in case any amount of the 50 per cent outstanding principal amount along with interest is not deposited within the prescribed two-year period, the coloniser will lose all benefits under this policy and the original EDC schedule applicable before the applicability of present policy shall stand restored and all payments received shall be considered to have been paid against the original EDC schedule.

### Was Such an Offer Made in The Past Too?

Yes, in September 2018, the state government had offered developers the option of opting for an EDC Reschedulement Policy, 2018, whereby they were given an option to clear their outstanding "in parts". The government had allowed developers to opt for the policy and make 20 per cent down payment of the outstanding EDC/IDC and pay the balance amount in eight half-yearly instalments along with the interest. Another option given under the policy was that in case a developer wanted to pay 15 per cent of the outstanding EDC/IDC, he/she would be allowed to pay the balance outstanding amount in five half-yearly instalments with interest. However, not many defaulters availed it. Thus, the government-initiated action and began forfeiting their bank guarantees.

### How Much EDC Has Been Recovered in The Last Few Years?

In the year 2015-16, the government recovered EDC worth Rs 1,504 crore, followed by Rs 1,162 crore in 2016-17, Rs 1,651 crore in 2017-18, Rs 1,400 crore in 2018-19 and Rs 1,027 crore in 2019-20. The recovery process took a major hit after the lockdown began. The recovery of EDC in April 2020 was nil, while it was Rs. 2.27 crore in May, Rs 20.15 crore in June and Rs 13.77 crore in July.

### How Haryana Plans to Resume Dept Inquiries, Revenue Court Proceedings Through Video Link

- In the wake of increasing cases of coronavirus across Haryana, the state government has decided to hold departmental inquiry proceedings and proceedings of revenue courts through video conferencing. A detailed set of guidelines were issued Friday to avoid piling up of pending departmental inquiries and revenue court cases across the state.

### Why the Need for Video Conferencing?

The government has realised that the coronavirus pandemic "is estimated to last for a long time", which is "hampering the ends of justice to be served by the pending inquiries and revenue matters". A government order reads, "Therefore, keeping in view of the of the present condition and the principles of justice, equity and fair conclusion, the government has decided that the online proceedings by way of video conferencing should be restored for



speedy disposal of such proceedings, in such exceptional circumstances, which may include pandemic, natural calamities, circumstances implicating law and order or any other condition which the inquiry officer/presiding officer may deem it fit for such proceedings by the way of video conferencing”.

### What Will Be the New Procedure?

The concerned department (department that entrusts the inquiry to the inquiry officer) will appoint coordinators – one being at the inquiry point (the place where the inquiry officer physically holds proceedings), and others being at the remote points (the place where any delinquent or witness are required to be present, appear through a video link). The alleged delinquent and the witnesses scheduled to appear in a particular proceeding will have to be ready at the remote point 30 minutes prior to the scheduled inquiry. No unauthorised person shall be allowed to enter the video conference room while inquiry in progress. The person being examined will not be prompted, tutored, coaxed, induced or coerced in any manner by any person and that the person being examined will not refer to any document script or device without the permission of the inquiry officer. The coordinators will also conduct a trial video conferencing preferably 30 minutes prior to scheduled video conferencing in order to ensure that all the technical systems are in working condition at both, the inquiry point and the remote point. If required by the witness, the inquiry officer will also give sufficient notice in advance, setting out the schedule of VC and in appropriate cases may transmit transfer non-editable digital scanned copies of all or any part of the record of the proceedings to the official email account of the coordinator of the concerned remote point.

### How Will the Officers Get Reference Material Pertaining to An Inquiry?

Before the scheduled video conference date, the coordinator at the inquiry point will ensure that the coordinator at the remote point receives the certified copies, print out or a soft copy of the non-editable scanned copies of all or any part of the record of proceedings which may be required for recording of statements. However, these will be permitted to be used by the delinquent and witness only with the permission of the inquiry officer.

### How Will Summons Be Served to Alleged Delinquents or Witnesses?

Summons issued to a witness, who is to be examined through VC, will mention the date, time and venue of the concerned remote point and will direct the witness to attend in person. The existing rules regarding service of summons and the consequences for non-attendance, as provided in the Haryana Civil Services (Punishment and Appeal) Rules, 2016, will apply with respect to service of summons for proceedings conducted by the way of video conferencing.

### How Will the Persons Be Examined During Inquiry?

The coordinator at remote point will check the identity of the witness, prior to the examination in such video conference. The inquiry officer will obtain signatures of the person being examined on the transcript once the examination is concluded. The signed transcript will form part of the record of the inquiry proceedings. The coordinator, at the inquiry point, will dispatch the recorded statement of the person preferably within three days to the coordinator at the remote point.





## What If the Alleged Delinquent or Witness Demands Any Document Related to Inquiry Proceedings?

During the course of an examination of a person at a remote point by video conference, if it is necessary to show a document to the person, the Inquiry Officer may permit the document to be shown in the following manner – if the document is at the inquiry point, by transmitting a copy or the image of the document to the remote point electronically. The Inquiry Officer will use facilities recommended for video conference in draft model rules framed in this regard by the title of Rules for Video Conference for Courts circulated by Registrar General, Punjab and Haryana High Court to all the district and Sessions Judge in the state of Haryana, Punjab and UT. The Inquiry Officer, Presiding Officer and Department Representative will remain present at inquiry point.

## Owning Up to Criminalization in Politics (Trilochan Sastry - Founder-Chairman, Association for Democratic Reforms, And Professor, IIM Bangalore)

→ A February 2020 Supreme Court judgment on criminalisation in politics may have far-reaching consequences for Indian democracy. It will first be implemented in the coming Bihar elections in October 2020. The Court has asked the political parties to state “the reasons for such selection, as also as to why other individuals without criminal antecedents could not be selected as candidates.” If a political party fails to comply, it would be “... in contempt of this Court’s orders/directions.” In other words, the political party and its leadership would for the first time have to publicly own up to criminalisation of politics. They had been denying it all these years. Earlier orders state that (a) each candidate shall submit a sworn affidavit giving financial details and criminal cases; (b) each candidate shall inform the political party in writing of criminal cases against him or her; and (c) the party shall put up on its website and on social media as well as publish in newspapers the names and details of such candidates. Why did the Court pass such an order? The judgment notes that “In 2004, 24% of the Members of Parliament had criminal cases pending against them; in 2009, that went up to 30%; in 2014 to 34%; and in 2019 as many as 43% of MPs had criminal cases pending against them.” India is the only democratic country with a free press where we find a problem of this dimension.

## An Ever-Present Crisis

As politics dominates the bureaucracy, and reins in business, civil society and the media, we need governance that is free of the “criminal” virus. Capability is not sufficient. The intent to do public service is also required. The British were capable, but we still did not want them. Today, it is not about any party, it is about the political system. The result has been that we get bad governance, and survey after survey show that people around the country are unhappy with the quality of governance. Given limited choices, they vote as best as they can. But **no matter how many parties are changed, governance does not really improve, a few exceptions apart. Using money power to buy MLAs and MPs sometimes makes a mockery of election outcomes. Meanwhile, electoral bonds bring secrecy back into political funding. Several laws and court judgments have not helped much, as the data show.** One reason is lack of enforcement of laws and judgments. It is also not clear what penalty would be imposed if the recent orders are not followed. Would the law enforcement agencies act vigorously to ensure that the guilty are prosecuted? Would any top political leader responsible



for not complying be found guilty? Would an election be set aside? Without such action, will there be change?

### Being Vigilant

Therefore, in the coming Bihar elections we need to be far more vigilant. This includes monitoring the affidavits of candidates, working with the Election Commission to ensure that information is promptly available on their websites, and widely circulating this information to voters using all the social media tools available. It also includes monitoring compliance with the Supreme Court judgment to see if details of tainted candidates are promptly put up on their websites, and on their social media handles, along with proper reasons for giving them ticket. The Court has said that “winnability” cannot be cited as a reason. Voters also need to be vigilant about misuse of money, gifts and other inducements during elections. **Till we realise that people who bribe us for votes cannot be trusted, change will be very slow.** Fortunately, an ever-growing number of voters and organisations are joining in this work of cleansing politics. Meanwhile, the waters will be muddied with fake news, trolling, and fanciful claims. This may drown out the little that citizens can do. Yet there is hope. Ensuring prosecution with public pressure may help. If one political leader is hauled up for giving ticket to large numbers of tainted candidates, something positive may happen. A root cause diagnosis shows that political party leaders are squarely responsible for this state of affairs as they field such candidates. Mahatma Gandhi taught us that to solve a problem, we have to confront the real issue. The Court order is to be welcomed. But **we are still unable to ban people with serious criminal charges from contesting elections. While there are various arguments for and against such a move, the Court has dismissed several petitions calling for a ban due to legal and technical constraints. Meanwhile, the political system is unwilling to change the law or the system. Politics for now has been captured by those who want power for its own sake.** In conclusion, we may not see dramatic changes in the quality of candidates. Campaigns may continue to be more and more personal and even abusive. We may not see a big change in money power, or in buying of MLAs post-elections in the case of a hung Assembly. But all these steps are required, however insignificant they may seem. **All the dozen and more Supreme Court judgments on electoral reforms since 2002 are in fact responses to citizen initiatives. Not one initiative has come from the political system.** The strategy so far has been to methodically try and break down the solid wall of corruption. When the dam will be breached and the pure waters of a new India flow over the land cannot be predicted.

### Reform with Caution

→ The formation of a ‘Committee for the Reform of Criminal Laws’ by the Union Home Ministry with an apparently short time frame and limited scope for public consultation has caused considerable disquiet among jurists, lawyers and those concerned with the state of criminal justice in the country. Few would disagree with the idea that the current laws governing crime, investigation and trial require meaningful reform. There have been several attempts in recent decades to overhaul the body of criminal law, comprising the **Indian Penal Code of 1860** vintage, the **Code of Criminal Procedure** that was rewritten in **1973**, and the **Indian Evidence Act** that dates back to **1872**. However, comprehensive legal reform is something that requires careful consideration and a good deal of deliberation. One criticism against the **latest Committee** is that it has begun its work in the midst of a pandemic. **This may not be the ideal time for wide consultations.** Activists and lawyers functioning in the hinterland may be at a particular disadvantage in formulating their opinions. The panel’s mandate appears quite



broad: “to recommend reforms in the criminal laws of the country in a principled, effective, and efficient manner which ensures the safety and security of the individual, the community and the nation; and which prioritises the constitutional values of justice, dignity and the inherent worth of the individual.” This is vague and open to multiple interpretations. It is also not clear why the Law Commission has not been vested with this task.

The lack of diversity in what is an **all-male, Delhi-based committee** has also been adversely commented upon. **In 2003, the Justice V.S. Malimath Committee on reforms in the criminal justice system** had come up with some far-reaching suggestions, some of which became part of changes in criminal law. However, it also attracted criticism over the suggestion that the standard of evidence be reduced from “beyond reasonable doubt” to “clear and convincing”. The **Justice Verma** panel came up with a comprehensive and progressive report on reforms needed in laws concerning crimes against women in 2013 in barely one month, but its speed was probably due to the limited mandate it had. **If at all criminal law is to be reformed, there should be a genuine attempt to reach a wide consensus on ways to speed up trials, protect witnesses, address the travails of victims, improve investigative mechanisms and, most importantly, eliminate torture.** An impression should not gain ground that wide-ranging changes are sought to be made within a short time frame and based on limited inputs from the public. Reform is best achieved through a cautious and inclusive approach.

## Crime as Punishment

→ The Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) police’s account of the killing of Kanpur gangster Vikas Dubey on Friday, even if taken at face value, is a startling admission of serious ineptitude. But the official narrative, as it stands, stretches the bounds of credulity to an astonishing extent. The possibility that his death is officially sanctioned retribution for the murder of eight policemen who were part of the team that went to arrest him on July 3 is hard to dismiss out of hand. Without a doubt, Dubey’s death in an ‘exchange of fire’ while he was ‘trying to flee’ after the police vehicle in which he was being taken ‘met with an accident’ is also extremely convenient for many; it puts a lid on the sordid tale of his violent rise to power and influence, which was nourished by a wider network of patrons, including some in the police force. A hardened criminal, who had 62 cases against him before his gang allegedly shot dead eight policemen last week, was supposedly being transported without handcuffs; he snatched weapons from those escorting him, according to the police version of the incident. Indeed, this is no more than a self-indictment of the state police, whose conduct has raised far too many questions in the recent past. There is no good explanation for driving such a suspect through the night across more than 600 km from Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh where he was arrested on Thursday. The brutal last episode of Dubey’s serial crimes should be no defence if the shooting turns out to be an extra-judicial killing.

Any demand of probity and accountability in police and military is often contested on the supposed ground that it emerges from a support for criminals, terrorists or enemies of the state by influential political and public figures. There is no question that crimes such as those Dubey was involved in must be met with exemplary punishment. The process of establishing guilt and executing punishment is not an incidental part of justice, but its integral soul. A fair and transparent trial cannot be dispensed with in order to satisfy cries for vengeance. **Social sanction of instant justice by state agents might have leached into institutions that are mandated to enforce the rule of law. Last year, when the Cyberabad police shot dead four people accused in a case of gang rape and murder, people celebrated in the streets. The courts and the National Human Rights Commission have also shown a lenient approach in**



such cases. Goading the police on to deliver instant justice, or even tolerating such behaviour, creates an atmosphere of impunity that could lead to murder of innocent people as happened with the custodial deaths in Tamil Nadu. Support for such killings by the police will not make a society more just. Mob justice is no justice at all. When law enforcers short-circuit due process, the damage to state institutions is severe and long-lasting.

### Despite Vikas Dubey Killing, Why Police Reforms Are Unlikely to Happen

→ The killing of Vikas Dubey and the chain of events leading up to it throw a spotlight on governance in Uttar Pradesh and police reform more generally. In his column, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, contributing editor of The Indian Express, explains why actual police reforms are unlikely to happen notwithstanding the current focus on Dubey. "The entire train of events in this episode will lead to demands for police reform: Protect police from political interference, invest in police training, shore up the judicial system. But the truth about police reform is that it is what Gandhi said about western civilisation, a nice idea. No one actually wants it for the following reason," he writes. For one, if you don't trust the police, do you actually want to make it more efficient? If the structure of your existence, as is the case with hundreds of millions of poor people, inhabits zones of state-created illegality, would you actually want to give police more enforcement power? "Disempowered groups, who already suffer most at the hands of the police fear an effective police force even more; whatever little margins of negotiation they might have would disappear. And the privileged would rather have a negotiable system," he explains. Second, "the police have a strange position in a democracy. It is an instrument of political power to channelize patronage". No ruling party wants to give that up, so there is no incentive to reform. Neither does the Opposition because they may be in power one day and might want to use the same instrument one day. "It is because an ad hoc rule of law structure, open to negotiation by community identity, money, violence and connections, actually fragments power in a democracy. No one wants to give the state an actual monopoly over violence," says Mehta. "Many criminals, like Dubey, subvert the rule of law. But people see them as nodes of power, which are often deployed in resistance to the state. Police reform would mean subverting this entire moral economy of fragmented power". Lastly, Mehta points to the peculiar status of the police as "expendables". For instance, in UP, contrary to global trends, more than twice as many policemen were killed on duty as the number of civilians killed by police. Most of the police deaths were not at the hands of criminals but a result of neglect and poor working conditions. "So it is little wonder that with no real constituency of police reform, the line between the criminal and the state will remain blurred, as it is in UP," he concludes.

### Gangster of Kanpur

→ The killing of eight policemen by a criminal gang in Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh on Friday bears the violent signature of a dysfunctional society and an alarming emaciation of governance in India's most populous State. A history-sheeter who has at least five dozen cases of murder, extortion, kidnapping and other violent crimes against him, waited in ambush at his own home for the arrival of the police party that was seeking to arrest him. One of the dead was in his early 20s and had just started his career; another one was nearing retirement. These were needless and avoidable deaths: reports suggest that the gangster had received information about the impending raid from his sources within the police. The administration responded to the tragic setback by bulldozing the gang leader's house and vehicles parked in the premises. Straddling the worlds of government contracts, politics and crime, the



gangster **Vikas Dubey is emblematic of the nexus between politics, crime and policing in many parts of the country.** The circumstances that went into the making of this incident and the response of the administration all point to the same morbid affliction that can be fatal to any democratic society – the collapse of the rule of law. Criminal gangs shielded by politics and police forces that bend to caste, communal and political vested interests form a malevolent circuit that perpetuates itself and rewards its patrons. These individuals in uniform ended up paying with their lives for this.

The police force is the coercive arm of the state often in direct contact with ordinary citizens. The quality of policing therefore has an outsized impact on the overall quality of governance. Poor training, an alienating and dehumanising work environment, corruption and a lack of resources add to the crisis in policing. **Politicians in power often use the police the same way politicians out of power use gangsters.** Not surprisingly, there are times when the police mirror in character the criminal gangs they chase down. U.P. is not unique, but these maladies reveal themselves on a petrifying scale in the State. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has a declared 'tough on crime' policy but this has sometimes meant that the police resort to shortcuts that subvert the legal course. The State has had 5,178 encounters in which 103 suspects were killed and 17,745 surrendered in a little over the last two years. Questionable coercive measures such as collective punishment and criminalisation of political protest and suppression of freedom of expression have also been mainstreamed as regular policing tools. This tragic loss of their own personnel in what should have been a routine law enforcement operation must fire up the U.P. police to uphold professionalism, cleanse its ranks of the corrupt and the inefficient, and liberate the State from the fear of gangsters.

## Kerala Gold Smuggling Case Explained: Diplomatic Cargo, An Absconding Woman and

### A Consulate Under Scanner

- The seizure of 30 kilogram of smuggled gold from a diplomatic cargo addressed to the UAE Consulate-General Office in Thiruvananthapuram last Sunday has emerged as a major controversy in Kerala, where smuggling of the yellow metal from the Middle East is a routine affair. But what makes this seizure, **worth Rs 15 crore**, cling on to the headlines is that the **gold was found in diplomatic cargo, which enjoys immunity from routine Customs examination.** The players behind the racket and their alleged links with senior government officials have also added to the interest around the episode. On Tuesday, **M Sivasankaran was removed as the principal secretary to Kerala Chief Minister, after the senior IAS official was found in the close network of an alleged key player of the smuggling racket, Swapna Suresh, who had earlier worked as executive secretary at the UAE Consulate-General's office.**

### Gold in Diplomatic Cargo

The stash of gold was part of diplomatic cargo from Dubai which reached the Thiruvananthapuram international airport. As per law, the diplomatic cargo should not be subjected to routine Customs examination and should be cleared as early as possible. The cargo was listed as bathroom fittings, noodles, biscuits and dates, sent from Sharjah-based **Al Zatar Spices.** But the Customs already has specific inputs about concealment of gold. Sarith Kumar, who had earlier worked as a local PRO for the Consulate-General office in Thiruvananthapuram, turned to claim the cargo under the pretext that he was still with the Consulate. The Consulate had already informed the Customs that Kumar had been removed as local PRO a year back and had not been assigned to get the diplomatic cargo cleared. **The**



Customs did not release the cargo, but decided to open the consignment in the presence of the officials of the UAE Consulate; another condition for examining any diplomatic cargo.

### The Arrest

Customs arrested Sarith Kumar, who had worked as the Consulate PRO from 2016 till a year back. A graduate, Kumar had earlier worked in Dubai as an asset officer at Commercial Bank International. He had also worked with Future Group India for a short stint 12 years back. Meanwhile, Suresh, who is currently on the run, filed an application for anticipatory bail before the Kerala High Court. In her petition, she claimed she was being falsely implicated in the case and that she had contacted the Customs officer at the airport on the directions of Rashid Khamis Al Shamel, who holds acting charge of the UAE Consulate in Thiruvananthapuram, regarding the delay in his consignment.

### Who is Swapna Suresh?

Suresh, who went into hiding a day before the Customs decided to open the diplomatic cargo, joined the UAE Consulate-General Office when it opened in the state capital in 2016, with her exposure to the emirates and fluency in Arabic standing her in good stead. As the Kerala government maintains a good rapport with UAE, home to lakhs of expats from Kerala, the local staff of the Consulate rose into prominence. Suresh moved in social, bureaucratic and political circles, at times even projecting herself as a diplomat. In 2017, when the Sharjah ruler was on a four-day official visit to Kerala, the consulate executive secretary moved along with the dignitaries and attended several official functions. A year back, she was sacked from the Consulate General's office over her criminal case. Kumar was also sacked around the same time. However, thanks to her networking, Suresh managed a job as business development manager with Kerala State Information Technology Infrastructure Limited (KSITIL) with senior IAS officer and IT secretary M Sivasankar as its chairman. Sivasankar was then Chief Minister's Principal Secretary, a key post in the CMO. After the smuggling scandal broke out, it was revealed that Sivasankar had recommended Suresh's name through transnational consultant PricewaterhouseCoopers for the post of manager at KSITIL. While KSITIL officials claimed Suresh, a graduate, was qualified for the job, her brother living abroad told the media she hadn't even completed the state school board exam. One of her former colleagues at a travel agency has also doubted about her qualification saying she had completed only Class XII. However, this is not the first case against Suresh. In 2013, when she joined as an HR executive with AISATS, an airport service firm, in Thiruvananthapuram. It came to light later that she had conspired with another senior executive at the firm to forge a false complaint of sexual abuse against an airport staff. She had prepared as many as 17 complaints, in many bogus names, against the person, who later complained to the state police seeking a probe into the conspiracy. Suresh was listed as an accused, but the probe was derailed, allegedly because of her influence. Suresh, a resident of Dubai, is currently living with her husband and two children, the younger son is studying in third standard and the elder daughter is studying for the second-year degree course.

### The Probe

The Customs department is now investigating to identify others involved in this smuggling network, including whether the racket had any support from other staff at the Consulate-General's office. So far, they have arrested only Kumar and have been looking for Suresh, who is now absconding. Customs officials said they suspected the role of the well-orchestrated smuggling lobby operating in the Middle East behind this incident also. "The smuggling



racket is always one and the same, in all previous cases of gold smuggling. They use different people and strange ways of concealing the gold in different forms in baggage. We would come across a new method of smuggling only after they completed several successful missions. Then, they (the racket) would explore other venues," said a senior officer.

- The decision of the Ministry of Home Affairs to assign the probe pertaining to the seizure of 30 kg of gold from a diplomatic cargo meant for the UAE Consulate to the National Investigation Agency is a significant development in the state's long history of gold smuggling from the Middle East. Tonnes of gold have been smuggled into Kerala over the years, finding their way into jewellery showrooms as finished ornaments, evading import duties and other taxes in the entire course of journey. The Customs and DRI have seized gold and arrested carriers, but the big sharks who run the international trade have seldom been brought to book.

### How Big Is the Gold Smuggling into Kerala?

According to Customs sources, the Customs and DRI seized 550 kg of smuggled gold in Kerala in 2019-20. This was an all-time record, even though the amount itself would just be a small portion of the actual gold smuggled into the state. Still, this was 15 per cent of all the smuggled gold seized in India, sources said. In 2018-19, 401 kg of gold was seized in the state.

### Why Is There Demand for Smuggled Gold?

As per the present market value of gold in India, 1 kg of the smuggled yellow metal would fetch a profit of Rs 5 lakh on import duty alone. The tax evasion would continue till the smuggled gold lands in jewellery showrooms as ornaments, thus enabling the dealers to make huge profits.

### What Is The Modus Operandi Of the Smugglers?

The modus operandi hasn't changed much over the years. Customs sources revealed that the carriers, who are usually the people arrested, never give out their links in Kerala or the Gulf countries. "Once a passenger is identified as a gold carrier and consignment is concealed in his or her body or baggage, the gangs would share their photographs to sources waiting outside the airports or fixed places to take away the smuggled gold," the source explained. So, the carriers would be in the dark about the person in Kerala who the consignment is meant for and it is up to the person waiting to receive the gold to identify the carrier based on his or her photograph. "So, even if we nab a carrier, he would not be able to divulge about the person waiting to take away the gold let alone the end beneficiary of the smuggled gold. Once the carrier is caught with gold, the next chains in the racket vanish," the source said, adding how this has helped the big kingpins remain safe. The sources said the smugglers have also deployed celebrities and film personalities to carry the smuggled gold from one centre to another.

### Why Has the Customs Not Been Able to Cap the Smuggling of Gold?

One big hurdle for Indian Customs authorities is their limitations in investigate in the Middle East. On several occasions, the agencies have issued lookout circular against the key players in the smuggling. But even when these are live, many suspects reach Kerala after crossing the India-Nepal border by road after landing in Kathmandu airport. The lax immigration and border checking at border crossing make it a safer entry point for these players compared to



the strict vigil maintained at Kerala airports. After entering India from Nepal, they can reach Kerala by train or road without being noticed by the law enforcing agencies, sources said.

## Peace Under Process, Tension in The Air

→ Nagaland Governor R.N. Ravi did not name any group when he, in a letter to Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio on June 16, said the legitimacy of the constitutionally-established State government was being challenged on a daily basis by more than half a dozen “armed gangs that question the sovereignty and integrity of the nation”. The Governor, who took charge in July 2019, pointed out instances of “gunpoint extortions” for siphoning off a large chunk of government funds meant for development. The Governor’s comments have threaten the tenuous peace process with the militant groups responding sharply to him. The Working Committee of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), a conglomerate of seven extremist groups, denied indulging in extortion but admitted to accepting “nominal contribution” that has been “mandatory” since the “inception of our struggle”. Some of the constituents of the umbrella group are breakaway factions of the NSCN (K), or the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, formed by the Myanmar-based Shangnyu Shangwang Khaplang. The NNPGs were not the first to counter Mr. Ravi. Their bigger rival NSCN (IM), named after founders Isak Chishi Swu, who died in June 2016, and Thuingaleng Muivah, reacted first by insisting it does not extort people but levies “genuine taxes” on them. “It is the inherent right of any sovereign people and nation to collect taxes from the people and commercial establishments... Taxes have been the source of sustenance that has brought the Naga political movement this far. This was legitimately acknowledged by the earlier interlocutors and Indian authorities and it was never an issue,” the NSCN (IM) said in its defence. The letter from Mr. Ravi, who was appointed as the Centre’s interlocutor for the Naga peace process in August 2014 for his hold on the affairs of the northeast, was unprecedented. Those acquainted with extremism in Nagaland and adjoining States where various factions of the NSCN have been active know much of what he said was familiar. The extremist groups have been collecting “taxes” or “donations” from people in their areas of operation before and after the ceasefire agreement with the NSCN (IM) in mid-1997.

## Special Responsibility

Mr. Rio’s coalition government, of which the Bharatiya Janata Party is a constituent, objected to the Governor’s reminder of Article 371A (1)(b) of the Constitution that gives the Governor of Nagaland the special responsibility with respect to law and order in the State. In a statement on July 2, the State government pointed out that the procedure of taking the Governor’s approval for the transfer and posting of senior officers was ended through an Assembly resolution in December 2013. It also said any decision to put the clock back “in the guise of discharging special responsibilities” under the







said Article “would be against the principles of democracy” and anti-people. But what stood out in the government’s rebuttal was the complaint about the Governor’s reference to “armed gangs”. Terming the organisations such, it said, “may not be congenial to the achievement of lasting peace, which is the desire of both the Central and the state governments”. By using the term vis-a-vis the peace process, both the Governor and the Rio government made it clear which group mattered the most – the NSCN (IM).

### The Naga Club

Mostly comprising the Nagas of Manipur, the NSCN (IM) is 32 years old. But it has its roots in the conscription of some 2,000 Nagas by the British as labourers and porters for salvage work and road-building in France during First World War in 1917. On a foreign land, the Nagas, from disparate and warring tribes, developed a bond and the survivors who returned in May-June 1918 formed the Naga Club, along with some educated locals in October that year. The club aroused a sense of Naga nationalism. In 1929, leaders of the club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission, stating that the Nagas should be left alone to “determine for ourselves as in ancient times”. The Naga Club was later overshadowed by the Naga Hills District Tribal Council, formed in 1945. A year later, it metamorphosed into a political organisation called the Naga National Council (NNC), which campaigned for sovereignty and secession of the Naga Hills, then a district of Assam, from India. Under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo, the Nagas declared independence on August 14, 1947. A referendum organised by the NNC in May 1951 showed “99%” people supported an “independent” Nagaland. The NNC’s movement intensified after it boycotted the 1952 general election. As New Delhi deployed the armed forces, the strength of the underground Nagas increased. In March 1956, the NNC formed a parallel government and hoisted the flag of the “republic”, while the radical members floated the underground Naga Federal Army. The intensity of the armed movement lessened with the signing of the 16-Point Agreement between the Centre and a group of the people’s representatives in 1960, leading to Nagaland’s statehood in December 1963. The movement, however, continued intermittently. The hopes of peace were raised when the Centre signed the Shillong Agreement with a moderate faction of the NNC in 1975. But a dissident group led by Muivah, Swu and Khaplang, who had been trained in China, rejected the pact outright. They went underground again, spending much of their time in Myanmar and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland in January 1980. Differences surfaced within the outfit over initiating a dialogue process with the Indian government. It split into the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) in April 1988 and often engaged in fratricidal battles.

### Feelers from Delhi

In 1997, the NSCN (IM) received feelers from New Delhi for peace talks and a ceasefire agreement was signed. The NSCN (K) followed suit four years later but it unilaterally abrogated the ceasefire in 2015. At least three of its breakaway factions, however, formed the NNPGs to join the peace process two years later. In the 23 years since the signing of the truce pact, the NSCN (IM), dominated by the Tankhuls of Manipur, has held more than 100 rounds of peace talks with the Centre within and outside the country. One of its most contentious demands was the creation of a unified Naga homeland, called ‘Greater Nagalim’ by integrating the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal with Nagaland. The other north-eastern States are opposed to the idea of the pan-Naga homeland, and are wary of the Framework Agreement the NSCN (IM) leaders signed at Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s residence in August 2015. The contents of the agreement have not been revealed.



The NSCN (IM) said Governor Ravi's letter reflected the intention of an interlocutor who wanted to complicate and prolong the much-delayed peace process. There are reports that key NSCN (IM) leader Phungthing Shimrang and his loyalists have gone underground again for a return to the pre-1997 days if the Nagas do not get the "honourable solution" they seek.

## Green-Lighting Ecological Decimation Amidst A Pandemic (Chitragada Choudhury - An Independent Journalist Working on Issues of The Environment; Aniket Aga Teaches Environmental Studies at Ashoka University)

➔ Few countries are witnessing such severe direct and indirect devastation on account of the COVID-19 pandemic as India. Yet, there is little attention on the roots of our vulnerability. It would be a mistake to approach the pandemic as a bolt from the blue, or an aberration that will eventually pass for 'normalcy' to return. Our vulnerabilities lie not just in the absence of equitable access to food, healthcare and housing but go to the heart of global development models that sacrifice environmental resilience for limitless economic growth and wealth accumulation. The 21st century has seen multiple lethal epidemics. Two were serious enough for the World Health Organization to designate as pandemics. The accelerating destruction of wild habitats, forests and diversified food systems for urbanisation, mining, and industry means pathogens which were once largely confined to animals and plants in the wild are now better positioned to infect humans. The expansion of monoculture cropping and livestock farming systems, coupled with dense human settlements dependent on narrow diets of global commodity crops and meat, are eliminating the biodiversity and distance barriers that lent resilience to the human species and domesticated plants and animals. A virulent pathogen can then trigger an epidemic that much more easily. As long as we do not address this march to unsustainability, we will remain vulnerable to pandemic outbreaks.

### Drawing the Wrong Lesson

It is troubling then that our governments are drawing the opposite lesson from the COVID-19 challenge. Through the lockdown, 'expert' bodies of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) have considered, and in many cases cleared, multiple industrial, mining and infrastructure proposals in critical wildlife habitats, and life and livelihood-sustaining forests. These include the Etalin Hydropower Project in the biodiversity-rich Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh; a coal mine in Assam's Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve; diamond mining in the Panna forested belt; a coal mine to be operated by Adani Enterprises with a coal-fired power plant in Odisha's Talabira forests; a limestone mine in the Gir National Park; and a geo-technical investigation in the Sharavathi Lion-Tailed Macaque Sanctuary in Karnataka. As the environment site Mongabay reported last month, authorities considered these projects via video-conferencing in contravention of environmental laws, and without all necessary documents or site inspections, in many cases spending just 10 minutes on a proposal.

### Draft Environment Impact Assessment

No meaningful public consultation can take place amidst a pandemic and repeated lockdown. Yet this did not stop the MoEFCC from pressing ahead with a June 30 deadline for feedback on its draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification. The Delhi High Court later extended the deadline to August 11. As per the draft, starting a project before obtaining environmental approvals will no longer be a violation, and it can be regularised



**post-facto.** Public hearings are riddled with problems and their content routinely ignored while awarding clearances, but they remain the only opportunity of voice for project-affected peoples and environmental and social experts. Instead of strengthening them, the notification proposes to exempt a wider range of projects from hearings, including those which authorities can arbitrarily designate as 'strategic'. The draft even allows for a class of projects to secure clearance without putting out any information in the public domain. Despite demands from environmentalists, the draft notification says virtually nothing on improving monitoring, and compliance with clearance conditions and safeguards. Safeguarding the environment and front-line communities seems nowhere on the government's agenda. Rather, its priorities are "unleashing coal", as tweeted by the Coal Minister, and green clearances for "seamless economic growth", as tweeted by the Environment Ministry in the lockdown weeks. The sum effect of all the above moves will be further environmental degradation. It takes a steadfast commitment to ecological illiteracy to argue that wanton environmental destruction will deliver never-ending, seamless growth. These giant leaps backward will not make us Atmanirbhar (self-reliant). Rather, they will further endanger habitats and lives, and intensify our vulnerability to infectious diseases and related socio-economic shocks.

[The Search for Unity in A Moment of Crisis \(Najeeb Jung - Former Vice Chancellor Of The Jamia Millia Islamia And Former Lt. Governor Of Delhi And Prateep K. Lahiri - Former Revenue Secretary To The Government Of India And Former Executive Director Of The Asian Development Bank, Manila\)](#)

- ➔ It is often believed that a crisis brings out the best in Indians. We have witnessed people selflessly coming to the aid of the affected during natural calamities. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case when the pandemic hit India. First, we failed in dealing adequately with the tremendous distress caused to migrant labourers. Second, we failed to make the fight against COVID-19 a common endeavour, irrespective of caste or community. Instead, sadly, the discourse was communalised, with one community being targeted even though its members were as much victims of the pandemic as were others.

### [Impact of The Lockdown](#)

The government proved inept in not anticipating the adverse impact of the lockdown on millions of migrant labourers, who were overnight deprived of their means of livelihood. It failed to foresee, and therefore mitigate, the adverse consequences of its sudden decision. While extensions of the lockdown were rightly preceded by consultations with the State governments, keeping the initiation of the lockdown a secret from all the stakeholders defied logic. In addition to the distress, the fact that this exodus of migrants to their homes would cause the infection to spread to the rural hinterland was not contemplated. Much later, after untold sufferings had been inflicted on the migrants and the Supreme Court had taken cognisance of the problem, the Centre and the States woke up to facilitate the return journeys of the migrants. This too was poorly managed. In hindsight, it is evident that the strategies employed to control the spread of the disease have achieved little success – India today has the third-highest number of COVID-19 cases. As industrialist Rajiv Bajaj wryly quipped, the wrong curve – the GDP curve instead of the pandemic one – has been flattened. The issue of spread of infection impacted communal harmony. The Tablighi Jamaat was mercilessly flogged, especially by certain people and sections of the electronic media, in order to profile



Muslims adversely. The fact that Tablighi Jamaat is an orthodox sect of Muslims and does not represent the community was ignored. So was the fact that the venue of the March congregation was about 50 metres from the Nizamuddin police station. Further, why no action has still been taken against the head of the Jamaat remains a mystery. It is not implausible that the focus on the Jamaat was engineered to shift the focus away from the plight of the migrant labourers, who were suffering and even dying. Certain TV channels were so irresponsible that they went to the extent of presenting the murder of two sadhus in Maharashtra as a communal incident even though this wasn't the case. Unfortunately, even prior to the lockdown, with an ongoing agitation, the atmosphere was fraught with tension. Muslims were aggrieved by the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, that discriminated against Muslim refugees with regard to grant of citizenship, as well as by the plan to prepare a National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was soon followed by the announcement to prepare the National Population Register (NPR). While the protests against the CAA, NRC and NPR were snowballing, the pandemic hit us and was soon followed by the lockdown. The protests had tested both the people's and the administration's patience, particularly because of the inconvenience caused by blocked roads. Even some of those who believed that the CAA, NRC and NPR were iniquitous were beginning to lose patience. The failure to initiate dialogue with the protesters and the heavy-handedness of the police could well have been a tipping point. If the lockdown had not been imposed, protests on the scale in the U.S. could have happened in India. While the fight against the pandemic was an opportunity to unite us, sadly, the Tablighi Jamaat issue was used to profile Muslims. This became so overt that it attracted international opprobrium with some West Asian countries and Canada taking action against overseas Indians engaging in Islamophobia. In a TV interview, historian Yuval Noah Harari said it was dangerous to pin the blame for the spread of the virus on Muslim minorities and stressed the need to make the fight against the pandemic a united endeavour.

### India's Brand of Secularism

Profiling any community is alien to India's secular tradition. The long history of heterodoxy in India has contributed to democracy and the brand of secularism and tolerance that is unique to India. Through centuries people have come to India and made it their home. To quote Firaq: "Sar zamiin-e Hind par Aqwaam-e Aalam ke Firaq qaafile baste gaye, Hindostan banta gayaa (Caravans from all over the world settled in this land and shaped India)". The emergence of Vedic religion (Hinduism) dates back to second millennium BCE. Buddhism and Jainism emerged in sixth century BCE. Jews came after the fall of Jerusalem. Early Christians came and settled in the south. They were followed by Parsis and Baha'is, persecuted in their homelands. Muslim Arab traders came and settled soon after the rise of Islam. Then came Muslim conquerors. Emperors like Ashoka and Akbar were exemplars in promoting religious harmony. Inter-religious tolerance, embedded in our life and culture, is reflected throughout our history in the writings of Bulleh Shah, Nanak, Kabir, Rahim, Amir Khusrau, Ravi Das and others. Sufi dargahs are visited by lakhs of non-Muslims. Secularism is based on the pluralist and syncretic character of the society with Sarva Dharma Sambhava being the guiding principle. That is the backdrop in which independent India's chosen destiny was to be a non-theocratic state. Today, we stand at the crossroads with the fundamental values of the Constitution under challenge. Our best universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jadavpur University and Aligarh Muslim University are pilloried, and their student leaders harassed. Instances of the police being partisan are seen, for instance, in the slanted nature of the investigations pertaining to the riots in north-east Delhi. The scourge of COVID-19 is haunting us, the economy is in free fall, our borders are under siege. India has a



glorious history of complete unity during crises. If ever there was a time to stand together and be counted as one, this is it. To ensure this, the country must provide even-handed and mature treatment to Dalits, Muslims, Christians and all minorities. This is not appeasement but an accepted form of progressive thought, so that all citizens get an opportunity to progress as equal partners. This is never easy in societies where the size of the cake is not adequate. It takes a large heart and a lot of education for people to appreciate this.

### A Backward Community

Muslims comprise not only India's largest religious minority but also one of the poorest in the modern world. They remain educationally backward. The Indian state, both in its secular and nationalist avatar, has played its part in perpetuating this backwardness. The community has produced some fine talent in different walks of life, whether in sports, music, art, cinema, or governance, from Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam to M.F. Husain, Bismillah Khan and Sania Mirza. Those who participated in the Tablighi Jamaat event are also part of the community, but they are not the only representatives of Islam. Today, as cases continue to rise in India, it is crucial to be objective and reasonable before we single out Muslims for the challenges we face.

### Positivity Rate on The Rise, Shows Prevalence of Disease

→ As the number of diagnostic tests for novel Coronavirus is increasing in the country, so is the positivity rate. This means a greater number of people, from among those who are being tested, are found to be infected with the disease. The positivity rate had crossed 6 per cent mark for the first time on June 20, and has risen swiftly thereafter. At present, the positivity rate is around 7.09 per cent. **Positivity rate is a good indicator to assess the prevalence of the disease in the community. The rise in positivity rate means that the growth in the number of confirmed cases is outpacing the growth in the tests being conducted. And this is happening mainly because the criteria for testing is still restrictive in most states.** As scientists have been pointing out, the more the number of tests that are carried out, greater would be the chances of finding infected cases. However, people are not being randomly tested. **Because of limited testing capacities, states are being selective in testing people. For example, many states are testing only people who are showing signs of symptoms, or those who are higher risk of attaining the disease, like the primary or secondary contacts of an already infected person.** Now, there is a much greater likelihood of these people testing positive, compared to other people. So, if the total number of tests are rising, but still only symptomatic cases, or those at high risk, are being tested, the positivity rate would progressively rise. In fact, **states that have restrictive criteria for tests have a much higher positivity rate.** An example is Maharashtra where the positivity rate is almost 19 per cent. Mumbai has an even higher positivity rate, of around 24 per cent. **As the testing criteria becomes more relaxed, the positivity rate is likely to decline.** Mumbai, for example, has declared that from now on, testing would be open for everyone, not just symptomatic cases, or those who have been prescribed a test by a physician. The number of tests being carried out in the country has seen a significant rise in the last two months. More than two lakh samples are being tested every day, and the cumulative number of tests crossed the one crore mark two days ago. But the growth in the number of cases has been more rapid. On Tuesday, about 22,750 new cases were detected across the country, only slightly higher than the previous day. More than 7.42 lakh people have so far been detected with the virus so far, of which more than 4.56 lakh have already recovered from the disease.



## India Gets Its First Plasma Bank: All You Wanted to Know About This Treatment for

### Covid-19

- On July 2, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal inaugurated India's first plasma bank at the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS) to ease access to plasma that is being used as a trial to treat Covid-19 patients. The bank will coordinate with patients who have recovered from Covid-19, and are eligible to donate plasma.

### What Is A Plasma Bank? Why Was It Set Up?

A plasma bank functions like a blood bank, and has been created specifically for those who are suffering from Covid-19, and have been advised the therapy by doctors. The facility has been set up at the ILBS, which will be the nodal centre for collection of plasma. In Delhi, seven hospitals have permission to conduct these trials on Covid-19 patients. These are All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Maulana Azad Medical College (MAMC) in coordination with Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS), Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, Batra Hospital, Lady Hardinge Medical College, Ram Manohar Lohia (RML) Hospital and Max Hospital Saket. "The rising demand for plasma among the patients pushed the government to set up a one-stop centre for the donors. Plasma was not easily available and the patient's attendants were running from pillar to post in search of plasma from a recovered patient. People were also scared of stepping into a Covid hospital, so we decided to set up in a non-Covid facility," said Dr S K Sarin, head of ILBS. In plasma therapy, the antibody rich plasma from a recovered patient is extracted and administered to a patient. The trials are trying to find out if the antibodies can help patients recover.

### So, Who Can Donate Plasma?

Those who had the disease, but have recovered at least 14 days before the donation can be considered – although doctors prefer a time of three weeks between recovery and donation. People between the ages of 18 and 60, and weighing not less than 50 kg are eligible. **Women who have given birth are not eligible, as the antibodies they produce during pregnancy (after being exposed to the blood of the foetus) can interfere with lung function.** People with comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer are also excluded. Once you reach the centre, a doctor will take a detailed medical history and conduct a physical examination (Height, Weight, Blood Pressure, Temperature, adequate veins for phlebotomy). The extensive checks and stringent eligibility conditions are among the reasons that finding an apt donor for Covid-19 patients is proving to be a problem. While the number of patients who have recovered in Delhi is around 63,000 at present, this figure was around 21,000 two weeks ago. Three weeks ago, it was around 13,000. The pool, therefore, is already small, and the stringent eligibility conditions mean more are excluded.

### What Test Are Carried Out Before Donating Plasma?

Laboratory tests are carried out to assess various conditions – serum protein and CBC, TTI testing for hepatitis B virus, hepatitis C virus, HIV, malaria, and syphilis – and for blood grouping and antibody screening. Serum Covid-19 specific IgG antibody concentration higher than 80 is preferred.



### How Can A Donor Contact the Bank?

A patient who is eligible and willing to donate plasma may call 1031 or WhatsApp details at 8800007722. A team of doctors will then get in touch with the patient to further confirm eligibility. A vehicle will be sent to the donor's home, or the government will reimburse transportation cost.

### Can A Patient's Family Directly Contact the Plasma Bank?

No. Each hospital should contact the plasma bank along with the details of the patient who is in need of plasma therapy. All Delhi hospitals will have to appoint a nodal officer who will be coordinating with the ILBS for plasma.

### How Many People Would Be Benefitted by One Person's Donation?

Each plasma donation would be used to treat 2 patients. The bank collects 500 ml of plasma, depending on weight.

### How Does Plasma Donation Differ from Blood Donation?

In plasma donation, as opposed to blood donation, only plasma is extracted and the other components of blood are returned to the body. "Blood contains several components, including red blood cells, platelets, white blood cells, and plasma. During a whole blood donation, donors typically donate a pint (about a half litre) of blood. **During automated donation (apheresis), you will be connected to the apheresis machine using a fully disposable one-time use apheresis kit. The process uses a single needle. The machine will selectively retain the plasma and return all red blood cells and other components of blood. All plasma proteins lost by you due to donation will be formed again in 24-72 hours,**" Dr Sarin said.

### How Often Can A Recovered Patient Donate Plasma?

500 ml of plasma can be donated every two weeks, while blood can be donated once in three months. "This is safer with very little stress on the body. Plasma can be stored for a year, as frozen plasma will still have antibodies. The antibody level doesn't decrease in a person's body," Dr Sarin said.

## Before the Next Health Crisis (Vinod Thomas - Visiting Professor at The National University of Singapore And A Former Senior Vice President at The World Bank)

- ➔ Stalking the efforts of the government and the private sector to revive the economy in the time of COVID-19 are two dangers to people's health – air pollution and greenhouse gases – and a weak public health system. The respite from the air pollution that blankets Indian cities is transitory. India must heed scientists' warnings tying health disasters to air pollution as well as greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions causing global warming.

### A Noxious Cocktail

Strikingly, the avoided number of early deaths from dirty air quality in recent months in China is estimated to have exceeded the number of those who have died from COVID-19. In Europe, 11,000 air-pollution related deaths were estimated to have been averted since the start of lockdowns. **There is an association between pollution levels in cities (despite the improvements during the pandemic) and COVID-19 infections and death rates, a link**



observed in New York City and the northern provinces of Italy. Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, in the top tier of pollution concentration, have also seen high deaths and infections per thousand people. Of course, other factors too decide morbidity and mortality. COVID-19's toll has differed considerably across States – Kerala and Tamil Nadu, for example, have a lower COVID-19 mortality rate. These States stand out with good healthcare systems. Globally some 9 million premature deaths a year are associated with air pollutants, such as fine particulate matter, known as PM 2.5. Regrettably, 14 of the world's 20 most polluted cities are in India. The air in Ghaziabad, Delhi, and Noida is particularly hazardous. Last year, a public health emergency was declared as post-Diwali New Delhi's air quality index approached 500, the "severe plus emergency" category. Adding to this noxious cocktail are GHGs like carbon dioxide, causing global warming and damaging health. Despite the plunge during the lockdown, atmospheric carbon emissions are a record high because of past accumulation. Ranked as the world's fifth most vulnerable country to climate change, India must respond to alerts on communicable diseases linked to GHGs. Global warming intensifies heat waves and worsens respiratory illnesses. Locust swarms in Jaipur and Gurugram have been linked to climate change. Evidence is also emerging on a link between global warming and the emergence of diseases. Mosquito-borne diseases in India have been connected to global warming through both increased rainfall and heat waves. Europe reported its first local transmissions of dengue in 2010.

### Need for A New Plan

So, India must not scramble to return to bad old ways of boosting short-term growth at any cost but capitalise on the tantalising glimpse of a healthier and cleaner world. Spending on reducing air pollution and GHGs provides estimated health benefits of 1.4 to 2.5 times more than the cost of the actions. Delhi, set to overtake Tokyo as the most populous city by 2030, needs to deal with transport, responsible for two-fifth of the PM 2.5 in the skies. Reforms should encourage public transportation in place of the 10 million vehicles, expand electric vehicles, and provide inter-connectivity between the metro and buses. In managing health risks, emission reduction should be coupled with a stronger public health system. Right now, government spending on health is just 1.6% of GDP, low for a lower middle-income country. Most countries, including India, fail the test of readiness for health disasters, according to the 2019 Global Health Security Index. The cleaner air the country is still breathing during the pandemic should be a powerful motivation. Scientific warnings do not indicate the time and place of calamities but do call for confronting air pollution and global warming and strengthening health systems before the next health emergency that is surely going to happen.

### Why It Is Difficult to Prosecute Someone Accused of Match-Fixing

- ➔ The Mohali police arrested alleged match-fixer Ravinder Dandiwal, who has been linked to two betting scandals exposed over the last fortnight. The first one was uncovered by police in Australia, following which the Sydney Morning Herald described Dandiwal as the 'kingpin' of a global match-fixing racket in tennis and cricket. The same person was on the radar of Mohali police for organising a fake Sri Lankan T20 league, whose matches were purportedly held in the island nation but actually played in Sawara, a village near Chandigarh. Dandiwal has been charged with cheating under Section 420 of the IPC.





## Why Is He Arrested for Cheating Rather Than Match-Fixing?

Match-fixing is not an independent offence in India and there are no laws covering it. After every match-fixing scandal, investigators, legislators and lawyers have called for reforms, arguing that the absence of laws makes it difficult for them to incriminate someone for match-fixing. Additionally, there is little scope for them to go after those who orchestrate match-fixing, other than the players. A study by the International Olympic Committee, Interpol and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime noted: "A criminal justice response against match-fixing would demonstrate that sporting manipulation is not a 'simple' breach of sporting rules, but also an offence against the public in a broader sense."

## How, Then, Have Alleged Match-Fixers Been Punished in The Past?

Those punishments were handed out by the cricket board under its anti-corruption rules and not by law enforcement (these punishments, too, were later reduced or overturned by courts). In fact, lawyers use these cases to illustrate the need to have separate, fool-proof laws for match-fixing. There have been two high-profile match-fixing scandals involving Indian cricketers in the last two decades: the 2000 scam involving former captain Mohammad Azharuddin and the 2013 Indian Premier League spot-fixing controversy, with Sreesanth at its centre. In both cases, investigators had to fall back on other sections of the law to hold them guilty. In both cases, they were unsuccessful. Last month, Vidhi Legal and the Sport Law and Policy Centre jointly published a paper, 'Fixing It: Tackling Match Manipulation'. The paper observed that in the 2000 match-fixing scandal, the CBI was unable to register a case against the accused, including Azharuddin, "as it was unable to establish that these cricketers had clearly violated any existing penal legislation in India" even though "their behaviour fell squarely under the ambit of match-fixing as defined by the CBI".

## What Is the CBI's Definition of Match-Fixing?

In its report on the 2000 scandal, the CBI defined match fixing as:

- ❖ Instances where an individual player or group of players received money individually/collectively to underperform;
- ❖ Instances where a player placed bets in matches in which he played that would naturally undermine his performance;
- ❖ Instances where players passed on information to a betting syndicate about team composition, probable result, pitch conditions, weather, etc.;
- ❖ Instances where groundsmen were given money to prepare a pitch in a way that suited the betting syndicates; and
- ❖ Instances of current and ex-players being used by bookies to gain access to Indian and foreign players to influence their performances for a monetary consideration.

## So, Under What Existing Provisions Are They Charged?

According to senior advocate Vikas Pahwa, who is representing alleged bookie Sanjeev Chawla in the 2000 scandal, investigating authorities mostly try to book the accused for cheating under IPC Section 420. Last week, Punjab police used this provision to book the organisers of the fake Sri Lankan T20 match. Before that, the Bengaluru Crime Branch charge sheeted players and bookmakers under this section for alleged spot-fixing in the Karnataka Premier League. **Other laws, too, have been used. In 2000, the CBI tried to book Azharuddin under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 as he was a public servant, employed by the State Bank of India (the Act is not applicable to those in the private sector). But it was pointed out that the alleged act of corruption was not committed while he was on duty. In the IPL**



spot-fixing scandal, the Mumbai Police charged Sreesanth under the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA), 1999. Here, too, a Delhi court let Sreesanth off for lack of evidence.

### What Powers Do the Investigators Have?

According to Pahwa, “they have enough power to call anyone, to interrogate anyone, to call for bank statements or call records from service providers... so they have all the powers to collect evidence provided it is available. But there has to be an offence to investigate. Since match-fixing is not defined as an offence, it is difficult to bring it under the domain of Section 420 of the IPC.”

### Does the BCCI’s Anti-Corruption Unit Have Similar Powers?

In an interview to The Indian Express recently, the head of BCCI’s ACU, Ajit Singh, said they are a “non-enforcement agency”. “We can request him (to come for questioning). If he comes, fine, but if he does not, there is little we can do. Also (without a law), police will be able to only question him if he has committed a crime. That is why we say we need a match-fixing law,” Singh had said.

### Have There Been Attempts to Make Laws Against Match-Fixing?

Yes. In 2013, the Sports Ministry drafted the Prevention of Sporting Fraud Bill, which suggested a jail term for offenders. That Bill has died a slow death. Two Private Member’s Bills too were introduced in the Lok Sabha, one by Anurag Thakur (National Sports Ethics Commission Bill) in 2016 and the other by Shashi Tharoor – The Sports (Online Gaming and Prevention of Fraud) Bill – in 2018. Neither has been debated yet.

## 1.2 Million Snakebite Deaths in India In the Past Two Decades

- India recorded a staggering 1.2 million snakebite deaths in the 20-year period from 2000 to 2019 with an average of 58,000 deaths caused by snakebite annually. Around 70% of these deaths occurred in low altitude, rural areas of eight States – Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan and Gujarat. The study, conducted by the Centre for Global Health Research (CGHR) at the University of Toronto, Canada, with Indian and U.K. partners, also points out that half of all the snakebite deaths occurred during the monsoon period from June to September. The study said that snakebite deaths occurred mostly in rural areas (97%), were more common in males (59%) than females (41%), and peaked in the age group of 15-29 years (25%). The numbers for annual snakebite deaths were highest in the States of Uttar Pradesh (8,700), Andhra Pradesh (5,200) and Bihar (4,500), it further added. In the largest ever such survey published in 2011 and titled ‘Snakebite Mortality in India: A Nationally Representative Mortality Survey’, researchers of the Million Death Study project estimated 46,000 annual snakebite deaths in India. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises snakebite as a top-priority neglected tropical disease. Romulus Whitaker, from the Centre for Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank and one of authors of the new study told The Hindu that the research revises the number of annual snakebite deaths in the country from 46,000 to 58,000. **“Since deaths are restricted mainly to lower altitude, intensely agricultural areas, during a single season of each year, this should make the annual epidemics easier to manage. India’s tremendous snakebite burden is staring us in the face and we need to act now,”** Mr. Whitaker said. The study also indicated



that the Government of India's data captured only 10% of the expected hospital-based deaths.

### Lifetime Risk

"We showed that the overall lifetime risk of being killed by snakebite is about 1 in 250, but in some areas, the lifetime risk reaches 1 in 100," said Prabhat Jha, Director of the CGHR at Unity Health Toronto and one of the authors of the paper. Experts suggest that targeting certain areas and educating people with simple methods such as 'snake-safe' harvest practices – using rubber boots and gloves, mosquito nets and rechargeable torches (or mobile phone flashlights) – could reduce the risk of snakebites. Jose Louise, founder of the website [indiansnakes.org](http://indiansnakes.org), said that **Indian anti-venoms neutralise venom from only the spectacled cobra (there are three other Indian cobra species), common krait (there are seven other krait species), Russell's viper and saw-scaled viper, whereas there are 12 other snake species causing fatal bites in the country.**

### How Faith in A Forest Goddess Helps the Sundarbans Survive

→ The Sundarbans is one of the most ecologically vulnerable terrains in the world. Spread between India and Bangladesh, the cluster of islands is picking up the pieces after Amphan, the worst cyclone to hit West Bengal in 100 years swept through it on May 20. But how has a centuries-old folk theatre form and the worship of a forest goddess helped the islanders understand the power of nature and the limits to human need in this precarious tide country?

### Who is Bon Bibi?

**Shrines to Bon Bibi and her twin brother Shah Jongoli dot the landscape of the Sundarbans.** The followers of Bon Bibi are fishermen, crab-collectors and honey-gatherers – a large chunk of the population of the islands, many of them impoverished – who go into the wild mangroves, teeming with wild animals such as tigers and crocodiles, to earn a livelihood. They believe that only Bon Bibi protects them when they enter the forest.

### Theatre of Worship

**One of the important ways in which people express their belief in Bon Bibi is through Bon Bibi'r Palagaan, a dramatic storytelling form that is enacted throughout the island.** The Sundarbans boasts of almost 30 troupes, each performing the plays in various islands through the year and at tourist lodges during the peak September-March season. **Traditionally, the performances are held near Bon Bibi temples or villages bordering the forests in the light of solar lamps or bulbs powered by generators.** People see the play as a part of their daily life, for it is by the grace of Bon Bibi that they believe they survive in tiger country.

### Rules of The Wild

The Bon Bibi faith is a check on human greed and acquisition. An unwritten code prohibits islanders from carrying guns or weapons into the forest. They must enter the forest only if they absolutely need to earn a livelihood and not take more – honey or crabs, fish or prawns – than they need. They must not desecrate the forest in any way, by smoking, defecating or washing utensils. According to local lore, poachers, pirates and those who disobey Bon Bibi are attacked by tigers as punishment.



## Syncretic Tradition

Hindus and Muslims worship Bon Bibi equally. Legend has it that Bon Bibi came to the Sundarbans with her twin, Shah Jongoli, from Saudi Arabia. The Bon Bibi'r Johuranama (Chronicles of Bon Bibi's Greatness), a 19th-century text, is written in Bengali script, but with the book opening to the right, in Arabic style. While the plays recounting Bon Bibi's life have not been staged for over three months – a record for the islands – the performers believe that for them to survive the Sundarbans, the Palagaan shows will have to go on.

## Business & Economics

### What Is A Bad Bank, And Why Is A Proposal to Set It Up Being Floated?

- The idea of setting up a bad bank often comes up for debate, especially when stress in the banking sector is projected to rise in the near term. Several economists and agencies project a recession in the Indian economy this year, due to the adverse effects of Covid-19 on economic activity. This will hit the banking and financial sector in particular, as slump in earnings of companies and individuals could lead to a jump in non-performing assets, reversing the early trends of NPA reduction post enactment of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) and write-off of bad loans by banks. To tackle this upcoming challenge, the banking industry has proposed the setting up of a government-backed bad bank.

### What Is the Recent Proposal of a Bad Bank?

A bad bank buys the bad loans and other illiquid holdings of other banks and financial institutions, which clears their balance sheet. The banking sector, led by the Indian Banks Association (IBA), had in May submitted a proposal for setting up a bad bank to the finance ministry and the RBI, proposing equity contribution from the government and the banks. This was based on an idea proposed by a panel on faster resolution of stressed assets in public sector banks headed by former PNB Chairman Sunil Mehta. This panel had proposed an asset management company (AMC), 'Sashakt India Asset Management', for resolving large bad loans two years ago. There were talks about creating a bad bank in 2018 too, but it never took shape.

### What Kind of NPA Spike Is Expected Down the Line?

The impact of Covid-19 and the associated policy response is likely to result in an additional Rs 1,67,000 crore of debt from the top 500 debt-heavy private sector borrowers turning delinquent between FY21 and FY22, according to a report by India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra). This is over and above the Rs 2,54,000 crore anticipated prior to the onset of the pandemic, taking the cumulative quantum to Rs 421,000 crore, the report said. Given that 11.57 per cent of the outstanding debt is already stressed, the proportion of stressed debt is likely to increase to 18.21 per cent of the outstanding quantum. The rating agency said in a scenario wherein funding markets continue to exhibit heightened risk aversion, corporate stress could increase further by Rs 1.68 lakh crore, resulting in Rs 5.89 lakh crore of the corporate debt becoming stressed in FY21-FY22. Consequently, 20.84 per cent of the outstanding debt could be under stress in the agency's stress case scenario.



### What Is the Government's View?

While the finance ministry has not formally submitted its view on the proposal, senior officials have indicated that **it is not keen to infuse equity capital into a bad bank**. The government's view is that bad loan resolution should happen in a market-led way, as there are many asset reconstruction companies already operating in the private space. The government has significantly capitalised state-owned banks in recent years and pursued consolidation in the PSU banking space. In the last three financial years, the government has infused equity of Rs 2.65 lakh crore into state-owned banks. These steps, along with insolvency resolution under the IBC, are seen as adequate to tackle the challenge of bad loans. The proposal of a bad bank was also discussed at a meeting of the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) chaired by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on May 28, but it has subsequently not found favour.

### What is the RBI View?

The central bank has so far never come out favourably about the creation of a bad bank with other commercial banks as main promoters. Former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan had opposed the idea of setting up a bad bank with a majority stake by banks, arguing it would solve nothing. Rajan argued that a government-funded bad bank would just shift loans "from one government pocket (the public sector banks) to another (the bad bank) and did not see how it would improve matters". **"Indeed, if the bad bank were in the public sector, the reluctance to act would merely be shifted to the bad bank. Why not instead infuse the capital that would be given to the bad bank directly into the public sector banks? Alternatively, if the bad bank were to be in the private sector, the reluctance of public sector banks to sell loans to the bad bank at a significant haircut would still prevail.** Once again, it would solve nothing," he wrote in his book I Do What I Do, comprising his commentary and speeches as the then RBI Governor.

### What Are the Alternatives to A Bad Bank?

**Many industry experts and government officials involved in economic policy-making argue that the enactment of IBC has reduced the need for having a bad bank, as a transparent and open process is available for all lenders to attempt insolvency resolution. As per latest available RBI data, as a percentage of claims, banks recovered on average 42.5% of the amount filed through the IBC in 2018-19, against 14.5% through the SARFAESI, 5.3% through Lok Adalats and 3.5% through Debt Recovery Tribunals.** The view is that an IBC-led resolution, or sale of bad loans to ARCs already existing, is a better approach to tackle the NPA problem rather than a government-funded bad bank. In a speech on February 21, 2017, on ways to resolve banks' stressed assets, Former RBI Deputy Governor Viral Acharya proposed two models. The first model is a private Asset Management Company (PAMC) which would be suitable for sectors where the stress is such that assets are likely to have economic value in the short run, with moderate levels of debt forgiveness. The second model is a National Asset Management Company (NAMC) for sectors where the problem is not just of excess capacity, but possibly also of economically unviable assets in the short- to medium-term, such as in the power sector. The NAMC would raise debt for its financing needs, keep a minority equity stake for the government, and bring in asset managers such as ARCs and private equity to manage and turn around the assets, he suggested, while arguing that these structures should not be termed as bad banks.



## You Have till Friday To Invest in Gold Bonds – But Should You?

→ The fourth tranche of sovereign gold bonds 2020-21 opened for subscription on Monday (July 6) – and will be open until Friday (July 10). The government has fixed the issue price of the bonds at Rs 4,852 per gram during the subscription period. A discount of Rs 50 per gram on the issue price is being offered to investors who apply online, and pay digitally. The price of gold has been rising relentlessly over the past year. The yellow metal had reached Rs 49,352 per 10 g on Monday afternoon at the Delhi bullion market. As it trades at all-time-high levels amid the Covid-19 pandemic, big returns over the past year have drawn a flood of investors in gold – at the same time, there are concerns over the high price point, and whether the time is right to invest in gold.

### What Are the Benefits of Buying Gold Bonds?

Gold bonds offer investors twin benefits of price appreciation along with a fixed 2.5 per cent coupon per year. Interest earned on these gold bonds is added to the holders' income, and taxed according to their slab rate. The government introduced the gold bonds scheme in 2015 to wean away investors from the physical gold market. Funds raised through such issuances form part of the government's overall borrowings in a year. Any capital gains on these bonds at maturity is tax free, making them far more attractive than owning physical gold. Gold bonds have a maturity period of eight years, but investors have the option to exit after the fifth year. To offer greater liquidity, the bonds are listed on stock exchanges within a fortnight of issuance, and can be traded. However, trading volumes depend upon liquidity in the secondary market.

### How Has Gold Performed?

Gold bonds appear attractive when gold prices spike, leading to greater investor interest in this asset class. Much before Covid-19's impact reverberated across economies and led to a crash in global stock markets, gold prices had started their upward glide. Over the last one year, gold prices in Delhi have gone up by over 43 per cent from Rs 34,380 per 10 g to Rs 49,350 now. Since the beginning of March 2020, when the coronavirus epidemic began in India, gold prices have risen by 16 per cent. In the international market, the price is up by around 27 per cent, and gold is currently trading around \$1,775 (approximately Rs 1.32 lakh) per ounce (about 28.35 g). Since India mostly imports gold, the depreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar makes gold costlier in India. Domestic factors such as concerns over the country's fiscal health and a higher demand for the precious metal also pushes up prices.

### But Why Are Gold Prices Rising?

The global spread of Covid-19 has raised concerns on global growth over the last three or four months. Negative growth rates and fears of a global recession have pushed central banks and big investors to take shelter in gold. The nearly 40 per cent crash in benchmark equity indices in the US between February and March 2020 forced the US Federal Reserve to announce a record liquidity injection and bond buying programme of more than \$3 trillion. In India, the RBI has cut policy rates by 115 basis points over the last three months, and brought down the repo rate –at which it lends to commercial banks– to 4 per cent. It has also announced liquidity injection in the economy – and any expansion in the paper currency tends to push up gold prices. Traditionally known as an asset class that preserves its value, the demand for gold has been going up in line with rising uncertainty.



### Will Gold Prices Continue to Rise?

While gold by itself does not produce any economic value, it is an efficient tool to hedge against inflation and economic uncertainties. It is also more liquid when compared with real estate and many debt instruments. After any major economic crash and recession, gold prices continue their upward run. Analysts of the market feel that gold could now overtake its previous peak of around \$1,900 per ounce in the global market. CJ George, MD, Geojit Securities said: "Given that there is no medical solution in sight for Covid-19, the current rally in gold is likely to continue. In India people are also looking at it as a hedge against rupee depreciation. Central banks and large investors are accumulating gold too." Gold prices also move in tandem with heightened economic policy uncertainty, thereby indicating the safe haven feature of the asset, the RBI said in its latest Monetary Policy Report. After the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 in the US, which led to a worldwide economic crisis, gold prices jumped from around \$700 an ounce in October 2008 to peak at \$1,900 an ounce in September 2011. Over the next four years, gold declined steadily – and crashed to almost \$1,000 an ounce in December 2015.

### Should You Invest in Gold at The Current Price Point?

In India, a sharp decline in interest rates over the last one year – and more so over the last three months – alongside high volatility in the equity markets, have brought investor focus towards gold. A cut in interest rates by the RBI has led to a decline in interest rates on small savings and term deposit rates of banks. SBI is currently offering an interest of 2.7 per cent on savings bank deposits, and 5.4 per cent on 5-10-year term deposits. Experts say that it makes good sense for investors to invest in gold. "At a time when bank interest rates have fallen sharply, sovereign gold bonds offering 2.5 per cent interest is an attractive proposition. Besides, there can be capital gains and it acts as a hedge against rupee depreciation," George said.

### But Can the Price of Gold Crash?

Given the economic uncertainty, gold is expected to touch a new all-time high. In India, prices will also be supported by any further weakness in the Indian rupee. Any sudden sale of gold holdings by central banks to tide over the economic crisis, and crisis in other risk assets prompting investors to compensate their losses through sale of gold ETFs (exchange traded funds), are key events that could stall the rise of gold.

### Why Has Indian Railways Opened Doors for Private Players?

- Indian Railways has launched the process of opening up train operations to private entities on 109 origin destination (OD) pairs of routes using 151 modern trains. It has invited Request for Qualifications proposals, for scrutiny of vendor capabilities, from those who can bring modern trains for operations on existing rail infrastructure. At present, scheduled passenger train services remain paralysed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and various railways have been running only specials such as those for workers. Yet, the Railway Board has moved ahead with a long-pending plan, setting a tentative schedule for private train operations, expected to begin in 2023 and in 12 clusters. In December 2019, Union Railway Minister Piyush Goyal had said that a Group of Secretaries had gone into the question of allowing private train services. There was no proposal to allow more Tejas trains from Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited (IRCTC), the Minister said. The IRCTC, in which the government is the majority shareholder, was given pilot Tejas operations in the New Delhi-



Lucknow, and Mumbai-Ahmedabad sectors. These were the first trains allowed to be run by a 'non-Railway' operator. The present move takes another step towards competing passenger train operations, bringing new-generation trains and attracting investments of an estimated ₹30,000 crore.

### What Is the Background to The Decision?

Several committees have gone into the expansion and the modernisation of Indian Railways. In 2015, the expert panel chaired by Bibek Debroy constituted by the Ministry of Railways a year earlier, recommended that the way forward for the railways was "liberalisation and not privatisation" in order to allow entry of new operators "to encourage growth and improve services." It also made it clear that a regulatory mechanism was a prerequisite to promote healthy competition and protect the interests of all stakeholders. The present invitation for private operators to submit qualification bids for 151 trains would be, in the assessment of the Railway Board, only for a fraction of the total train operations – 5% of the 2,800 Mail and Express services operated by Indian Railways. The overall objective, however, is to introduce a new train travel experience for passengers who are used to travelling by aircraft and air-conditioned buses. From a passenger perspective, there is a need for more train services, particularly between big cities. The Railway Board says five crore intending passengers could not be accommodated during 2019-20 for want of capacity, and there was 13.3% travel demand in excess of supply during summer and festival seasons. Without an expansion, and with growth of road travel, the share of the Railways would steadily decline in coming years.

### Why Is the Move Significant for Indian Railways?

For the Railways, one of the largest organisations in the country operating not just trains for passengers and freight, but also social institutions such as hospitals and schools, it represents a radical change. According to data maintained by the World Bank, **in 2018 India had 68,443 route kilometres of railways. It is among the four largest rail networks in the world, along with the United States, China, and Russia, although every kilometre of track in India covers geographical area much less than Germany, Russia, China or Canada, indicating scope for expansion.** An analysis of passenger and freight operations in the Railways, taken note of by the **Economic Survey and the erstwhile Planning Commission, showed that a steady shift to other modes of travel for both categories was affecting economic growth: by as much as 4.5% of GDP-equivalent. It was estimated that a one-rupee push in the railway sector would have a forward linkage effect of increasing output in other sectors by ₹2.50.** The Debroy committee found this significant to take the 'Make in India' objective forward. The panel also noted that passengers were willing to pay more, if they had guaranteed and better quality of travel and ease of access. The move to augment capacity virtually overnight through private capital in train operations pursues this line of reasoning.

### Are Private Train Operations Sustainable?

Train services operated by Indian Railways cover several classes of passengers, meeting the social service obligation to connect remote locations, and adopting the philosophy of cross-subsidy for passengers in low-cost trains through higher freight tariffs. **In more recent years, it has focused on revenue generation through dynamic demand-based pricing. Private operators are not expected to shoulder the burden of universal service norms, and will focus on revenue. Even the first IRCTC-run trains have a higher cost of travel between Lucknow and Delhi than a Shatabdi train on the same route that almost matches it for speed. So private operators would have to raise the level of their offering even higher, to justify higher fares,**





and attract a segment of the population that is ready to pay for this difference. The government would have to explain that it has monetised its expensive fixed assets such as track, signalling and stations adequately for the taxpayer, who has paid for them. The key piece in the scheme is the independent regulator, recommended by expert committees. Before the pandemic struck, the Government of India said in the Lok Sabha in March that it had notified the resolution to set up a Rail Development Authority as a “recommendatory/advisory” body, advising government on, among other things, promoting competition, efficiency and economy, and protecting consumer interests. Private rail operations can thus be seen as a government-led pilot plan, not a full programme for unbundling of the monolithic Indian Railways, although the more attractive parts are being opened for private exploitation.

### What Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Slogan Means for Indian Agriculture

- ➔ With global supply chains being disrupted because of the COVID-19 crisis and the country embroiled in a border standoff with China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given a clarion call for “Aatma Nirbhar Bharat”.

#### But What Does It Mean for Indian Agriculture?

Ashok Gulati, Infosys Chair Professor for Agriculture at ICRIER, looks at trade data, which clearly shows that India is already a net exporter of Agri-produce. It has been so ever since the economic reforms began in 1991. “The golden year of Agri-trade, however, was 2013-14. That year Agri-exports peaked at \$43.6 billion while imports were \$18.9 billion, giving a net trade surplus of \$24.7 billion. That was the last year of the UPA government”. But since the Modi government took over the reins of the economy in 2014, Agri-exports have been sluggish and sliding. “In 2019-20, when the Modi government had completed six years in office, Agri-exports were just \$36 billion, and the net Agri-trade surplus at \$11.2 billion. With this lacklustre performance, talk of doubling Agri-exports by 2022 looks almost impossible,” he writes in his latest column in The Indian Express. On the Agri-imports front, Gulati finds that the biggest item is edible oils – worth about \$10 billion (more than 15 mt). “This is where there is a need to create ‘Aatma nirbharta’, not by levying high import duties, but by creating a competitive advantage through augmenting productivity and increasing the recovery ratio of oil from oilseeds and in case of palm oil, from fresh fruit bunches,” he argues. “While mustard, sunflower, groundnuts, and cottonseed have the potential to increase oil output to some extent, the maximum potential lies in oil palm. This is the only plant that can give about four tonnes of oil on a per hectare basis,” he states. “India has about 2 million hectares that are suitable for oil palm cultivation – this can yield 8 mt of palm oil. But it needs a long-term vision and strategy. If the Modi government wants “Aatma nirbharta” in agriculture, oil palm is a crop to work on.

### Rolling Back the Induced Livelihood Shock (Sumit Mazumdar - Research Fellow, Centre For Health Economics, University of York, U.K. Indranil Is Associate Professor, School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, Haryana)

- ➔ For most regions across the country, the long lockdown has just got over. As the “unlocking” begins, it is becoming increasingly apparent how the Indian state had chosen its sides and revealed its elitist bias during one of the most stringently enforced lockdowns worldwide. Several news reports and surveys on the plight of India’s less-privileged workforce during the



lockdown have highlighted the massive scale of falling incomes and loss of means of livelihood. Many have been pushed into various depths of poverty depending on how vulnerable their occupations were. Quantifying the likely scale of the poverty impacts of the lockdown, we use most recent workforce survey data on India to estimate what the lockdown-induced livelihood shock might have meant economically for different categories of workers. We suggest some potential policy measures to prevent the shocks from further snowballing into chronic poverty.

### Pre-Shock Conundrum

India's poverty line has been a matter of contention for long for its unrealistically low thresholds leading to conservative poverty numbers. Irregular updating of official poverty lines and unavailability of data on consumption expenditure from National Sample Surveys in recent years have added to the ambiguity around poverty estimation in India. According to the household consumption expenditure reported in the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017-18 (which replaces the employment-unemployment surveys of the National Sample Survey Office) and applying State-specific poverty lines (used by the erstwhile Planning Commission in 2011 based on the Tendulkar Committee recommendations, adjusted with current price indices), about 42% or around 56 crore people were 'officially' poor before the lockdown was announced. Highlighting how closely packed people are towards the lower half of the consumption expenditure distribution, another 20-crore people were within a narrow band 20% above the poverty line. In most parts of the country, this amounts to a few hundred rupees over the poverty line threshold. A modest dip in earnings – and hence a fall in consumption spending – would push a majority of them into the vortex of poverty and hunger. Sucking up large or entire chunks of the modest incomes, the lockdown gave a shove.

### A Poverty Deepening

Our estimates from the PLFS data extrapolated for the year 2020 suggest that about an additional 40 crore people were pushed below the poverty line due to the lockdown. Around 12 crores of this lockdown-induced newly poor are in urban areas and another 28-crore people in rural areas. Those who were already poor are going to suffer a further worsening in their quality of life, a phenomenon known as poverty deepening. Before the lockdown, around 16% of the population had per capita consumption expenditure of about a third of the poverty line, managing their daily expenses with ₹30 per day or less. After the lockdown this could swell to more than 62 crore (47%) people pushed to such extreme poverty. A shock of such a scale to an overwhelming majority of Indians is unprecedented in the nation's living memory.

### Inadequate State Responses

At such a juncture, formal responses of the state have been mostly inadequate and poorly conceived. The second economic stimulus package announced by the Finance Minister exposes the class nature of the current political dispensation more than ever. A token increase of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) wage by ₹20 (₹182 to ₹202) seems like a joke in the light of the overall magnitude of the crisis. Undoubtedly, a revamped, expanded NREGA needs to be made the fulcrum of the rural recharge. The demand for work is anticipated to increase by 25% with reverse migration-fuelled increase in rural labour supply. The revamped scheme would require providing 90 million workers guaranteed employment of 20 days of work/month for at least the next six months. This means an



additional financial stimulus of ₹1.6-lakh crore. Universalisation of the Public Distribution System has been widely talked about but needs better equity focus in implementation. Recent experience of expanding food coupons to non-ration card holders in Delhi suggests that such measures are likely to exclude marginalised communities including Dalits and Muslims at the lowest strata of the work hierarchy. At the local level, this would mean identification of the most vulnerable and including them into the programme before expanding it to the relatively better-off. The exclusion errors of IT-based attempts to coverage have huge social costs in the form of accentuated hunger.

### Stabilising Urban Economy

Massive reverse migration flows out of the urban informal sector will force grinding halts and hiccups for the economy limping back towards normalcy in the post-lockdown scenarios. **Given the magnitude of the destabilisation, an urban employment guarantee programme becomes a dire necessity to stabilise the urban economy. A 'direct' employment programme implemented through municipal corporations could be introduced to guarantee 20 days of work. This can be used to develop key social infrastructure in urban areas including slum development, drinking water supply, toilet construction, parks and common areas, urban afforestation and social forestry.** Such facelift public works programmes can make a major difference in both the condition of public utilities and absorbing the spurt in demand for work in district towns and smaller cities in the traditional outmigration hotspots across the country. The wages could be fixed with 30% premium over prevalent MNREGA benchmark average wage in the State. An 'indirect' branch of this programme can be used to encourage a revival of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the most prominent clusters. This could include employer-contractor facilitated programmes to provide wage subsidy of an equivalent amount as in the direct programme to employers of urban SMEs, other business establishments and construction sector projects. **The neo-liberal growth that we have experienced since the 1990s has been largely through breaking the back of the labouring class. The economy grew by paying less and less to workers and allowing surplus to accumulate in the hands of the owners of the means of production, with the expectation that this would be reinvested. The state worked systematically to let this model flourish. A series of policies made the labouring class increasingly vulnerable, weakening their collective bargaining power, pushing them away from their native towns out of desperation, forcing them to accept any wage that is offered to them, making them live in conditions which take away their sense of dignity, and curtailing any social security benefit that could help them survive in times of difficulties.** If we do not alter the course of economic progress and reorient development programmes, the implications could be severe with increasing hunger-related deaths and destitution, leading to social unrest and crime.

- The finding that 8.4 lakh poor households have completed at least 80 days of the 100-day limit for work under the MGNREGS and 1.4 lakh among those have completed the full quota, should come as no surprise. While these numbers are a fraction of the 4.6 crore households which have benefited from MGNREGS this year, the fact that many poor households have nearly completed their full quota of employment under the scheme in just the last two months (May-June 2020) is a reflection of the distress that has driven them to take recourse to it. With the economy reeling after extended lockdowns following the COVID-19 pandemic and migrant labourers losing jobs in urban areas and returning to their rural homes to avoid destitution, the scheme has come as a huge relief to poor families. The government's decision to extend it into the monsoon season has also benefited households. Data from this year show that in nearly two-thirds of the States, demand for MGNREGS work has doubled or even tripled in a number of districts compared to the previous year. Only in States where



kharif crop was sown, the demand was relatively lower. But with some States resorting to their own shutdowns to curtail the spread of COVID-19, the prospects of a robust economic recovery that would benefit those engaged in casual labour and daily wage-labour remain dim. The fairly good monsoon this season should help with providing for more agricultural jobs beyond the MGNREGS works as well, but the surging rate of demand for work under the scheme suggests that it is time the government thought about extending the limit, at least on a State-by-State basis. **The swell in agrarian employment in the monsoon season notwithstanding, the excess supply of labour owing to reverse migration from the cities could depress wages. This makes an extension of the limit of work days under the MGNREGS even more imperative.**

Since its implementation over a decade ago, the scheme has acted as insurance for rural dwellers during crop failures and agrarian crises. But the Centre's outlook towards it continues to limit it only as a "fall-back" option for the poor. Even before the COVID-19-induced crisis, a lack of demand and falling consumption among the poor were constraining the economy. The MGNREGS, if utilised as more than just an insurance scheme and as a vehicle for rural development, could potentially address that problem. **The lessons from its successes and failures could be used for a more comprehensive job guarantee plan that covers urban India too.** Besides alleviating distress, this could also boost consumption and aid economic recovery. An extension of the 100-day limit and comprehensive implementation of the scheme in rural areas can be the first step.

## Life & Science

### The Difference Between A Locust Plague, Upsurge and Outbreak

- India should remain on high alert against locust attack, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned amid the country facing the worst locust attack in 26 years. In its latest update, the FAO said spring-bred locust swarms, which migrated to the Indo-Pakistan border and travelled east to northern states, are expected to return back to Rajasthan with the start of the monsoon in coming days. **The FAO has three categories of Desert Locust situations: outbreak, upsurge, and plague.** The current locust attack (2019-2020) has been categorised as an upsurge. Outbreaks are common, but only a few results in upsurges. Similarly, few upsurges lead to plagues. The last major plague was in 1987-89 and the last major upsurge was in 2003-05. Upsurges and plagues do not occur overnight; instead, they take many months to develop.

### Locust Outbreaks

**Before the outbreak stage, the FAO first issues 'Desert Locust threats' that are determined from an analysis of national survey and control data combined with remote sensing imagery and historical records. Such threats have been issued in 2012, 2013, and 2015. Not all threats develop into an outbreak.** When there are good rains and green vegetation develops, Desert Locusts – which are always present somewhere in the deserts between Mauritania and India – can rapidly increase in number and within a month or two, start to concentrate, gregarise which, unless checked, can lead to the formation of small groups or bands of wingless hoppers and small groups or swarms winged adults. Such a situation is called an 'outbreak', and usually occurs with an area of about 5,000 sq. km (100 km by 50 km) in one part of a



country. The FAO website lists nine outbreaks: 2018, 2016, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006.

### Locust Upsurge

This is a more serious Desert Locust situation and generally affects an entire region. An 'upsurge' is formed when an outbreak or contemporaneous outbreaks are not controlled and if widespread or unusually heavy rains fall in adjacent areas, several successive seasons of breeding can occur that causes further hopper band and adult swarm formation. There FAO website records the upsurges of 2004-2005, 1996-1998, 1994-1996, 1992-1994, and 1972-1974. The upsurge of 1992-1994 affected India after Desert Locusts that bred for several generations along the Red Sea coastal plains in the winter of 1992 moved via the Arabian interior to India and Pakistan.

### Locust Plague

The most serious category, a 'plague' can develop when an upsurge is not controlled and ecological conditions remain favourable for breeding, locust populations continue to increase in number and size, and the majority of the infestations occur as bands and swarms. This does not happen overnight; instead, it takes at least one year or more for a plague to develop through a sequence that commences with one or more outbreaks and followed by an upsurge. A major plague exists when two or more regions are affected simultaneously. The area in which plagues occur covers about 29 million sq. km and can extend across 58 countries. There have been six major plagues in the 1900s, one of which lasted almost 13 years, the FAO website notes.

## What Is Causing Sparrows in North America To Change Their Song?

- Current hypotheses suggest songs sung by birds of a particular species remain the same within a region, and distinct between regions. These songs persist between bird populations over extended periods of time. However, when researchers analysed the songs of 1,785 male white-throated sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) recorded across North America over two decades, they found the spread of a novel song that is being sung by these birds across Canada. The song has covered a distance of over 3,300 km, from British Columbia to Ontario since it started spreading after 2000. The research paper by Ken A Otter, Alexandra Mckenna, Stefanie E LaZerte of University of Northern British Columbia and Scott M Ramsay of the Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5, Canada was published in the journal Current Biology on July 2.

### What Have the Researchers Found?

Researchers studied the cultural evolution of songs sung by 1,785 male white-throated sparrows over a period of two decades and found that **doublet-ending songs spread from east to west, replacing the traditional triplet-ending songs in Canada**. According to surveys done in the 1960s across Canada, the white-throated sparrows traditionally sang a whistled song terminating in a repeated triplet of notes. Between the 1960s and the 2000s, however, doublet-ending songs emerged and replaced the triplet-ending songs west of the Rocky Mountains. The song had reached the east of the Rockies by the 2000s. Essentially, from recordings that were collected over two decades across North-America, the researchers note that the novel doublet-ending song that originated in western Canada, has now spread at a continental scale. In 2004, when researchers recorded birds across Alberta, they found that



half of the sampled males were singing the traditional triplet-ending songs. Within the next 10 years, they found that all the males in the area had switched to the new doublet-ending song.

### How Did This Happen?

Potentially, the novel song's spread could be attributed to birds from western Canada spending the winter with birds in central Canada, where the song initially spread, possibly through song tutoring as birds from large portions of the breeding ranges intermingled.

### What Are the Key Findings?

What is unprecedented is that the novel song, which was initially a rare variant, emerged to be the "sole, regional song type". **It is uncommon for a novel song to "invade" and "replace" an established regional variant since birds rarely change their songs and even if they do the change is limited to a region, unlike what researchers have observed in the case of the white-throated sparrows, where the song has spread across the continent.** "To our knowledge, this is an unprecedented rate of song-type transition in any species of birds," the researchers note, adding that in the historic recordings taken prior to 2000, males can be heard singing the triplet-ending song. From the new song's initial detection in 2005, when in the survey researchers found that 1 out of 76 males sang the novel song, the proportion of males singing the song had increased to 47.8 percent of one surveyed population in 2017, suggesting that once a new song emerges, it takes time to build momentum before it becomes established. "It took 9 years (2005–2014) for the song variant to go from approximately 1% to 22% of males adopting, but then only 3 years (2014–2017) to go from 22% to nearly 50%, suggesting that the cultural spread may be exponential once a critical number of males have begun adopting the new variant," researchers note.

### But Why Would the Male Birds Adopt the New Song at All?

It is not entirely clear as to why the males would do this, but as per one hypothesis called the indirect biased transmission hypothesis, certain innovations in songs are non-randomly adopted by the males within a population, which leads to fast population-level transitions to new variants. For instance, juvenile males learn and actively integrate novel elements into their songs thereby furthering the transition. There is also the possibility that males may integrate novelty into their songs to maintain female interest, the research paper states.

### What A Study Of 17 Million People Tells Us About Covid-19 Deaths

- ➔ A study published in the journal 'Nature' – an analysis of over **17 million people in England** (40 per cent of the English population) – has quantified a range of clinical risk factors for deaths associated with Covid-19. The authors of the study claim that it is the largest cohort study conducted by any country to date.

### What Does the Study Say?

In the study, the researchers linked the data of more than 17 million adults to 10,000 of those who died due to the disease. They found that deaths were associated with being **male, older age, deprivation, diabetes and severe asthma, among other factors**. They also note that **compared with white people, Blacks and South Asians were at a higher risk of developing poorer outcomes due to the disease**. Out of the 17 million people in the study, 11 per cent had non-white ethnicities. Significantly, they found that old age was "strongly associated"



with risk, with those 80 years or above at 20-fold increased risk than those between the age 50-59 years. As per them, most comorbidities were associated with increased risk – these include cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, respiratory disease such as asthma, obesity, cancer, kidney, liver, neurological or autoimmune conditions. Even so, one limitation of the study is that the researchers included in the study clinically suspected and not laboratory-confirmed Covid-19 cases, as a result of which some patients could have been incorrectly identified as Covid-19 positive.

### So, What Is New About the Findings?

It is already known that older individuals and those with comorbidities are at higher risk of developing severe outcomes from the disease and the findings of the study are largely in line with what is being observed in Covid-19 patients around the world. Therefore, **more than the nature of their findings, it is the scale of the study that has allowed researchers to be more precise on rare exposures, multiple risk factors and the rapid detection of important signals.** Essentially, studying the disease patterns in such a large data set has allowed the researchers to assess the less common risk factors more robustly.

### TB During COVID-19 (Shibu Vijayan - Physician and Global TB Technical Director At PATH, Mumbai, India. Madhukar Pai - Physician and Director of The McGill International TB Centre, Montreal, Canada)

➔ India has the highest burden of tuberculosis (TB) in the world. Even as the government was pushing to end TB by 2025, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a massive disruption in TB services. TB case notifications across India have dropped by over 50% since March, with an estimated 3,00,000 missed case notifications (until May 30). This is worrisome, since undiagnosed TB can worsen patient outcomes and increase transmission in the community. As the lockdown ends, we will see a big surge in people seeking care with TB and COVID-19 symptoms. However, people will struggle to get care because the public sector is still dealing with the pandemic, while the private sector is not functioning at normal capacity or is reluctant to manage people with fever and cough. To find the missed TB patients, we will need to find ways to rapidly resume public TB services, integrate TB and Covid-19 testing and be creative about engaging the private health sector to augment public TB services. It is critical for the National TB Elimination Programme to resume routine TB services, which include diagnostic services, such as microscopy and rapid molecular testing, as well as drug-susceptibility testing.

### Dual Testing

Since fever and cough are symptoms of both TB and COVID-19, simultaneous screening and testing can be encouraged. Thankfully, India has access to three existing technologies that permit dual testing for both infections. The first is the digital chest x-ray (CXR), which could be deployed along with artificial intelligence (AI) based tools for both TB and COVID-19. AI-based algorithms are now available that obviate the need for trained radiologists to read the x-rays. If a CXR is suggestive for TB on the AI algorithm, then a confirmatory test such as GeneXpert can be done to confirm TB and also detect drug-resistance. One such AI-enabled screening tool is called qXR, developed by Qure.ai, an Indian company. Several studies show accuracy that is comparable or better than human radiologists. The screening tool, qXR, has now added the capability of detecting signs of COVID-19 from the x-ray's images. It is being



deployed in some sites in Mumbai with promising preliminary results. It is important to validate the use of qXR for simultaneous screening for both diseases for wider use. Based on an estimated 3,00,000 missed cases during the national lockdown, around 10,50,000 CXR (assuming 70% of these are pulmonary TB cases and 5 CXRs are needed to detect one patient with pulmonary TB) will be required for detecting TB cases. This is an overwhelming figure for any health system especially during a pandemic. However, a dynamic partnership with 80,000 licensed diagnostic radiology facilities will help combat this. **CXR screening will require confirmatory testing for both diseases, and molecular testing is the most accurate and rapid option. There are two technologies already in use in India that could be leveraged for simultaneous testing of sputum samples for both infections. One is called GeneXpert. India has over 1,100 of these systems in use. A large number of private labs, too, have this technology. On this platform, TB can be detected using a cartridge called Xpert MTB/RIF and COVID-19 by using the Xpress SARS-CoV2 cartridge. The second molecular platform is called TrueLab, developed by an Indian company – Molbio Diagnostics. This technology is already being used in some states and in private labs to test for TB using a chip called Truenat MTB. Molbio now has a chip called Truenat Beta CoV that can be used for COVID-19. This chip, along with Xpress SARS-CoV2 cartridge, has been approved by ICMR for emergency use for COVID-19 testing. Typically, TB testing requires sputum sample. Now, SARS-CoV-2 testing is done using nasopharyngeal swabs, but there is no reason why sputum samples cannot be used, since sputum is generated deeper in the lungs. However, it is important to validate both test molecular platforms for simultaneous testing using the same sputum sample.**

### Why Fans of Horror Movies May Be Better Equipped to Deal with Covid-19

- In a new study currently under review by the journal Social Psychology and Personality Science, researchers tested if engagement with certain kinds of movies impacted people's psychological resilience and preparedness to deal with a pandemic. They found that those who had consumed horror and pandemic fiction were likely to weather the COVID-19 situation better.

#### What Does the Study Say?

Authors of the study tested the impact that films had had on 310 individuals' ability to psychologically deal with a scenario such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. They found that fans of horror films exhibited greater resilience during the pandemic, and fans of genres such as alien-invasion, apocalyptic films and zombie movies exhibited both greater resilience and better preparedness. They maintain that with regards to the current pandemic, people who spend more time simulating frightening or dystopian experiences will still be impacted, but the psychological toll on them may not be so great as to drastically interfere with their day-to-day life. The findings are based on a series of questions asked to determine respondents' interest in a specific film genre, and questions that measures their morbid curiosity. The respondents' resilience to the pandemic was determined using the **Pandemic Psychological Resilience Scale (PPRS)**. "Those with more experience engaging with fictional scenarios involving dangerous phenomena, such as morbidly curious individuals, may also be more likely to deal with a pandemic in a more resilient way," the researchers say. According to them, the simulation account of fiction allows people to explore possible worlds and try out various strategies and experiences, without the negative consequences of having that experience in real life. But how exactly does watching horror films help in becoming more psychologically resilient? The researchers say that exposing oneself to horror fiction helps the individual grapple with negative emotions in a "safe setting". "Through fearing the





murderer or monster on the screen, audiences have an opportunity to reflect on negative emotions such as fear or disgust and practise emotion regulation skills,” the study says. Even so, it does not mean that watching horror films can help one practise dealing with negative emotions or offer strategies for “enjoying life” amid negative experiences. Rather, a history of watching horror films overtime may help in building emotion regulation skills, which can be utilised to lessen the psychological distress that accompanies dysphoric events.

### Lessons from Immune Response of Most Severe Covid Patients

→ A new study has found that even the sickest Covid-19 patients produce T cells that help fight the virus. T cells are a key component of the immune system and their roles include killing infected host cells, activating other immune cells, and regulating the immune response. The study cites its findings as further evidence that a Covid-19 vaccine (whenever developed) will need to elicit T cells to work alongside antibodies. The new research was published in the journal Science Immunology on Friday. The researchers followed 10 severely ill Covid-19 patients who were on ventilators at Erasmus University Medical Center, Netherlands. Two of the patients eventually died. An in-depth look at their immune system responses showed that all 10 patients produced T cells that targeted the SARS-CoV-2 virus. **These T cells worked alongside antibodies in trying to clear the virus and stopping the infection.** The researchers note that these findings are in line with a recent study, published in Cell, that showed a robust T cell response in individuals with moderate cases of Covid-19. In both studies, **the T cells in these patients prominently targeted the “spike” protein on SARS-CoV-2**, according to La Jolla Institute for Immunology, researchers from which are involved in both studies. It is the spike protein that the coronavirus uses to enter human cells. The new study adds to growing evidence that the **spike protein is a promising target**. According to La Jolla, it also confirms that the immune system can also mount strong responses to other targets on the virus. While the Cell paper followed San Diego residents, the new paper follows Dutch patients—and the T cell responses were consistent in both populations. “This study is important because it shows this immune response in patients thousands of miles apart. The same observation has now been strongly reproduced in different continents and different studies,” Weiskopf said.

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