



CURRENT AFFAIRS, 16TH TO 29TH AUGUST, 2020

DreamIAS



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERNATIONAL	4
WHY IS AMERICA DEBATING MAIL-IN BALLOTS?	4
THE GROWTH OF INDIAN AMERICANS, IN PUBLIC OFFICE AND INDUSTRY	5
CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING 'BIRTHERISM' IN US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS	5
WHO WAS SUSAN B ANTHONY, THE AMERICAN SUFFRAGIST TRUMP HAS PARDONED AFTER 148 YEARS?	7
WHO IS EDWARD SNOWDEN?	7
U.S. BLACKLISTS 24 CHINESE FIRMS AMID SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE	8
WHY TCS HAS TO PAY \$140 MILLION IN DAMAGES TO A US COMPANY	9
AT \$2 TRILLION, APPLE IS THE MOST VALUABLE COMPANY IN THE WORLD	9
TURKEY TO CONVERT ANOTHER FORMER CHURCH TO MOSQUE	10
TROUBLED WATERS	10
GERMAN DOCTORS SAY ALEXEI NAVALNY WAS POISONED	11
PALESTINE, NOW A FOOTNOTE (KHINVRAJ JANGID - ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR ISRAEL STUDIES, OP JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY, SONIPAT)	12
WHY HAS NEW ZEALAND POSTPONED ITS GENERAL ELECTION?	14
HOW EFFECTIVE IS UK'S 'EAT OUT TO HELP OUT' SCHEME IN HELPING RESTAURANTS?	15
WHY BELARUS PRESIDENT LUKASHENKO IS FACING THE STRONGEST PROTESTS AGAINST HIS RULE IN 26 YEARS	16
UNTANGLING THE CONFLICT IN LIBYA	17
THREATENED BY DISINFORMATION, A MONK FLEES CAMBODIA	18
WHAT IS VICTORY IN JAPAN DAY, AND WHY IT COINCIDES WITH INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE DAY	19
WHY THE WORLD IS WATCHING A MILITARY TAKEOVER IN MALI	20
THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS	21
FOREIGN AFFAIRS	23
WHY LONG-TIME ALLIES PAKISTAN & SAUDI ARABIA APPEAR TO BE DRIFTING APART	23
THINKING THROUGH THE NEPAL POLICY (SHYAM SARAN - FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY AND SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH. HE WAS INDIA'S AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL IN 2002-04)	24
SHINZO ABE RESIGNS	26
WHY CHINA HAS DECLARED WAR ON FOOD WASTAGE	28
THE PLA, ITS STRUCTURE AND MOTIVATIONS	29
THE CHINA TWIST IN INDIA-BANGLADESH TEESTA RIVER CHALLENGE	30
WHY TELECOM DEPT WANTS COMPANIES TO INITIATE SECURITY AUDIT OF THEIR NETWORKS	33
NATION	34
THE 'QUOTA WITHIN QUOTA' DEBATE	34
DOMICILE-BASED JOB QUOTA: THE LAW, SC RULINGS, AND SPECIAL CASES	35
SC HITS OUT AT CENTRE ON LOAN MORATORIUM SCHEME	37
WHY THERE ARE DIFFERENT VOTERS LISTS, AND WHY THE GOVERNMENT WANTS A COMMON ELECTORAL ROLL	38
WHAT THE EC HAS SAID ON VOTING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	38
NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY	40
ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT: A BRIEF AND NOT-SO-AFFECTIONATE HISTORY	41
WHY PM MODI HAS ANNOUNCED AN EXPANSION OF THE NCC	42
BEHIND PM MODI'S THREE BIG DIGITAL ANNOUNCEMENTS	43
WHAT IS THE NATIONAL HEALTH ID ANNOUNCED BY PM MODI?	44
HOW THE NATIONAL RECRUITMENT AGENCY WILL STREAMLINE THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS	46
RAILWAYS DEPLOYS 'NINJAS' FOR SURVEILLANCE	47
AN AIR-TIGHT CASE	48



WHY THE PUNJAB CM HAS WARNED AGAINST RESTARTING SYL CANAL WORK	48
BARRAGE ACROSS NARMADA: PROMISE OF SWEET WATER, WORRIES ABOUT HILSA.....	50
CABINET APPROVES LEASING OF 3 AIRPORTS.....	51
WHAT IS THE ROW OVER THE TAKEOVER OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM AIRPORT BY ADANI GROUP?	51
NEET EXAM: A NO-WIN SITUATION.....	53
THE LOGIC OF, AND DEBATE AROUND MINIMUM AGE OF MARRIAGE FOR WOMEN	54
WHAT DOES THE GOVT'S MOVE TO INCREASE BIOETHANOL IN PETROL MEAN?.....	55
WHY BRAHMAPUTRA ROPEWAY IS SPECIAL	56
THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE ATAL TUNNEL AT ROHTANG	57
WHY PUNJAB GOVT'S TEMPORARY BAN ON NINE PESTICIDES CAN'T PUT A STOP ON THEIR USE.....	57
KERALA READIES TO HOST ITS FIRST DRAGONFLY FESTIVAL.....	59
'NAMATH BASAI', A BIG HIT AMONG KERALA TRIBAL CHILDREN	59
COVID-19 REACHES THE GREAT ANDAMANES, WHY IS THIS WORRYING?	59
LAKSHADWEEP ISLANDS TO HAVE MORE KERALA BARN OWLS TO KILL RATS.....	60
EGYPTIAN MUMMY SURVIVES FLOODING AT JAIPUR MUSEUM.....	60
THE MURDER CASE OF NARENDRA DABHOLKAR, SEVEN YEARS ON.....	61
MUSIC LEGEND PANDIT JASRAJ PASSES AWAY.....	61
HOW A NEW PHISHING SCAM USED E-SIMS TO SWINDLE BANK CUSTOMERS	62
WHAT ARE SUPER APPS, WHY IS INDIA GETTING ANOTHER ONE?.....	63
AS HEAD OF HOUSE PANEL, CAN SHASHI THAROOR SUMMON FACEBOOK OVER ALLEGED LINKS WITH BJP?	65
RS CHAIRMAN WRITES TO PANEL HEADS ON RULES.....	66
HOW TO EFFECT BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE DURING COVID-19.....	67
BUSINESS AND ECONOMY	69
UN SECY.-GEN. GUTERRES FLAYS INDIA'S COAL SUBSIDY.....	69
WILL LOCAL PRODUCTION MAKE APPLE'S IPHONES CHEAPER?.....	69
MAGNETS FOR MANUFACTURING (STHANU R NAIR TEACHES ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC POLICY AT IIM-KOZHIKODE) ...	70
THE CHALLENGE OF CATCHING ELUSIVE TAXPAYERS (ARUN KUMAR - MALCOLM ADISESHIAH CHAIR PROFESSOR, INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES)	72
WHY ARE FOREX RESERVES SHOOTING UP WHEN INDIAN ECONOMY IS HIT?	73
CHINESE FIRMS HIT AS INDIA'S QUALITY CONTROL AGENCY HOLDS UP APPROVALS	75
WILL THE IMPORT RESTRICTIONS ON TELEVISIONS PUSH UP PRICES?	76
ISSUES IN GST COMPENSATION	77
WHY RBI SENT Rs 73,615 CRORE TO ITS CONTINGENCY FUND.....	79
THE ALLEGATIONS AND ANTITRUST PROBE AGAINST FLIPKART	80
CHANGES IN CSR RULES THAT BENEFIT COMPANIES WORKING ON COVID-19 CURES	81
WHY ANIL AMBANI FACES BANKRUPTCY PROCEEDINGS	82
LIFE & SCIENCE	84
WHAT IS ASTEROID 2018VP1, HEADED FOR EARTH THIS NOVEMBER?	84
HOW THE WORLD'S SECOND LARGEST ICE SHEET IN GREENLAND MELTED 'PAST POINT OF NO RETURN'	84
THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF OUTER SPACE (SYED AKBARUDDIN HAS SERVED AS INDIA'S PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE AT THE UN).....	86
DWARF PLANET CERES IS NOW AN 'OCEAN WORLD'. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?	87
HOW SEVERE IS PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN?	88
WHY DOES A ZEBRA HAVE STRIPES? MANY OLD THEORIES, SOME NEW FINDINGS.....	89
SMELL MATTERS.....	91
WHY FACEBOOK THINKS AN IOS14 FEATURE WILL IMPACT ITS BUSINESS MODEL	91
WHAT IS 'CANCEL CULTURE'?	92
WHY A US GOVT BODY SAYS MEN SHOULDN'T HAVE MORE THAN ONE GLASS OF ALCOHOL A DAY.....	93



HOW MOSQUITOES STOPPED MOSQUITOES FROM SPREADING DENGUE IN A CITY.....	94
DENGUE MAY POSE RISK OF MISDIAGNOSIS.....	95
IN HEART CELLS, CLUES WHY COVID-19 IS SEVERE IN THE ELDERLY	95
U.S. FDA NOD FOR RAPID, INEXPENSIVE SALIVA TEST.....	95
WHAT IS RLF-100 OR AVIPTADIL, THE 1970 DRUG BEING EXPLORED FOR COVID-19 TREATMENT	97
LUNG DAMAGE, CLOTTING SIGNS IN POSTMORTEM OF COVID-19 CASES	98
WHAT IS VACCINE NATIONALISM?.....	98
WHO MAY FIRST GET COVID-19 VACCINE IN INDIA, OTHER COUNTRIES.....	99

INTERNATIONAL

WHY IS AMERICA DEBATING MAIL-IN BALLOTS?

With the US presidential elections less than three months away, the US Postal Service (USPS) is at the centre of a row with Democrats demanding that more Americans be given access to mail-in voting, and Republicans opposing this on the ground that it would increase chances of fraud.

Why is a postal ballot critical now?

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many states have made mail-in voting accessible to more voters. However, slower mail deliveries over the last few months, including for medicines, have raised concerns about how the USPS will handle an influx of mail-in ballots. The USPS has warned that these ballots may not reach in time to be counted. *While Democrats are calling for wider mail-in voting, they are also concerned about changes in the methods of processing mail initiated by Postmaster General Louis DeJoy.* These include clamping down on overtime and halting late delivery trips, which will effectively delay mail-in ballots. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in a letter accused President Donald Trump of sabotaging the election by “manipulating the Postal Service to disenfranchise voters”. Pelosi referred to DeJoy as a “crony” who “continues to push forward sweeping new operational changes that degrade postal service, delay the mail, and – according to the Postal Service itself – threaten to deny the ability of eligible Americans to cast their votes through the mail in the upcoming elections in a timely fashion”.

What is President Trump’s stand?

Trump does not favour mail-in voting. *Many Republicans are of the view that mail-in voting will favour Democrats — in essence, they believe that more voters (especially low-income and non-white ones) will mean more votes for Democrats.* Trump has alleged that voting by mail will lead to fraud in the election process. Various studies, in fact, suggest that there is no evidence that mail-in voting leads to greater chances of fraud. A Stanford University study in April said that while mail-in ballots offer greater convenience to voters and may increase voter turnout “modestly”, it had no particular advantages for any party. In 2017, the Brennan Centre for Justice estimated the risk of ballot fraud at between 0.00004-0.00009%.

How does mail-in voting work?

While every state offers mail-in voting, their rules differ. Some states allow mail-in voting in special circumstances only. These circumstances include illness, injury, disability or being a student at an out-



of-state college or university. Once local election authorities have received such a request, they will send a ballot to the address of the voter after vetting the application. The voter then casts their vote and signs the envelope and mails the ballot back to the election authorities. States that require reasons for mail-in ballot include Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, all Republican-controlled. Democrat-controlled New York also requires a reason for mail-in ballots. On the other hand, in view of the pandemic, some states have allowed absentee voting for all. These include Florida, North Carolina, Ohio and Michigan among others. Other states such as California, Nevada and Vermont will mail a ballot to every registered voter ahead of the elections. As per The New York Times, this year over 76% of Americans will be eligible to receive a ballot in the mail and roughly 80 million votes are expected to be cast this way.

THE GROWTH OF INDIAN AMERICANS, IN PUBLIC OFFICE AND INDUSTRY

The rise of Kamala Harris, daughter of an Indian mother, as the Democratic Party's candidate for Vice President represents a coming-of-age of the Indian American community in the United States. Two other persons of Indian origin — Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley — also served as Governors of Louisiana and South Carolina, respectively, in that period. Today, more Indian Americans hold public office than ever before. However, *politics is far from being the only sphere in which the Indian diaspora has gained influence in the last few decades.* To begin with, in absolute numbers, the population of Indian Americans has grown ten-fold between 1980, the first US Census to count Indians as a distinct ethnicity, and 2010. Historically, *Indians in the US worked in medicine, science & technology, engineering and mathematics-related jobs. Some, like the Patel community from Gujarat, took to the hotel industry and grew to dominate it. Others were entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley after the digital revolution of the 1980s. In 1997, Ramani Ayer became the CEO of the Fortune 500 financial firm The Hartford, becoming the first in the list of Indian leaders heading American businesses. Indian Americans, who make up 1% of the US population, own a third of all Silicon Valley start-ups,* according to Nirvikar Singh, Sanjoy Chakravorty and Devesh Kapur, authors of the book *The Other One Percent: Indians in America.* *About 8% of all high-technology firms in the US were founded by Indian Americans.* At present, *2% of the Fortune 500 companies of American origin — including Microsoft, Alphabet, Adobe, IBM, and MasterCard — are led by Indian American CEOs. One in every seven doctors in America is of Indian descent; President Donald Trump's top consultant on healthcare is Seema Verma. And over half of all motels in the US are owned by Indian Americans, although there are no accurate estimates.* In addition, the current generation of Indian Americans comprises political activists, comedians and Hollywood and TV artists. For a long time, the most visible Indian on television was the Simpsons character Apu. Now, Indian American actors such as Kalpen Suresh Modi or Kar Penn, Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling star in leading roles, playing Indian characters in prime time shows that depict a warts-and-all picture of the so-called model minority. *Due to the lucrative fields in which most of them were employed, the median income of an Indian American household (\$44,696 in 1990) was higher than that of all Asian communities at that time. Today, it is \$90,711 for the Indian Americans — still much higher than the Asian-American average of \$67,022. Many Indians living in the US today were beneficiaries of visa programmes for students or high-skilled professionals that allowed them to stay and work in America. The number of such non-immigrant visas hit a peak in 2017, but has since been declining. Harris, a Northern California native, is in favour of a more immigrant-friendly approach.* A Bill she co-sponsored, which was vetoed in the Senate, would have granted permanent resident status to workers from India and China with pending green card requests.

CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING 'BIRTHERISM' IN US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



Over the past decade, controversies surrounding birtherism have followed the election cycle in the US. *Its origins are relatively recent – it first surfaced during former US President Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008, where Obama’s citizenship, birthplace and religious affiliation were questioned in what came to be known as the ‘birther movement’.* This election cycle, it appears to have resurfaced, targeting Democratic senator Kamala Harris. Questions were earlier raised on her eligibility as a presidential candidate, and now, after Joe Biden’s announcement, as his running mate.

What is the birtherism controversy?

During Obama’s time, members of the birtherism movement, many of whom were conservatives and Republican voters, claimed Obama was not eligible to become president of the United States because he was not a natural-born citizen. Proponents of this movement claim that Obama was not born in the US state of Hawaii, but in Kenya. Some have questioned the authenticity of Obama’s birth certificate, claiming that it is forged. There are others who claim Obama gave up his US citizenship while living in other countries during his growing up years.

Why is Kamala Harris’ citizenship being questioned?

Critics of the birtherism movement had said a decade ago that the attacks on Obama were racist, with such questions being raised against him because of his African-American heritage. The focus of the movement’s ire now appears to be Kamala Harris because of her Indian mother and Jamaican father. Last week, at a press conference, Donald Trump questioned Harris’ eligibility to serve as vice president and president, when he implied that he had been informed about purported claims on social media saying she may be ineligible. When pressed, Trump referred to a law professor, John Eastman of Chapman University in the US, who had raised these claims in a Newsweek opinion piece. Kamala Harris is a US citizen and was born in Oakland, California. That her parents were immigrants does not change Harris’ citizenship.

Why is Trump focussed on birtherism?

Observers believe that in 2008, Donald Trump was one of the most prominent promoters of birtherism, by questioning Obama’s citizenship. Obama’s opponents and others who didn’t approve of him as a presidential candidate jumped onto Trump’s endorsement of these conspiracy theories. Political analysts who have charted Trump’s journey to the White House believe that his endorsement of these birtherism claims during Obama’s presidential campaign significantly contributed to building his own profile for his eventual foray into US politics. One of the most visible promotions of this conspiracy theory by Trump was in 2011, when during an interview on the US television programme Good Morning America, he said he was questioning Obama’s citizenship. The next year, Trump pledged \$5 million to a charity of Obama’s choice if the latter made his college applications, transcripts and passport history public. By 2016, weeks before results of the presidential election were announced, Trump acknowledged that Obama was a US citizen. But by then, these conspiracy theories had taken a form of their own, regurgitated by individuals who opposed Obama and the Democratic party, and held conservative views on issues like citizenship, immigration and race.

Who is a US citizen?

According to the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, “all persons *born or naturalized* in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” In addition to this, the *United States Naturalization Act of 1795* states that children born outside the jurisdiction of the US to parents who were US citizens would be considered citizens of the United States.



WHO WAS SUSAN B ANTHONY, THE AMERICAN SUFFRAGIST TRUMP HAS PARDONED AFTER 148 YEARS?

On the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution that gave American women the right to vote, *President Donald Trump announced he would pardon Susan B Anthony, a pioneering feminist leader who had been arrested and fined \$100 in 1872 for voting and defying laws that only allowed men to cast a ballot.* The move is seen as an effort by Trump to improve his image among women voters, who, opinion polls suggest, are more inclined to vote for his Democratic rival, Joe Biden, at the presidential elections in November this year.

Who was Susan B Anthony?

A lifelong advocate of women's rights, Anthony is considered among the leading suffragists of the late 19th century. *Her efforts ultimately led to the passing of the 19th Constitutional Amendment in 1920 — which some also refer to as the Susan B Anthony Amendment.* Born in 1820 into a family that believed in the Quaker tradition of Christianity, *Anthony was also a committed abolitionist, and began working for the anti-slavery cause at the age of 17. During the mid-19th century, the struggle for women's rights had a strong connection with the movement to abolish slavery. In its initial years as a nation, the United States had primarily extended the right to vote to men who fulfilled property ownership criteria. Racial bars and the institution of slavery in many parts of the country stopped most non-White men from voting, and women were almost entirely disenfranchised.*

Why was Susan B Anthony arrested?

After the American Civil War (1861–65), the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution was passed in 1868 to grant citizenship to all persons born or naturalised in the country, thus dramatically increasing the number of persons who could enjoy rights such as voting. Since men from hitherto disenfranchised communities (such as the Black community) could now vote, women's suffragists believed the amendment also extended to women. However, the feminists felt betrayed as most states continued to prohibit women from voting. It was at this time that Anthony, already a towering figure in the suffragist movement, decided to cast her vote in the presidential election of 1872 at Rochester in New York state, defying laws that only permitted men to vote. After she voted, Anthony was arrested and convicted; the judge serving a verdict that had been written even before the trial had started. Anthony refused to pay the \$100 fine levied upon her, and authorities chose not to pursue the matter further. An indefatigable activist, Anthony continued to campaign for women's suffrage across the US, and individual states increasingly began to recognise these rights. Anthony died in 1906, 14 years before the 19th Amendment was passed. In 1979, Anthony became the first woman to be depicted on a US Dollar coin.

WHO IS EDWARD SNOWDEN?

US President Donald Trump said he was considering a pardon for Edward Snowden, former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, who exposed a surveillance programme under which the US government was collecting data on millions of people. Trump has previously called Snowden a "traitor" and a "spy who should be executed". Since he was charged in 2013, Snowden has been in exile in Russia. A pardon could mean he can finally return to the US.

Who is Edward Snowden, and what did he do?



In 2013, The Guardian broke the news that the NSA was collecting phone records of millions of Americans from telecom service provider Verizon. It was further revealed that the intelligence agency was tapping servers of Facebook, Google and Microsoft to track Americans' online activities. Subsequently, The Guardian revealed its source of information, and named Snowden as the whistle-blower who leaked information on these surveillance programmes.

What was in the documents that Snowden leaked?

The documents leaked by Snowden showed the NSA and its counterpart in the UK, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), had found ways to bypass the encryption offered to consumers by various companies on the Internet. The NSA's ability to decipher the data of millions of Americans was one of its closest-guarded secrets. Knowledge of this was restricted to those who were a part of a highly classified programme, called Bullrun. The surveillance programme was not only limited to ordinary American citizens, but also foreign leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In 2013, Snowden was charged with theft of US government property and unauthorised communication of national defence information, in violation of the 1917 Espionage Act, and providing classified information to The Guardian and The Washington Post. The leaks had triggered a debate on surveillance and privacy. While critics accused Snowden of treason, his supporters, including privacy activists, lauded him for releasing the documents. In 2019, a lawsuit was filed against him by the US for publishing a book, titled 'Permanent Record', which was in violation of the non-disclosure agreements he had signed with the NSA and CIA. The lawsuit alleged Snowden published the book without submitting it to agencies for pre-publication review, in violation of his agreements with the two agencies.

What kind of information were the intelligence agencies able to access?

According to a report in The New York Times, the data intelligence agencies were able to access included sensitive information "like *trade secrets and medical records*, and automatically secures the e-mails, Web searches, Internet chats and phone calls of Americans and others around the world, the documents show." In an interview Snowden gave to The Guardian in 2014, *he said through the arrangement between the NSA and private Internet companies, such as Facebook, the agency was able to get copies of one's Facebook messages, Skype conversations and Gmail inboxes.*

U.S. BLACKLISTS 24 CHINESE FIRMS AMID SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE

The United States blacklisted 24 Chinese companies and targeted a number of individuals it said were part of construction and military actions related to disputed islands in the South China Sea. The U.S. Commerce Department said the two dozen companies played a "role in helping the Chinese military construct and militarise the internationally condemned artificial islands in the South China Sea." The State Department, in a separate statement, said it would impose visa restrictions on Chinese individuals "responsible for, or complicit in," such action and those linked to China's "use of coercion against Southeast Asian claimants to inhibit their access to offshore resources." The move marked the Trump administration's latest efforts to crack down on companies whose goods may support Chinese military activities. The Chinese embassy in Washington did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Act of 'intimidation'

The United States accuses China of militarising the South China Sea and trying to intimidate Asian neighbours who might want to exploit its extensive oil and gas reserves. The U.S. has conducted multiple freedom of navigation operations by sending its warships through the area to assert the freedom of access to international waterways. China claims 90% of the potentially energy-rich South



China Sea, but Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also lay claim to parts of an area through which about \$3 trillion of trade passes each year.

- The Commerce Department said it was adding the firms to its "entity list," which restricts sales of U.S. goods shipped to them and some more limited items made abroad with U.S. content or technology. Companies can apply for licenses to make the sales, but they must overcome a high bar for approval. The actions follow the same blueprint used by Washington in its attempt to limit the influence of Huawei Technologies Co for what it says are national security reasons.

WHY TCS HAS TO PAY \$140 MILLION IN DAMAGES TO A US COMPANY

A US appeals court on Friday (August 21) upheld compensatory damages of \$140 million against Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) in an intellectual property lawsuit filed by Epic Systems Corp. The Verona, Wisconsin-based company had claimed that TCS employees had stolen trade secrets belonging to the company while working on a project for them.

What was the case against TCS?

In 2014, TCS and its subsidiary Tata America International Corporation were hired by Epic to help set up its systems at a medical facility in Portland, Oregon, United States. In October of that year, Epic alleged that TCS employees who were working on site at the hospital had unlawfully gained knowledge of trade secrets and intellectual properties of the former. Based on the information allegedly stolen by TCS employees, TCS had built another software which was a "rip-off" of the original software, Epic alleged.

What are intellectual property rights in the US?

The US Department of State has its own intellectual property (IP) enforcement agency which ensures that the IP rights of US-based companies are protected across the world. The agency seeks to deter access to counterfeit and pirated goods that can harm consumers, ensure that the interests of American IP rights holders are protected abroad, and promote IP protection and enforcement as vital conditions for economic development. Apart from this, the United States Patents and Trademarks Office protects the intellectual property rights of individuals and companies, as well as the trade secrets of firms. *The agency defines a trade secret as "a formula, pattern, compilation, program, device, method, technique or process", which can give a company an "opportunity to obtain an economic advantage over competitors who do not know or use it". Any violation of either IP rights or trade secrets of American companies can result in the awarding of punitive damages, as well as the seizure of properties of the company that is accused of stealing those rights or secrets.* All such materials, whether physical or software, seized by the agencies then remain in the custody of the court until the matter is decided.

What happens next for TCS?

TCS can still appeal its case before higher courts in the US, and present its claim on why its software is not similar to that of Epic Systems'. The company has in the past said that it respects the intellectual property rights of the clients and partners it works with, and has no tolerance for any infringement. However, if the higher courts also rule against TCS, the company may face problems with its projects in the US going forward.

AT \$2 TRILLION, APPLE IS THE MOST VALUABLE COMPANY IN THE WORLD



On August 19, Apple became the first US company to cross the \$2 trillion market cap, securing a position as the most valuable company in the world. Apple dislodged Saudi Aramco, which previously held the title. In the April-June quarter of 2020, Apple earned 12 per cent more than it did in the same period in 2012. At a time when iPhone sales dropped due to Covid-19, its success was buoyed by its services like Apple TV and Apple Music. The new iPhone SE also made a difference. Apple is not alone in reaping benefits amid the coronavirus pandemic. Amazon, Microsoft and Alphabet, too, are some US companies that have seen their stock prices surge.

TURKEY TO CONVERT ANOTHER FORMER CHURCH TO MOSQUE

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday ordered another ancient Orthodox church that became a mosque and then a popular Istanbul museum to be turned back into a place of Muslim worship. The decision to transform the Kariye Museum into a mosque came just a month after a similarly controversial conversion for the UNESCO World Heritage-recognised Hagia Sophia. Both changes reflect Mr. Erdogan's efforts to galvanise his more conservative and nationalist supporters at a time when Turkey is suffering a new spell of inflation and economic uncertainty caused by the virus. But they have added to Turkey's tensions with Greece and its Orthodox Church.

Greece's objection

The Greek Foreign Ministry called the decision "yet another provocation against religious persons everywhere" by the Turkish government. *The 1,000-year-old building's history closely mirrors that of the Hagia Sophia — its bigger neighbour on the historic western bank of the Golden Horn estuary on the European side of Istanbul.* The **Holy Saviour in Chora** was a medieval Byzantine church decorated with 14th-century frescoes of the Last Judgment that remain treasured in the Christian world. It was originally converted into the Kariye Mosque half a century after the 1453 conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks. It *became the Kariye Museum after Second World War as Turkey pushed ahead with the creation of a more secular new republic out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.* A group of *American art historians then helped restore the original church's mosaics and opened them up for public display in 1958.* But Mr. *Erdogan is placing an ever greater political emphasis on the battles that resulted in the defeat of Byzantium by the Ottomans.*

Approved by court

Turkey's top administrative court approved the museum's conversion into a mosque in November. The sandy-coloured structure visible today replaced one created as a part of a monastery in the fourth century when Constantinople was the new capital of the Roman Empire. It features a minaret in one corner and small cascading domes similar to those of other grand mosques whose calls to prayer echo over Istanbul.

Frescoes and mosaics

But inside it is filled with magnificent frescoes and mosaics that represent some of the finest examples of Byzantine art in the Christian world. Turkey's tumultuous efforts to reconcile these two histories form the underpinnings of the country's contemporary politics and social life. Opposition HDP party lawmaker Garo Paylan called the transformation "a shame for our country". "One of the symbols of our country's deep, multicultural identity and multi-religious history has been sacrificed," he said in a tweet.

TROUBLED WATERS



Tensions in the eastern Mediterranean soared last week, with Turkey sending an exploration vessel, accompanied by a Navy fleet, to the disputed waters and France despatching warships to assist Greece. *The trigger for the recent hostility between Turkey and Greece, which have historically shared troublesome relations, has been the discovery of gas in the Mediterranean waters. The EU's plans to transport the gas to its mainland, which would help reduce its dependency on Russia, have raised the region's geopolitical profile.* Turkey and Greece have overlapping maritime claims. But *when EU members and its allies in West Asia and North Africa made plans to build a gas pipeline from the Mediterranean to Europe's mainland, they kept Turkey out of it, which infuriated Ankara. Earlier this year, the EastMed Gas Forum was formed by Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine, and Turkey was again excluded. But Turkey challenged the pipeline project and reached an agreement with Libya's Tripoli-based government, which Ankara is backing, to form an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from its southern shores to Libya's northern coast across the Mediterranean. Greece claimed the Turkish zone violated its maritime sovereignty. Later, Greece announced its EEZ with Egypt, which clashes with Turkey's zone. Immediately thereafter, Turkey sent its survey ship over.*

The highly complicated issue now has the potential to involve Europe, West Asia and North Africa. It is difficult to demarcate the maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean, which is dotted with



Turkish and Greek islands. Cyprus is physically divided with the southern part ruled by the internationally-recognised government and the northern part controlled by Turkey. Turkey's survey ship plans exploration activities around Greece's Crete Island, which lies just outside the Turkish-Libya economic zone, and Greece and Cyprus call it a violation of their sovereignty. France, the EU's most powerful military force, has thrown its weight behind Greece and Cyprus. Now, an alliance is emerging among Greece, Cyprus, Italy and France, which is backed by Egypt, Israel and the UAE. Turkey stands almost isolated, but remains a key power in the Mediterranean, which requires the EU to tread cautiously. If the EU wants to transport gas from the coast of Israel to Europe via Cyprus and Italy, an open conflict with Turkey cannot help. What is in everybody's interest is to dial down tensions and find a diplomatic and mutually acceptable solution to the gas contest. Excluding Turkey, which has a long Mediterranean coast, is unwise. Allowing a resurgent Turkey to bully smaller powers in the region would be strategically disastrous. The EU has to strike a balance between these two options.

GERMAN DOCTORS SAY ALEXEI NAVALNY WAS POISONED

German doctors said on Monday that medical examinations indicated that Russia opposition figure Alexei Navalny, who is in a Berlin hospital after collapsing on a plane in Russia last week, had been poisoned. Mr. Navalny, a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, had been flown to Germany for treatment on Saturday. The Kremlin has said it was unclear what caused Mr. Navalny to fall ill and that initial tests did not show he was poisoned, as his aides charged. Berlin's Charite hospital said a team of doctors



there had examined him in detail after his arrival. “The clinical findings indicate poisoning by a substance from the group of active substances called cholinesterase inhibitors,” the hospital said in a statement.

Cholinesterase inhibitors

The specific substance was not yet known, they said. The outcome remains uncertain but long-term effects, especially to the nervous system, could not be ruled out, it said. *Cholinesterase inhibitors are drugs that can increase communication between nerve cells in the brain. They are sometimes used to temporarily improve or stabilise the symptoms of people with dementia. Common side effects of cholinesterase inhibitors include vomiting, muscle cramps, headache and hallucinations.* Certain chemical classes of pesticides work against bugs by interfering with, or ‘inhibiting’ cholinesterase but they can also be poisonous, or toxic, to humans in some situations. *Mr. Navalny collapsed on a plane on Thursday last week after drinking tea while on his way to campaign in Siberia.* Early on Monday, the German government said it was “fairly likely” that Mr. Navalny was poisoned. Doctors at the Siberian hospital that first treated Mr. Navalny said earlier on Monday they had saved his life but they had not found traces of poison in his system. They had not come under pressure from authorities while treating Mr. Navalny, they said. *Mr. Navalny has been a thorn in the Kremlin’s side for more than a decade, exposing what he says is high-level graft and mobilising crowds of young protesters.*

PALESTINE, NOW A FOOTNOTE (KHINVRAJ JANGID - ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR ISRAEL STUDIES, OP JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY, SONIPAT)

In an agreement brokered by the U.S., Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have agreed to establish full diplomatic relations. This is a historic moment for Israel. For a long time, Israel was a state that no country in West Asia was to recognise, negotiate with or broker a peace with until statehood was granted to the Palestinians. However, Israel managed to achieve full diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1979 and then with Jordan in 1994. This is the third significant win for Israeli foreign policy where it has managed to keep the precondition of Palestinian statehood off the table and establish full diplomatic ties.

The question of Palestine was not a precondition or part of the deal that Egypt signed with Israel in 1979. Under Gamal Abdul Nasser’s leadership, Egypt was the leader of the Arab world, but after Nasserism and the wars in 1967 and 1973, it realised that it did not have enough leverage to compel Israel to accept the two-state solution. This was the case with Jordan too, when it established full bilateral ties with Israel in 1994 leaving the Palestinian cause in the hands of Yasser Arafat. The Palestinian issue is a non-issue for the Arab rulers because it is not an existential matter. There is solidarity among the Arab people with the Palestinians, but that’s about it. The ruling class is not accountable to the public as most of the Arab rulers are not democratically elected and often make decisions depending on the situation in the region. That’s how the Iranian factor has moved them closer to Israel. Yasser Arafat was right in believing that it is childish for the Palestinians to sit behind the autocratic Arab leaders. The agreement shows that the Palestinian national movement needs to be reawakened, but there is no Arafat to lead it.

- Arab-Israeli ties have historically been conflict-ridden. Arab countries, including *Egypt, Transjordan, Syria and Iraq, fought their first war with Israel in 1948 after the formation of the state of Israel was announced.* The war ended with *Israel capturing more territories, including West Jerusalem, than what the UN Partition Plan originally proposed for a Jewish state.* After that, Israel and Arab states fought *three more major wars — the 1956 Suez conflict, the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War.* After the 1967 war in which Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula and

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



Gaza Strip from Egypt, East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria, Arab countries convened in Khartoum and declared their famous three “Nos’ — no peace with Israel, no talks with Israel and no recognition of Israel”. But it did not last long. After the death of Egypt President Gamal Abdel Nasser, his successor Anwar Sadat started making plans to get Sinai back from Israel. His efforts, coupled with American pressure on Israel, led to the *Camp David Accords of 1978*. A year later, Israel and Egypt concluded their peace treaty, as part of which *Israel withdrew from Sinai in return for Egyptian recognition*. In 1994, Jordan became the second Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel. In 1988, after an initial agreement reached between the two countries collapsed, Jordan abandoned its claims to the West Bank and said it would accept a deal between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel.

Following the *Oslo Accords*, under which the PLO recognised Israel and was allowed to form the *Palestinian Authority* in the West Bank and Gaza, time was ripe for an Israel-Jordan deal. The enmity between the two countries came to an end in July 1994 with the *Washington Declaration on the White House lawn* by Jordan’s King Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister *Yitzhak Rabin* under the watch of U.S. President *Bill Clinton*. The UAE-Israel agreement comes after 26 years. If more countries in the Gulf follow the UAE’s lead, it would open a new chapter in Arab-Israel ties.



The UAE-Israel agreement comes after 26 years. If more countries in the Gulf follow the UAE’s lead, it would open a new chapter in Arab-Israel ties.

Why did the UAE sign the agreement?

One of the major factors that brought them closer has been their shared antipathy towards Iran. Both these blocs were wary of U.S. President Barack Obama’s Iran outreach. When Mr. Trump became the



President, his administration brought these two blocs of West Asia, both American allies, together. In February 2019, the U.S. brokered a security conference in Warsaw to build a global strategy against Iran. The meeting brought leaders from Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and several other countries. Following this conference, in August 2019, the U.S. arranged secret talks between the UAE and Israel. These meetings laid the foundations for the agreement. *Arab countries have signalled that they are ready to live with Israel's occupation of Palestine. What they do not want is a major change in the status quo which would put them under political and diplomatic pressure. Mr. Netanyahu's plan to annex the West Bank would have drastically changed the status quo, further putting in peril the two-state solution. The UAE-Israel agreement has averted that outcome.* It also allows Mr. Netanyahu to label the suspension of the annexation to his right-wing religious allies in the government as a victory. Further, this is an election year in the U.S. *If a Democratic President comes to power and restores the Iran deal, both the Israeli and the Arab blocs in West Asia would come under pressure to live with an empowered Iran in what President Obama called "cold peace". A formal agreement and enhanced security and economic ties make the Arab and Israeli sides better prepared to face such a situation. So there is a convergence of interests for the UAE, Israel and the U.S. to come together in the region.*

What are the geopolitical implications of the deal?

The agreement could fast-track the changes that are already under way in the region. The Saudi bloc, consisting of Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain and others, see their interests being aligned with that of the U.S. and Israel and their support for Palestine, which Arab powers had historically upheld, is dwindling, while Turkey and Iran emerge as the strongest supporters of the Palestinians in the Muslim world. This bipolar contest is already at work in West Asia. The UAE-Israel thaw could sharpen it further.

WHY HAS NEW ZEALAND POSTPONED ITS GENERAL ELECTION?

Days after a new wave of coronavirus infections hit New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the country's general election, originally scheduled for September 19 this year, would be postponed by four weeks to October 17. On the new date, New Zealanders will also vote on two referendums – one on personal cannabis consumption and the other on euthanasia.

The latest coronavirus wave in New Zealand

New Zealand, a country of 50 lakh people, has been praised for its effective handling of the coronavirus pandemic, recording a total of 22 deaths and around 1,600 overall infections. On August 9, the South Pacific nation marked 100 days since it stamped out the spread of the virus. For many, life returned to normal as sports stadiums were packed and bars and restaurants were open. The only new known cases were travellers returning to New Zealand, and these were quarantined at the border. However, after fresh cases were reported in Auckland, the city was placed under lockdown for two weeks on August 12. The 58 new infections are believed to be in a cluster, but authorities are yet to determine their origin. Auckland, home to a third of New Zealand's population, is an important battleground for Ardern's Labour Party, which has been running a coalition government since 2017. Ardern, who is New Zealand's third female Prime Minister, enjoyed a surge of popularity in late March for her handling of the pandemic, but could now face greater scrutiny as cases have returned. Opinion polls continue to predict a second term in office for Ardern.

Rescheduling the New Zealand election

After the Ardern government imposed the Auckland lockdown and halted political campaigning, opposition parties sought a delay of the national vote. In New Zealand, the Prime Minister is the sole authority that can decide on moving the election date, and has the power to delay polls by about two



months. Around the world, authorities have chosen to postpone elections in the wake of the pandemic. Hong Kong's Legislative Council vote has been postponed by a year, and many US states moved primary contests for this year's presidential election.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS UK'S 'EAT OUT TO HELP OUT' SCHEME IN HELPING RESTAURANTS?

Since the lockdown began in India, different bodies representing the country's hospitality sector, including the National Restaurants Association of India (NRAI) and Indian Hotel and Restaurant Association (AHAR), have repeatedly asked the government for financial assistance to help tide over the crisis. In an interview to The Indian Express last week, restaurateur and former president of the NRAI, Riyaz Amlani, cited the UK's popular Eat Out to Help Out (EOHO) Scheme as an example of the kind of intervention the Indian government could make.

What is the EOHO Scheme?

The EOHO Scheme is an economic recovery measure by the UK government to support hospitality businesses as they reopen after the COVID-19 lockdown in the country. The brainchild of Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, the scheme was announced on July 8 as part of the Plans for Jobs summer economic update. Under the EOHO Scheme, the government would subsidise meals (food and non-alcoholic drinks only) at restaurants by 50 per cent, from Monday to Wednesday every week, all through August. The discount is capped at GBP 10 per head and does not apply to take-away or event catering. There is no minimum spend and no limit on the number of times customers can avail the offer, since the whole point of the scheme is to encourage a return to dining in restaurants. EOHO is only one of the schemes in the UK designed to help the food services sector. Other financial support measures include a furlough scheme for workers, cutting VAT to 5 per cent from the standard 20 per cent, a business rates holiday and small business grants, besides temporary changes to licensing laws and outdoor seating under Business and Planning Act 2020, which would make it easier for restaurants and pubs to seat and serve customers outdoors and to comply with social distancing guidelines.

DreamIAS



WHY BELARUS PRESIDENT LUKASHENKO IS FACING THE STRONGEST PROTESTS AGAINST HIS RULE IN 26 YEARS

The authoritarian ruler of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has been facing massive protests since last Sunday (August 9), when a controversial presidential vote showed him winning by a landslide. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets in capital Minsk, demanding that their dictator of more than a quarter century step down. Lukashenko, 65, who has been running the East European country since 1994, has sought help from Russian President Vladimir Putin for tiding over what has been described as the most vulnerable period of his dictatorship.

Lukashenko's iron grip over Belarus

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus became a sovereign nation, and its first presidential elections were held in 1994. Lukashenko, who worked as the director of a collective farm during the Soviet period and served in the Soviet Army, won the polls. After coming to power, Lukashenko solidified his control over Belarus's legislature, judiciary and media, and used the KGB spy apparatus inherited from Soviet predecessors to crush dissent. After 1994, Lukashenko claimed victory in five consecutive national polls, despite criticism that the elections were unfair. The strongman was able to remain in power thanks to generous support from Russia in the form of cheap oil and gas supplies, and by avoiding the tumultuous privatisation route that many post-Soviet countries adopted. However, in the months before his sixth election on Sunday, Lukashenko faced widespread criticism for his government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. *The leader had dismissed Covid-19 fears as "psychosis", and urged people to drink vodka and go to the sauna to stay healthy.*

Sunday's disputed vote

After elections were held on August 9, polling officials said Lukashenko had won 80 per cent of the vote, to the dismay of several Belarusian voters who were hoping for an upset. A day later, Lukashenko's main challenger, 37-year-old former teacher *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya*, urged voters not to organise anti-government protests – a message that many believe was coerced. On Tuesday, *Tsikhanouskaya fled Belarus to neighbouring Lithuania*, where she said an ultimatum involving her family caused her to leave. Tsikhanouskaya's husband, a pro-democracy blogger barred from elections, has been in jail in Belarus since May. From Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya challenged the election results, saying she had won by 60 to 70 per cent in many precincts, and asked for a recount. Since the results were announced, thousands of protesters have taken to the streets in capital Minsk every day. The leaderless demonstrations, largely peaceful, have been met with a ferocious crackdown– including severe beatings, stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets– that has caused further resentment against the ruling government.

How Lukashenko has reacted

For Lukashenko, the countrywide protests are being seen as the most sustained challenge to his presidency since he first took over 26 years ago. Thousands among the pro-democracy demonstrators are factory workers, who traditionally formed Lukashenko's support base. Belarus's ambassador to Slovakia has also expressed solidarity with protesters, as have members of the police force and the state-run media. *The United States and the European Union have both condemned the post-election violence, and talks of imposing sanctions against Belarusian officials are underway. Lukashenko has responded by mending ties with his country's main ally, Russia, and on Saturday spoke to Putin on phone. Belarus-Russia relations had recently turned sour – in 2019, Lukashenko expelled the Russian ambassador after accusing Moscow of treating Belarus like a vassal state, and last month had 32 private Russian military contractors arrested on charges of planning to stage riots ahead of the presidential vote. Russia*

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



had also scaled back subsidies to Belarus. While Russia was yet to confirm as of Sunday that it would provide Belarus military support, analysts expect Kremlin to protect its interests in Belarus – which hosts pipelines that carry Russian oil and gas to the West, and which acts as Russia’s buffer zone with NATO and the EU.

UNTANGLING THE CONFLICT IN LIBYA

Rival authorities have backed a ceasefire in Libya, raising the prospect of a de-escalation in the country’s long-running conflict. Achieving a lasting deal will require political and economic agreements that have proved elusive for years, and cooperation from foreign powers.

Who’s been fighting who?

Khalifa Haftar’s self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA) has been battling forces aligned with the Tripoli-based, internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Both sides are formed from local armed factions, whose shifting loyalties have helped steer the course of the conflict. Both have depended heavily on foreign allies pursuing strategic and political goals in Libya.



Turkey stepped up its military support for the GNA in January after signing a maritime deal with Tripoli, allowing it to repel a 14-month LNA offensive against the capital. Haftar has long enjoyed backing from countries including the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia and Jordan.

How did we get here?

Libya’s fault lines surfaced nine years ago as local groups took different positions in the NATO-backed uprising that toppled Muammar Gaddafi. An attempted democratic transition slid out of control as armed groups built local power bases and coalesced round rival political factions. After a battle for Tripoli in 2014, one faction moved east and set up a parallel government and institutions. It recognised Haftar as military chief as he began a long campaign against Islamist groups and other opponents in Benghazi. The GNA emerged from a December 2015, UN-backed agreement struck as Islamic State gained a foothold in Libya and migrant smuggling to Europe surged. But eastern factions spurned the deal. Instead, Haftar consolidated control of the east and swept south in early 2019 before launching his offensive on Tripoli.



Who controls what?

Front lines are drawn at LNA-held Sirte, roughly the midpoint of Libya's Mediterranean coastline and a gateway to major oil ports. The GNA and affiliated groups control Libya's densely populated northwest and the LNA holds the east. Allegiances in the south are more tenuous.

What's the damage?

Nearly 400,000 Libyans have been displaced over the past nine years. Thousands more have died. The conflict has cost tens of billions of dollars in lost oil revenue, damaged infrastructure, and sharply reduced living standards. Coronavirus infections have started to surge. The collapse of public services has fuelled protests in western Libya against the political elite.

What chance of peace?

Fighting stopped in June but both sides have continued to mobilise. The ceasefire call by GNA head Fayeaz al-Sarraj proposed demilitarising Sirte, allowing an oil restart by freezing revenues until a political deal is reached, and elections in March. But it is unclear how much backing those ideas have in the west, let alone the east. The LNA dismissed the Sarraj's announcement as a ploy. A parallel ceasefire call by Aguila Saleh, head of an eastern parliament aligned with Haftar, proposed Sirte as the seat of a new government. The United Nations is pushing the two sides to resolve issues including oil revenue distribution, the make-up of a unity government and the status of armed groups. Foreign powers officially back the process, but have also shipped arms to their allies, undercutting diplomatic efforts.

What happened to the oil?

OPEC member Libya holds Africa's largest oil reserves, producing 1.6 million barrels per day before 2011. Blockades have caused output to fluctuate sharply since then. Production climbed to around one million bpd from late 2016, then plunged to less than 100,000 bpd as the LNA's allies closed ports and pipelines in January. The National Oil Corporation says it will restart exports only if military forces leave oil facilities.

THREATENED BY DISINFORMATION, A MONK FLEES CAMBODIA

In just four days, the reputation of a Buddhist monk who had spent decades fighting for the human rights of Cambodians was destroyed. First, grainy videos appeared on a fake Facebook page, claiming that he had slept with three sisters and their mother. Then a government-controlled religious council defrocked the monk for having violated Buddhist precepts of celibacy. Fearing imminent arrest, the monk fled Cambodia, destined for a life in exile, like so many people who have stood up to Asia's longest-governing leader. The monk, Luon Sovath, was the victim of a smear campaign this summer that relied on fake claims and hastily assembled social media accounts designed to discredit an outspoken critic of the country's authoritarian policies. *A New York Times investigation found evidence that government employees were involved in the creation and posting of the videos on Facebook. Under Prime Minister Hun Sen, the Cambodian government has repeatedly used falsified Facebook posts or manipulated audio to defame and imprison politicians, activists and other human rights defenders.* Facebook has come under fire in the U.S. for disseminating hate speech and disinformation. It has been criticised for failing to detect Russian influence in the 2016 election. But its influence is even greater in places like Cambodia, where the social media platform is the only digital interface for millions of people. Since civil liberties are often constricted in such countries, Facebook can be a powerful tool for autocrats to bolster their grip on the state, even as it provides a rare space for free expression and activism. *During his nearly 35-*



year rule, Hun Sen — a one-time soldier for the genocidal Khmer Rouge — has decimated Cambodia's political opposition. He has cozied up to China, eschewing aid from the West that was conditioned on improving human rights. Many high-profile activists and opposition politicians have been assassinated, their cases rarely investigated properly. As scandals proliferate on its platform, Facebook has been criticised for being too slow in removing problematic accounts and pages, many fake. It took almost a month for Facebook to take down the page on which the videos smearing the monk first aired.

Better monitoring

In a statement to The Times about Mr. Luon Sovath's case, Facebook said that it had built up a team in Cambodia to better monitor the local situation. Last month, Mr. Luon Sovath, who is now in Switzerland after receiving a humanitarian visa, was charged in absentia by prosecutors in Siem Reap province with raping one of the sisters, escalating the accusations in the videos. The sex charges against Mr. Luon Sovath, one of Cambodia's most celebrated activist monks, went viral. Mr. Luon Sovath has denied the rape charges, and accusations that he had sexual relations with any of the women.

WHAT IS VICTORY IN JAPAN DAY, AND WHY IT COINCIDES WITH INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE DAY

15 August 1945 is remembered in history as Victory in Japan or V-J Day, when Allied forces mark their victory over Imperial Japan during World War II. Japan, which had entered the war in September 1940, was part of the Axis bloc— consisting of itself, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and had occupied several parts of Asia during the international conflict.

What is V-J Day

In May 1945, Axis powers in Europe had been defeated (the Victory in Europe or V-E Day is marked every year on May 8). Allied forces, however, continued fighting Japan in East Asia in the following months. As a part of the British Empire, India also played a key role in the war with Japan— its troops helping secure Singapore and Hong Kong for the Allies in August 1945. Things started changing rapidly after the US dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and three days later, another one on Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of people. On August 14, US President Harry S Truman announced that Japan was surrendering, and British Prime Minister Clement Atlee confirmed the news at midnight. *On August 15, the Japanese emperor Hirohito in his first radio address ever announced Japan's surrender. V-J Day marked the complete end of World War II, and Japan formally signed surrender documents on September 2 that year.*

Japanese rule in India

During the war, Japan had also forced its exploitative control over one of India's territories. Japanese forces landed in South Andamans on March 23, 1942 and in the next three to four hours gained complete control over the area. Japanese control over the Andamans coincided with Subhash Chandra Bose-led Indian National Army (INA)'s occupation over the area and the internal understanding between the two, ensured that the Japanese faced no resistance while trying to take over the Andamans. Bose believed that India could never achieve independence without resorting to revolutionary forces, and held faith in acquiring help from international powers for expelling the British from Indian soil. Once freed from the British, Bose convinced the Japanese to hand over the islands to him and consequently hoisted the tricolour there on December 30, 1943. He also named the islands Shaheed (martyr) and Swaraj (self-rule). Soon after, however, things turned bitter as the Japanese force erupted over the island's population with the kind of barbarity unheard of before, as administration remained only nominally in the hands of the INA.



It is estimated that close to 2,000 Indians in the Andamans died as a result of Japanese brutality. Finally, the islands were again taken over by the British in October 1945.

V-J Day and India's Independence Day

For almost two decades before India actually became independent, the country's freedom fighters had been celebrating January 26 as "Poorna Swaraj Day"– after Congress leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Bose pushed for complete independence from British rule over dominion status at the Lahore session of 1929-30. But when independence finally arrived in 1947, British rulers coincided the date of transfer with the second anniversary of V-J Day, August 15. The historian Ramachandra Guha notes, "freedom finally came on a day that resonated with imperial pride rather than nationalist sentiment." Two years later when Indian leaders finished writing the country's Constitution, it was decided to adopt the document on Poorna Swaraj Day in 1950 as it was associated with national pride. January 26 has since been celebrated as India's Republic Day.

WHY THE WORLD IS WATCHING A MILITARY TAKEOVER IN MALI

The military in Mali arrested the country's president and prime minister in a coup staged after weeks of destabilizing protests over a disputed election, government corruption and a violent Islamist insurgency that has lasted for eight years. The streets of Bamako, the capital, exploded with both jubilation and gunfire after President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and his prime minister, Boubou Cissé, were detained along with other government officials. Around midnight, the president announced on state TV that he was resigning. The effects of the turmoil could spill beyond the borders of Mali, a country whose strategic location has geopolitical implications for West Africa, the Sahel, the broader Arab world, the European Union and the United States.

French forces and US advisers show the West's keen interest

France has remained deeply involved in the affairs of Mali, its former colony, decades after the country gained independence. For the French forces battling Islamists in the region, Mali is part of what some call France's "Forever War" in the Sahel, the far-stretching land beneath the Sahara. The United States, too, has military advisers in Mali, and U.S. officials have a keen interest in a stable Malian government whose interests align with the West.

Extremists driven from power, but not defeated

After a previous military coup in 2012, Islamist rebels, some with ties to al Qaeda, took advantage of the disarray to seize control of large areas of the country's north, including the ancient city of Timbuktu. Under their brutal rule, Malians in those areas under jihadist control were forced to follow a strict religious code or risk severe punishment. Women were forced into marriage, and historical sites were demolished. The rebels lost control of their territories after French forces intervened to help the Malian military drive them out. But armed groups continue to terrorize civilians in the countryside, and the violence has metastasized across borders into the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger. More than 10,000 West Africans have died, more than 1 million have fled their homes and military forces from West Africa and France have suffered many losses.

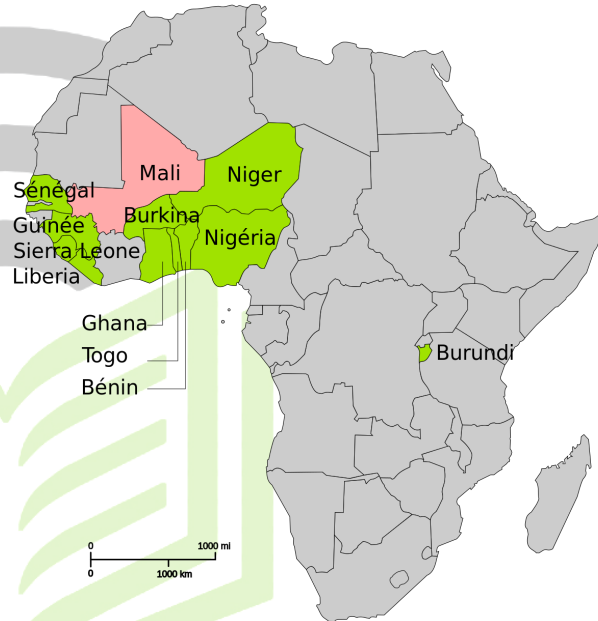
A success story turned sour



In the years following its independence from France in 1960, Mali was viewed as having achieved a good track record in democratic government. In 1996, a New York Times correspondent on a reporting trip to Mali made note of the pervasive poverty afflicting the citizenry but said the West African country nevertheless had become “one of this continent’s most vibrant democracies.” But Mali, once cited as a democratic role model in the region, has lurched from one crisis to another since the 2012 coup that overthrew President Amadou Touré a month before elections were to be held. The factors behind that coup, in part a consequence of the Arab Spring, underscore Mali’s position connecting North Africa with the rest of the continent. After the fall of Moammar Gadhafi in Libya in 2011, hundreds of heavily armed Malian rebels who had fought for the Libyan leader returned home and attacked northern towns, creating the chaos that preceded the military takeover.

Another leader falls

Keita, the president arrested in Tuesday’s coup, won office in a landslide in 2013. But whatever hopes Keita raised when he took 78 per cent of the vote, his star, and his genuine popularity, gradually faded. He vowed “zero tolerance” for corruption, but Malians came to view him with mistrust. Keita won reelection in 2018, when he ran for a second term, but only after being forced into a runoff. In recent weeks, protesters complained that those in charge had not done enough to address the corruption and bloodshed that have plagued the country. And they accused the president of stealing a parliamentary election in March and installing his own candidates. After security forces shot and killed at least 11 protesters earlier this summer, the demands for reform only grew. A team of regional mediators arrived in the capital, Bamako, to try to ease the unrest. Then the military stepped in.



THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS

In most republics, the head of state is supreme. Thus, it may have seemed unusual when Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani pleaded “helplessness” in making the decision on whether to release 400 Taliban prisoners, and said he would convene a Loya Jirga, a gathering of elders, to deliberate on it. The decision was the final stumbling block in a series of issues the Taliban has held over the government since February, when it signed a peace agreement with the U.S. These 400, explained President Ghani’s office, had been convicted of “serious crimes”, and it was not in the President’s “mandate” to pardon or release them. The Loya Jirga of approximately 3,200 representatives from various parts of Afghanistan, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, met on August 7-9, and directed the release of the men, under the condition they would not return to the battlefield, thus paving the way for the Intra-Afghan negotiations (IAN). The IAN is now expected to begin in Qatar’s capital Doha later this week, bringing together officials and negotiators of the Ghani government, the High Council for National Reconciliation and civil society representatives face to face with Taliban representatives for the first time. Signing the decree for the release of the last Taliban convicts, Mr. Ghani laid all the credit and responsibility for the decision at the Loya Jirga’s door. The truth is, despite a decade or more of democracy, and years of being a republic, Afghanistan still gives its tradition of Loya Jirgas the kind of respect that allows even an elected head



of state to defer to it. *Since at least 1709, Jirgas have brought together tribal elders to settle issues of national crises in Afghanistan.*

Historical decisions

From the momentous decision to anoint Ahmed Shah Abdali (Durrani) King in 1747, to the historic endorsement of Hamid Karzai as President of the post-Taliban republic, all major decisions in the country flowed from the elders' conference. Often, it is the leader who turns to the Jirga, as Mr. Ghani just did, when he wants a broader political consensus or a stamp of approval for a policy decision. However, not all Jirgas have endorsed the leader of the times unquestioningly. In 1928, the reformist King Amanullah was setting his country on course for a slew of moves to modernise society — declaring a constitutional monarchy, mandatory schooling for all, abolition of slavery and women's rights. He convened a Jirga to give its stamp of removal to the measures. However, when he asked his wife Soraiya to remove her veil at a public function, the act led to considerable disquiet during the Jirga. Within the year, a civil war broke out, and King Amanullah was forced into exile. Many in Afghanistan in modern times have been wary of the Jirga process, which is seen as a patriarchal structure with unlimited powers. In the run-up to the latest Jirga, activists criticised the decision to release Taliban fighters accused of the most heinous crimes as a 'pre-ordained result', under pressure from the U.S. government that wants to force the pace of the reconciliation process with the timeline of U.S. Presidential elections in November. U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad made several trips to Doha, Kabul and Islamabad in the weeks running up to the Jirga, in order to keep plans for the IAN on track. Others, especially women's rights activists have criticised both the Jirga and its decision to release Taliban prisoners as a regressive step. During the Jirga last week, at least two women representatives were heckled, even assaulted when they tried to voice their protests. Organisers countered that since 2002, the Jirga has always included women, and the latest one, which is a part of the consultative "Peace Jirga" convened by President Ghani last year to advise the government on the reconciliation process, comprises 30% women, ensuring participation, if not a resounding voice at the centuries old platform.

DreamIAS



WHY LONG-TIME ALLIES PAKISTAN & SAUDI ARABIA APPEAR TO BE DRIFTING APART

The rift between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia over Jammu and Kashmir is out in the open. A delegation led by Pakistan Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Saudi Arabia, but were denied a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Now, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to secure support.

Saudi-Pakistan ties

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan was most prominent during the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. According to reports of that time, Saudi Arabia had denounced the Indian action as "treacherous and contrary to all international covenants and human values" and found no justification for the Indian aggression except "India's desire to dismember Pakistan and tarnish its Islamic creed". Saudi Arabia is also reported to have transferred arms and equipment including the loan of some 75 aircraft to Pakistan. After the war, Saudi Arabia consistently supported the call for the return of Pakistan's prisoners of war and for dropping the Dacca (Dhaka) Trial against 195 of them. After the war, Saudi Arabia gave loans to Pakistan enabling it to buy arms worth about \$1 million by 1977, including F-16s and Harpoon missiles from the US. Saudi oil and dollars have kept Pakistan's economy on its feet after sanctions following the nuclear tests. Over the last two decades, Saudi Arabia has provided oil on deferred payments to Pakistan whenever it ran into economic difficulty. Saudi funding of madrasas have also led to their mushrooming, later giving rise to religious extremism. In 1990, Pakistan sent its ground forces to defend Saudi Arabia against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Alignment over Kashmir

The alignment over Kashmir at the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) crystallised since 1990, when insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir began. While the OIC has issued statements over the last three decades, it became a ritual of little significance to India. *Last year, after India revoked Article 370 in Kashmir, Pakistan lobbied with the OIC for its condemnation of India's move. To Pakistan's surprise, Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued statements that were nuanced rather than harshly critical of New Delhi. Over the last one year, Pakistan has tried to rouse the sentiments among the Islamic countries, but only a handful of them — Turkey and Malaysia — publicly criticised India.*

The Saudi perspective

Saudi Arabia's change in position has been a gradual process under Crown Prince MBS. As it seeks to diversify from its heavily oil-dependent economy, it sees India as a valuable partner in the region. New Delhi, for its part, has wooed the Arab world over the last six years. From Saudi Arabia to the UAE, it worked the diplomatic levers through high-level visits and dangled opportunities for investment and business. MBS, who is looking to invest in India, has taken a realistic view, along with UAE's crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed. *Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest trade partner (after China, US and Japan) and a major source of energy: India imports around 18% of its crude oil requirement from the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia is also a major source of LPG for India. And, with India stopping oil imports from Iran due to threat of US sanctions, Saudi Arabia is key in this respect as well.*

Saudi-Pakistan tension

The tension between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has been brewing for some time. In 2015, Pakistan's Parliament decided not to support the Saudi military effort to restore an internationally recognised

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



government in Yemen. Later, Pakistan's then Army chief General Raheel Sharif led the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, comprising 41 Muslim countries. In February 2019, after the Pulwama terror attack, it was Saudi Arabia and the UAE that pulled their weight to get Wing Commander Abhinandan released, apart from the US. The Saudi Crown Prince visited Pakistan and India at that time, and made it clear that he valued economic opportunities. He did not wade into the Kashmir issue in India, or the terrorism issue in Pakistan. A year after Article 370 was revoked, Qureshi belled the cat. His accusation that Saudi Arabia has failed to deliver on the Kashmir cause was an indication of Islamabad — and Rawalpindi's — frustration that OIC had not played a leadership role in backing Pakistan against India. This angered Saudi Arabia, which in November 2018 had announced a \$6.2 billion loan package for Pakistan. The package included of \$3 billion in loans and an oil credit facility amounting to \$3.2 billion. Riyadh demanded the return of the \$3 billion loan and refused to sell oil to Islamabad on deferred payment. Pakistan immediately returned \$1 billion, displaying the rift. But, in the current economic situation, Pakistan is unable to pay the next tranche. Gen Bajwa went to Riyadh in a patch-up exercise, but MBS refused to meet him. What has also angered Saudi Arabia is that Pakistan has been trying to pander to Turkey and Malaysia. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seen as trying to position himself as the new leader of Muslim world, challenging Saudi Arabia's long-held position.

The China factor

Pakistan and China have called themselves “all-weather allies” and “iron brothers”. Over the last one year, Beijing has supported Pakistan on Kashmir, raising the issue at the UN Security Council thrice. China has also emerged as Pakistan's biggest benefactor through its funding of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Originally valued at \$46 billion, China's commitment to Pakistan now stands at \$62 billion. Saudi Arabia too has invested in CPEC projects, to the tune of \$10 billion, but Pakistan now looks towards Beijing for both diplomatic and economic support. Qureshi's visit to China needs to be seen in this context. Ostensibly, he has gone for strategic dialogue with the Chinese Foreign Minister in south China's Hainan province. He called his visit a “very important trip”, and Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said it will “play an important role in further strengthening Pakistan-China All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership”.

Implications for India

India, which is closely watching the developments between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, has not said anything publicly. But, Saudi's silence on J&K as well as CAA-NRC has emboldened the Indian government. Both New Delhi and Riyadh see value in their relationship. At a time when India and China are locked in a border standoff, India would be wary of Pakistan and China teaming up. But with Saudi Arabia in its corner for now, it may have a leverage over Pakistan — Riyadh would not want a conflict and regional instability. What is key to India's calculus is that the Pakistan-China and the Pakistan-Saudi axes are not fused together at the moment: It is not a Saudi-Pakistan-China triangle. How New Delhi leverages that may decide the future of the region.

THINKING THROUGH THE NEPAL POLICY (SHYAM SARAN - FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY AND SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH. HE WAS INDIA'S AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL IN 2002-04)

On August 15, Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli made a friendly gesture towards India by telephoning Prime Minister Narendra Modi to convey greetings on India's Independence Day. This should be welcomed. This was followed by a meeting of the India-Nepal Joint Project Monitoring Committee on August 17 chaired by the Indian Ambassador to Nepal and the Nepal Foreign Secretary.



The committee was set up to review progress in the large number of bilateral cooperation projects. An India-Nepal Joint Commission meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers is due later in October but may be held virtually due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. But will the two sides hold Foreign Secretary-level talks on the vexed boundary issue that is related to Kalapani and Susta?

Unilateral actions

The Nepali side has upset the apple cart by taking a series of unilateral actions. A relatively minor dispute involving about 35 square kilometres of territory around the Kalapani springs, was expanded to claim a large wedge of Indian territory towards the east, measuring nearly 400 square kilometres. The expanded claim was incorporated into Nepal through a constitutional amendment and a revised official map. India has been confronted with a fait accompli though Nepal has conveyed its willingness to negotiate on the issue in Foreign Secretary-level talks. India should be willing to engage in talks with Nepal on all aspects of India-Nepal relations. But any talks on the Kalapani issue should be limited to the area which was the original subject for negotiations and Susta. To agree to talks which include the unilateral changes will create a very bad precedent not only in India-Nepal relations but in managing India's borders in general. This is irrespective of Nepal presenting historical documents or maps which support its claims. Borders which have been accepted by both sides for more than 100 years and which have also been reflected on their official maps cannot be unilaterally altered by one side coming up with archival material which has surfaced in the meantime. This would make national boundaries unstable and shifting, and create avoidable controversies between countries as is the case now between India and Nepal.

Geography and boundaries

The Treaty of Sugauli of 1816 sets the Kali river as the boundary between the two countries in the western sector. There was no map attached to the treaty. Nepal is now claiming that the main tributary of the Kalapani river rises east of the Lipu Lekh pass from the Limpiyadhura ridgeline and hence should serve as the border. Even if the lengthiest tributary may be one principle for a riverine boundary, which is itself debatable, it is not the only one. There are many boundaries which do not follow any geographical principle at all but are the result of historical circumstances, mutual agreement and legal recognition. The fact is that once the British side carried out detailed surveys of the region, they consistently showed the India-Nepal border heading due north of Kalapani springs to a few kilometres east of the Lipu Lekh Pass. This alignment never changed in subsequent years and was also reflected in Nepali official maps. This is just a fact. It has been argued that it was the East India Company and successor governments which engaged in "cartographic chicanery" to shift the source of the Kali river towards the east. What prevented successive Nepali governments to reject such chicanery and assert the Nepali claim? There is no record of such a claim being raised at any point including when the Company was in a generous mood, having received Nepali help in putting down the 1857 Indian war of independence. In 1969, the then Prime Minister of Nepal Kirti Nidhi Bisht, demanded that India military personnel manning 17 villages along the Nepal-Tibet border since the early 1950s be withdrawn. Here is the National Panchayat record of Bisht's statement: "The Minister informed that the check posts manned by the Indian nationals exist in seventeen villages — Gumsha, Mustang, Namche Bazar, Lamabagar, Kodari, Thula, Thumshe, Thulo, Olanchung Dola, Mugu, Simikot, Tin Kar, Chepuwa, Jhumshung, Pushu, Basuwa and Selubash." If Lipu Lekh and Kalapani were on Nepali territory then why were they omitted from the list? I have pointed out earlier that the argument that the omission was due to Nepali "magnanimity" taking into account India's security concerns vis-à-vis China is laughable. The withdrawal of Indian military personnel from the Nepal-Tibet border was precisely to win brownie points with China. The inconvenient fact is that the Chinese, at least since 1954, have accepted Lipu Lekh Pass as being in Indian territory. In the Nepal-China boundary



agreement of 1960, the starting point of the boundary is clearly designated at a point just west of the Tinker Pass.

History and ties

In a recent article (The Hindu, Editorial page, August 19, 2020), Nepali journalist Kanak Mani Dixit advised Indians “must try and understand why Nepal does not have an ‘independence day’”, the implication being that Indians should with humility remember their history as a colonised country while Nepal was always an independent nation. Independence Day has meaning for us because we engaged in a long and painful struggle for independence from British colonial rule. We also recall that it was the ruler of “independent” Nepal which sent troops to fight alongside the East India Company, mercilessly killing those who were fighting India’s first war of independence. The same independent country was happy to receive as reward chunks of Indian territory in the Terai through the treaty of 1861. If no agreement has superseded the Sugauli treaty as has been claimed then, perhaps the “Naya Muluk” received after Nepal’s alliance with the Company against Indians fighting for freedom, should be restituted. Or should this brand of “chicanery” be excused since it benefited Nepal? Reversing history selectively may seem tempting but it can open a Pandora’s box which may have irretrievably negative consequences for what Mr. Dixit rightly describes as “the most exemplary inter-state relationship of South Asia”. For India, more than the exemplary inter-state relationship, it is the unique people-to-people relations between India and Nepal; and, fortunately, inter-state relations have been unable to undermine the dense affinities that bind our peoples together. While India should reject the Nepali state’s ill-conceived territorial claims, it should do everything to nurture the invaluable asset it has in the goodwill of the people of Nepal.

SHINZO ABE RESIGNS

Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, 66, resigned Friday citing health concerns. This announcement comes days after he made at least two hospital visits in a week. Abe recently became Japan’s longest-serving leader, breaking the record of spending the maximum number of days in office that was previously set by his great-uncle, Eisaku Sato, who served as Prime Minister of Japan from 1964 to 1972.

Why has Japan’s PM Shinzo Abe resigned?

According to local news reports, Abe suffers from *ulcerative colitis*, a chronic medical condition that he has lived with since he was a teenager, but one that has exacerbated more recently. During his first term as the country’s prime minister, Abe resigned in 2007, only a year after assuming the top job. At that time, political observers had said that Abe’s sudden resignation was a combination of foreign and domestic factors, including a political stalemate in Japan over the country’s logistical support for the US invasion of Afghanistan.

What has Shinzo Abe’s tenure been like?

Abe has been *a firm conservative politician and is known for his nationalist policies, particular his leanings towards revisionist history*. These views have been visible in Abe’s domestic and foreign policy decisions for much of his tenure since he first became prime minister in 2012, but even more so in the case of *contending with Japan’s colonial history, and particularly in its role of wartime sexual exploitation, violence and slavery of ‘comfort women’ in Korea and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia*. Abe’s tenure will particularly be known for *his aggressive economic policies known as ‘Abenomics’* that focussed on Japan’s economic revival and combined structural reform, monetary easing and fiscal expansion, with the goal to increase domestic demand. Among his foreign policy plans, Abe has been known for



approaching North Korea with a firmer stance. In 2014, Abe began focussing on building ties between Japan and ASEAN, India, Australia. Some observers believe that these foreign policy moves were an attempt to offset China's influence in the region, as well its contentious ties with South Korea over several territorial and diplomatic disputes. As an example of improving ties with India, Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to attend India's Republic Day parade as the chief guest during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Despite reservations about China's growing influence, post 2014, Abe was also seen to attempt to build ties with Beijing by meeting Xi Jinping and had later announced that he had proposed the establishment of a hotline between Tokyo and Beijing to discuss and attempt to resolve issues such as maritime disputes.

What have Abe's policies been regarding Article 9 of Japan's Constitution?

Although Abe has taken several policy decisions with regard to the building of defence and security, one of *the most striking moves has been his attempts to reform and revise the Japanese Constitution's Article 9. Article 9 of Japan's Constitution was the result of the brutality of the Second World War and came into effect in May 1947. This clause, included at the behest of the United States, reads as follows: "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes." That means, under the provisions of this clause, Japan is not allowed to maintain an army, air force or navy for anything other than self defence. The country does have the Self-Defense Force, that some critics believe operates as a defacto military force. Presently, Japan has one of the largest defence budgets in the world. The revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution has been one of Abe's many goals for which he pushed hard during his tenure but was unable to achieve. Abe and his political party have openly stated that they have wanted to revise this clause and to do so, in July 2014, Abe circumvented Japanese laws and approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution to give more powers to the Self-Defense Forces. This move was done, ironically, with the approval of the US, much to the consternation of its neighbours, South Korea, North Korea and China, who opposed the move. That isn't to say that these attempts by Abe found support even within Japan. Some citizens and politicians had criticised Abe's plans, deeming them to be unconstitutional, saying that Abe had deliberately circumvented constitutional amendment procedures to further his own political goals.*

What happens next?

According to the BBC, after Abe's resignation, under the provisions of Japanese law, an acting prime minister would step in and there would be no term limit on how long the acting prime minister would stay in the role. *Abe would be replaced by deputy prime minister Taro Aso, who also serves as Japan's finance minister. Next in line would be chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga. An acting prime minister has limited powers* in some ways. For once, the BBC reports that they can't call for snap elections. Till a new leader is selected, the acting prime minister would have powers over budgets and treaties. Within the governing Liberal Democratic Party, of which Abe is president, his resignation would lead to elections to vote for a new party leader. It is these elections that would lead to a parliamentary vote to elect the new prime minister whose tenure would last till September 2021, which was the end date for Abe's tenure.

- While the foundation for "Global Partnership between Japan and India" was laid in 2001, and annual bilateral summits were agreed in 2005, Abe accelerated the pace of ties since 2012. *In August 2007, when Abe visited India for the first time as PM, he delivered the now-famous "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech — laying the foundation for his concept of Indo-Pacific. This concept has now become mainstream and one of the main pillars of India-Japan ties.* During his second term, Abe helped build the relationship further. Having visited Japan several times as Gujarat CM, Modi as PM chose Japan for his first bilateral visit outside the neighbourhood, in September 2014. Modi and Abe

[3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



agreed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to “Special Strategic and Global Partnership”. The relationship grew and encompassed issues from civilian nuclear energy to maritime security, bullet trains to quality infrastructure, Act East policy to Indo-Pacific strategy. *When Modi went to Japan in 2014, the Indo-Japan nuclear deal was still uncertain, with Tokyo sensitive about a pact with a non-Nuclear-Proliferation-Treaty member country. Abe’s government convinced the anti-nuclear hawks in Japan to sign the agreement in 2016. The pact was key to India’s deals with US and French nuclear firms, which were either owned by or had stakes in Japanese firms.*

Defence and Indo-Pacific

While the security agreement was in place since 2008, under Abe the two sides decided to have Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting (2+2), and are negotiating the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement — a kind of military logistics support pact. In November 2019, the first Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting was held in New Delhi. A pact for transfer of defence equipment and technology was also signed in 2015, an uncommon agreement for post-War Japan. *During Abe’s tenure, India and Japan came closer in the Indo-Pacific architecture. Abe had spelt out his vision of the Confluence of the Two Seas in his 2007 speech when the Quad was formed. It collapsed soon, but in October 2017, as Chinese aggression grew in the Pacific, Indian Ocean, and India’s borders in Doklam, it was Abe’s Japan that really mooted the idea of reviving the Quad. In November 2017, it was revived as Indian, Japanese, Australia and US officials met in Manila on the sidelines of the East Asia summit.*

India-China stand-offs

Since 2013, Indian and Chinese soldiers have had four publicly known border-stand-offs — April 2013, September 2014, June-August 2017, and the ongoing one since May 2020. Abe’s Japan has stood with India through each of them. During the *Doklam crisis* and the current stand-off, Japan has made statements against China for changing the status quo.

Infrastructure

During Abe’s visit in 2015, India decided to introduce the *Shinkansen system (bullet train)*, due to begin in 2022. Under Abe’s leadership, India and Japan also formed the Act East Forum and are engaged in projects in the Northeast, closely watched by China. *The two countries also planned joint projects in Maldives and Sri Lanka among others to counter Beijing’s influence.*

What next

Abe has been a valuable G-7 leader for India, focused on strategic, economic and political deliverables, and not getting distracted by India’s domestic developments — much to New Delhi’s comfort. Having hosted Modi at his ancestral home in Yamanashi, the first such reception extended to a foreign leader, Abe was feted at a roadshow in Ahmedabad. His planned visit to India last December in Guwahati, however, was cancelled due to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. New Delhi will now wait for Abe’s successor — who, as a South Block official said, “will have big shoes to fill”.

WHY CHINA HAS DECLARED WAR ON FOOD WASTAGE

China’s President Xi Jinping last week called on his country’s citizens to drastically cut down on food waste in a new initiative called the ‘Clean Plates Campaign’. The push came as the Covid-19 pandemic, devastating floods and worsening relations with major international partners have raised fears about food shortage in the world’s most populous country. Restaurants, catering associations and even the military have swiftly responded to the President’s appeal by introducing new measures.



The campaign

Xi announced the campaign, promising to strengthen legislation and other mechanisms in support, calling the problem of food waste in the country “shocking and distressing”. *Studies in recent years show that China produces around 17-18 million tonnes of food waste annually. Just as a matter of comparison, the United States, the global leader in food waste, throws away approximately 40 million tonnes of food a year.* Following Xi’s announcement, the State-run media ran “exposes” on restaurant customers ordering more than they could eat, as well as named and shamed a growing number of shows on China’s popular social media platforms with people live-streaming themselves eating large quantities and varieties of food, saying this was promoting a culture of extravagance. The compliance has been swift. A few streaming platforms pledged to crack down on such content, while the Wuhan Catering Industry Association urged restaurants in the city to *devise an “N-1” system — the number of dishes served to a group of customers in a restaurant must be at least one less than the number of people in the group.* Several restaurants around the country announced their own measures in support of the campaign, including the introduction of “waste prevention supervisors” –staff members who would help customers order just enough food to ensure there’s no wasting. The PLA Daily, the mouthpiece of China’s People’s Liberation Army, reported that the military was introducing new high-tech, high-efficiency equipment and processes — including robot cooks — to streamline cooking and cut down on wastage of food and other resources.

The backlash

Apart from the N-1 system that has generated some criticism, one restaurant in Changsha city had to apologise and backtrack following a torrent of online abuse for its decision to weigh customers before serving them. It said the weight data would be fed into an app which would then recommend the amount of food a customer should be served. *China has had memories of food regulation. Between 1958 and 1962, during his ‘Great Leap Forward’, Chairman Mao had dictated strict rules regarding what farmers could sow, and imposed food rationing. Millions of people are estimated to have starved to death.*

The timing

According to China’s National Bureau of Statistics, food prices in the country are 10% higher this July compared to last year. The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic in international trade has had a severe impact on China’s economy and cut off many of the supply chains through which it procured various kinds of food items. China’s worsening relations with countries in its own neighbourhood, and also with the US and Australia — two major sources of food imports — have added to food security concerns. To make matters worse, the recent floods across large swathes of southern China have laid to waste farms and destroyed tonnes of produce. Parts of the country have also had to deal with locust swarms destroying crops. The State media, however, has dismissed suggestions that China is facing a crisis of food shortage.

The history

In 2013, soon after Xi became President, the Chinese government had announced a similarly named “Clean your plates” campaign to reduce food waste. However, that campaign was focused more on ensuring that government officials followed austerity and cut down on extravagant feasts and receptions. According to China’s Commerce Ministry, these measures had resulted in a fall of sales of luxury food items by almost half in 2013 compared to the previous year.

THE PLA, ITS STRUCTURE AND MOTIVATIONS



It is customary for a nation to have an army but extremely rare for a political party to have one. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is an exception, as it owes allegiance to the Communist Party of China (CPC). This exclusive arrangement was formalised in December 1929 during the Ninth Meeting of the CPC at Gutian in Fujian province where Mao Zedong, while addressing the men of the Fourth Army, clarified the role of the military: it was "to chiefly serve the political ends", Mao said. Here on, absolute control of the Communist Party over the army became entrenched. Interestingly, 85 years later, on December 30, 2014, President Xi Jinping during his address to 'Military Political Work Conference' at Gutian, reiterated that the "PLA remains the Party's army, and must maintain absolute loyalty to political masters". The two most powerful organs in the Chinese system, crucial for the survival of the authoritarian regime, are the CPC and the PLA. To comprehend the aggressive behaviour of the Communist leadership, it is important to understand the symbiotic relationship between these two entities, and the nature of the generational transformation in the Chinese military.

The PLA: Birth, structure, evolution, and its symbiotic relationship with the Communist Party

The PLA traces its roots to the 'Nanchang Uprising' of August 1, 1927, the day the Communists led by stalwarts like Mao, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De rose against the nationalist forces. It played a key role in the successful culmination of the Communist revolution in 1949, and of the CPC coming to power. The PLA's iconic commanders, Mao and Deng Xiaoping, led the People's Republic of China (PRC) for almost a half century as its first and second generation leaders. Given its symbiotic relationship with the CPC, the PLA is well represented in the two apex governing bodies – in the Politburo, the PLA has 2 members out of 25, and in the Central Committee, the PLA accounts for 18-20 per cent of the 205 permanent and 171 alternate members. The Central Committee elects the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), the highest political body that is currently composed of seven members. Until 1997, the PLA had representation in the PSC as well; General Liu Huaqing was the last general to hold that position. The Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military body, is composed of the PLA top brass, appointed by the PSC. The chairman of the CMC is the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the PLA, usually the Secretary General of the CPC, and presently President Xi. Senior PLA officers are invariably members of the CPC. While commanders handle operational and training aspects, Political Commissars are responsible for personal matters, propaganda and indoctrination to establish the Party's authority over the PLA. Barely a year after its creation, China jumped into the Korean War in 1950 to take on the United States. Fighting the adversary to a stalemate, the PLA suffered over half a million casualties, including Mao's son Capt Anying. In 1962, it defeated the Indian Army in a limited conflict. However, the PLA performed poorly against the Vietnamese Army in 1979. As a sequel to introspection, it went through a sustained restructuring and modernisation process. In 1993, President Jiang Zemin, upon observing US military power on display in the 1991 Gulf War, directed the PLA to prepare for "local wars under modern conditions". This paved the way for the initiation of major doctrinal reforms in the Chinese military.

THE CHINA TWIST IN INDIA-BANGLADESH TEESTA RIVER CHALLENGE

Bangladesh is discussing an almost \$1 billion loan from China for a comprehensive management and restoration project on the Teesta river. The project is aimed at managing the river basin efficiently, controlling floods, and tackling the water crisis in summers. India and Bangladesh have been engaged in a long-standing dispute over water-sharing in the Teesta. More importantly, Bangladesh's discussions with China come at a time when India is particularly wary about China following the standoff in Ladakh.

How has the Teesta dispute progressed?



The two countries were on the verge of signing a water-sharing pact in September 2011, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was going to visit Bangladesh. But, West Bengal Chief minister Mamata Banerjee objected to it, and the deal was scuttled. After Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, he visited Dhaka in June 2015 — accompanied by Mamata Banerjee — and told Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina that he was confident they could reach a “fair solution” on the Teesta through cooperation between central and state governments. Five years later, the Teesta issue remains unresolved.

How has India’s relationship with Bangladesh played out over the years?

New Delhi has had a robust relationship with Dhaka, carefully cultivated since 2008, especially with the Sheikh Hasina government at the helm. India has benefited from its security ties with Bangladesh, whose crackdown against anti-India outfits has helped the Indian government maintain peace in the eastern and Northeast states. Bangladesh has benefited from its economic and development partnership. Bangladesh is India’s biggest trade partner in South Asia. Bilateral trade has grown steadily over the last decade: India’s exports to Bangladesh in 2018-19 stood at \$9.21 billion, and imports from Bangladesh at \$1.04 billion. India also grants 15 to 20 lakh visas every year to Bangladesh nationals for medical treatment, tourism, work, and just entertainment. A weekend shopping trip to India by Bangladesh’ elite is quite common — when the film Bahubali was released, a group of Bangladesh nationals came to India in chartered flights to watch it in Kolkata. For India, Bangladesh has been a key partner in the neighbourhood first policy — and possibly the success story in bilateral ties among its neighbours. However, there have been recent irritants in the relationship.

What are these irritants?

These include the proposed countrywide *National Register of Citizens (NRC)* and the *Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)* passed in December last year. Bangladesh had cancelled visits by ministers, and Hasina has expressed reservations about CAA. She had said that while the CAA and the proposed nationwide NRC are “internal matters” of India, the CAA move was “not necessary”. Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, who has served as India’s envoy in Dhaka, flew to Dhaka in early March to assuage such concerns. Amid discussions between Bangladesh and China, Shringla went to Bangladesh this week, too. He was the first visitor Hasina has met since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

How have relations between Bangladesh and China been developing?

“China is the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh and is the foremost source of imports. In 2019, the trade between the two countries was \$18 billion and the imports from China commanded the lion’s share. The trade is heavily in favour of China,” said Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank. Recently, *China declared zero duty on 97% of imports from Bangladesh.* The concession flowed from *China’s duty-free, quota-free programme for the Least Developed Countries.* This move has been widely welcomed in Bangladesh, with the expectation that Bangladesh exports to China will increase. *India too has provided developmental assistance worth \$10 billion, making Bangladesh the largest recipient of India’s total of \$30 billion aid globally.* China has promised around \$30 billion worth of financial assistance to Bangladesh. Additionally, Bangladesh’s strong defence ties with China make the situation complicated. *China is the biggest arms supplier to Bangladesh and it has been a legacy issue — after the liberation, officers of Pakistan Army — who were well-versed with Chinese arms — joined Bangladesh Army and that’s how they preferred Chinese weapons* As a result, Bangladesh forces are equipped with Chinese arms including tanks, missile launchers, fighter aircraft and several weapons systems. Recently, Bangladesh purchased two Ming class submarines from China. *In the wake of the Ladakh standoff, India has become more sensitive to Chinese defence inroads into Bangladesh.*



How has India been engaging with Bangladesh post CAA?

Over the last five months, India and Bangladesh have cooperated on pandemic-related moves. Hasina supported Modi's call for a regional emergency fund for fighting Covid-19 and declared a contribution of \$1.5 million in March 2020. India has also provided medical aid to Bangladesh. The two countries have also cooperated in railways, with India giving 10 locomotives to Bangladesh. *The first trial run for trans-shipment of Indian cargo through Bangladesh to Northeast states under a pact on the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports took place in July.* However, in recent weeks, Pakistan PM Imran Khan's call to Hasina raised eyebrows in Delhi. While Islamabad portrayed it as a conversation on Kashmir, Dhaka said it was about cooperating to deal with Covid-19.

How has India sought to address China's latest move?

During Shringla's recent meeting with Hasina, "security-related issues of mutual interest" were discussed. The visit tried to address issues on areas that have emerged as potential irritants in the relationship. Bangladesh expressed "deep concern" at the *rise in killings at the Indo-Bangladesh border by "BSF or Indian nationals" during the first half of this year*, and the Indian side assured that the BSF authorities have been sensitised of the matter and it will be discussed in detail at the DG-level talks between Border Guards Bangladesh and BSF to be hosted by Dhaka next month.

Among other issues:

- * The two sides agreed that Implementation of projects should be done in a timely manner, and that greater attention is required to development projects in Bangladesh under the Indian Lines of Credit.
- * Bangladesh sought return of the *Tablighi Jamaat* members impacted by the lockdown in India, and also early release of the 25 Bangladeshi fishermen in custody in Assam. India assured Bangladesh that its nationals would be able to return soon.
- * Bangladesh requested for urgent reopening of visa issuance from the Indian High Commission in Dhaka, particularly since many Bangladeshi patients need to visit India.
- * India was also requested to reopen travel through *Benapole-Petrapole land port* which has been halted by the West Bengal government in the wake of the pandemic.
- * Bangladesh told Shringla that it is ready to collaborate in the development of a Covid-19 vaccine, including its trial, and looks forward to early, affordable availability of the vaccine when ready.

What is the way ahead?

While the Teesta project is important and urgent from India's point of view, it will be difficult to address it before the West Bengal elections due next year. What Delhi can do is to address other issues of concern, which too are challenging. Now, the test will be if India can implement all its assurances in a time-bound manner. Or else, the latent anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh — which has been revived after India's CAA -NRC push — threatens to damage Dhaka-New Delhi ties.



WHY TELECOM DEPT WANTS COMPANIES TO INITIATE SECURITY AUDIT OF THEIR NETWORKS

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) is all set to direct telecom companies to undertake an "information security audit" of their networks and submit the report by October end.

What is an information security audit for telecom networks?

As the name suggests, an information security audit is a step-by-step assessment of the complete network infrastructure which checks for the equipment installed and the latest upgrades done in order to prevent any data leakages. The auditors also check the data storage and security policies of the company and check whether all sections of the company adhere to the norms set by the company itself. Apart from that, some auditing agencies also launch a controlled bug into the network of the company to check for vulnerabilities, and see what all systems are being impacted.

Why does the DoT want telcos to do this audit?

One of the main reasons for the DoT asking telecom companies to get this external audit done by an agency empanelled with the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (Cert-IN) is to check for any 'backdoor' or 'trapdoor' bugs installed on their networks. A 'backdoor' or a 'trap door' is a bug installed in the telecom hardware which allows companies to listen in or collect data being shared on the network. While it has not specifically mentioned threat from any company, DoT officials did hint that this audit was necessary since there were reports from other parts of the world of such bugs being installed in telecom networks. *The audit is likely to increase the scrutiny on Chinese vendors Huawei Telecommunication Company and ZTE, which have been alleged to spy for the Chinese government.* For example, in January 2020, the US had released a report in which it had said that Huawei had inserted 'backdoors' in telecom networks it had helped build in mobile phone networks in the US and across the world. Apart from the US, other countries such as the UK and Australia have also banned both the Chinese companies on "national security" concerns with the same allegations. Nearly all the countries that have barred the operations of these companies have cited the same law which requires Chinese firms to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies no matter where they are located in the world.

Who will do the audit? How will it help?

In its guidelines, the DoT is likely to suggest to the companies that the external audit should be done only by an agency empanelled with Cert-IN. This means that the audit will no longer remain a commercial compliance norm for the company, but will also look into the national security aspects of the telecom network. Though such internal and external audits are done by companies every three or four years, it will be the first time that the audit will be done by an agency specified by the DoT. The report of the audit is likely to help DoT put in a concrete plan to bar Chinese vendors from the Indian telecom market space if any problems are found.



THE 'QUOTA WITHIN QUOTA' DEBATE

A five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court reopened the legal debate on sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for reservations, or what is commonly referred to as "quota within quota" for SCs and STs. While the Bench ruled in favour of giving preferential treatment to certain Scheduled Castes over others to ensure equal representation of all Scheduled Castes, it referred the issue to a larger Bench to decide. This was because in a 2005 ruling, also by a five-judge Bench, the Supreme Court had ruled that state governments had no power to create sub-categories of SCs for the purpose of reservation. Since a Bench of equal strength (five judges in this case) cannot overrule a previous decision, the court referred it to a larger Bench to settle the law. The larger Bench, whenever it is set up by the Chief Justice of India, will reconsider both judgments.

What is sub-categorisation of SCs?

*States have argued that among the Scheduled Castes, there are some that remain grossly under-represented despite reservation in comparison to other Scheduled Castes. This *inequality within the Scheduled Castes is underlined in several reports, and special quotas have been framed to address it. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Bihar, special quotas were introduced for the most vulnerable Dalits. In 2007, Bihar set up the Mahadalit Commission to identify the castes within SCs that were left behind. In Tamil Nadu, a 3% quota within the SC quota is accorded to the Arundhatiyar caste, after the Justice M S Janarthanam report stated that despite being 16% of the SC population in the state, they held only 0-5% of the jobs. In 2000, the Andhra Pradesh legislature, based on the findings of Justice Ramachandra Raju, passed a law reorganising 57 SCs into sub-groups and split the 15% SC quota in educational institutions and government jobs in proportion to their population. However, this law was declared unconstitutional in the 2005 Supreme Court ruling that held states did not have the power to tinker with the Presidential list that identifies SCs and STs. Punjab too has had laws that gave preference to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs within the SC quota; this was challenged and eventually led to the latest ruling.**

What is the Presidential list?

*The Constitution, while providing for special treatment of SCs and STs to achieve equality, does not specify the castes and tribes that are to be called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This power is left to the central executive — the President. As per Article 341, those castes notified by the President are called SCs and STs. A caste notified as SC in one state may not be a SC in another state. These vary from state to state to prevent disputes as to whether a particular caste is accorded reservation or not. According to the annual report of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, there were 1,263 SCs in the country in 2018-19. *No community has been specified as SC in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep.* In the 2005 decision in E V Chinnaiah v State of Andhra Pradesh and Others, the Supreme Court ruled that only the President has the power to notify the inclusion or exclusion of a caste as a Scheduled Caste, and states cannot tinker with the list. Andhra Pradesh had submitted that the law was enacted as states had the power to legislate on the subject of education, and reservation in admission fell within its legislative domain. The court, however, rejected this argument. The Constitution treats all Schedule Castes as a single homogeneous group.*



If all SCs are treated as one group, what are the grounds for sub-categorisation?

The basis of special protections for SCs comes, in the first place, from the fact that all these castes suffered social inequity. Untouchability was practised against all these castes irrespective of economic, education and other such factors. However, the Supreme Court has engaged with the argument on whether the benefits of reservation have trickled down to the “weakest of the weak”. *The concept of a “creamy layer” within SCs was upheld by the court in a 2018 judgment in Jarnail Singh v Lachmi Narain Gupta. The “creamy layer” concept puts an income ceiling on those eligible for reservation. While this concept applies to Other Backward Castes, it was applied to promotions of Scheduled Castes for the first time in 2018. The central government has sought a review of the 2018 verdict and the case is currently pending. Punjab’s law applies a creamy layer for SCs, STs in reverse — by giving preference to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs.* This is the case that has now led to reopening the debate on sub-categorisation of scheduled castes. *In the E V Chinnaiah case in 2005, the court had held that special protection of SCs is based on the premise that “all Scheduled Castes can and must collectively enjoy the benefits of reservation regardless of interse inequality” because the protection is not based on educational, economic or other such factors but solely on those who suffered untouchability. The court had held that merely giving preference does not tinker, rearrange, subclassify, disturb or interfere with the list in any manner since there is no inclusion or exclusion of any caste in the list as notified under Article 341. The states have argued that the classification is done for a certain reason and does not violate the right to equality.* The reason they have given is that the categorisation would achieve equitable representation of all SCs in government service and would be about “real equality” or “proportional equality”.

What are the arguments against sub-categorisation?

The argument is that the test or requirement of social and educational backwardness cannot be applied to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The special treatment is given to the SCs due to untouchability with which they suffer. In a 1976 case, State of Kerala v N M Thomas, the Supreme Court laid down that “Scheduled Castes are not castes, they are class.” *The petitioner’s argument against allowing states to change the proportion of reservation is also based on the perception that such decisions will be made to appease one vote-bank or the other. A watertight President’s list was envisaged to protect from such potential arbitrary change.* Also, in the current case, the court relied on its 2018 ruling in Jarnail Singh to buttress the point that social inequities exist even among SCs. However, since that ruling is pending for review, the petitioners argued against relying on it. *In the Jarnail Singh case, the court held that the objective of reservation is to ensure that all backward classes march hand in hand and that will not be possible if only a select few get all the coveted services of the government.* “The constitutional goal of social transformation cannot be achieved without taking into account changing social realities,” the court ruled.

DOMICILE-BASED JOB QUOTA: THE LAW, SC RULINGS, AND SPECIAL CASES

The Madhya Pradesh government’s recent decision to reserve all government jobs for “children of the state” raises questions relating to the fundamental right to equality. *While domicile-based reservations have been implemented in education, courts have been reluctant to expand this to employment.* Although Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has not outlined details of the proposal, reservation solely based on place of birth would raise constitutional questions.

What does the Constitution say?

Article 16 of the Constitution, which guarantees equal treatment under law in matters of public employment, prohibits the state from discriminating on grounds of place of birth or residence. Article 16(2) states that “no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth,

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect or, any employment or office under the State". The provision is supplemented by the other clauses in the Constitution that guarantee equality. However, Article 16(3) of the Constitution *provides an exception by saying that Parliament may make a law "prescribing" a requirement of residence for jobs in a particular state. This power vests solely in the Parliament, not state legislatures.*

Why does the Constitution prohibit reservation based on domicile?

When the Constitution came into force, India turned itself into one nation from a geographical unit of individual principalities and the idea of the universality of Indian citizenship took root. *As India has common citizenship, which gives citizens the liberty to move around freely in any part of the country, the requirement of a place of birth or residence cannot be qualifications for granting public employment in any state.*

But are reservations not granted on other grounds such as caste?

Equality enshrined in the Constitution is not mathematical equality and does not mean all citizens will be treated alike without any distinction. To this effect, *the Constitution underlines two distinct aspects which together form the essence of equality law — non-discrimination among equals, and affirmative action to equalise the unequals.*

What has the Supreme Court said on reserving jobs for locals?

The Supreme Court has ruled against reservation based on place of birth or residence. In 1984, ruling in Dr Pradeep Jain v Union of India, the issue of legislation for "sons of the soil" was discussed. The court expressed an opinion that such policies would be unconstitutional but did not expressly rule on it as the case was on different aspects of the right to equality. Despite Article 16(2), "some of the States are adopting 'sons of the soil' policies prescribing reservation or preference based on domicile or residence requirement for employment or appointment... Prima facie this would seem to be constitutionally impermissible though we do not wish to express any definite opinion upon it, since it does not directly arise for consideration..." the court said. In a subsequent ruling in Sunanda Reddy v State of Andhra Pradesh (1995), the Supreme Court affirmed the observation in Pradeep Jain to strike down a state government policy that gave 5% extra weightage to candidates who had studied with Telugu as the medium of instruction. In 2002, the Supreme Court invalidated appointment of government teachers in Rajasthan in which the state selection board gave preference to "applicants belonging to the district or the rural areas of the district concerned". In 2019, the Allahabad High Court struck down a recruitment notification by the UP Subordinate Service Selection Commission which prescribed preference for women who are "original residents" of the UP alone.

What about securing jobs for locals in the private sector?

Such a law will be difficult to implement even if allowed. Private employers do not go on an annual recruitment drive to fill vacancies identified in advance but hire as and when required. The state can recommend a preference to locals but ensuring that it is followed would be difficult. *In 2017, Karnataka mulled similar legislation but it was dropped after the state's Advocate General raised questions on its legality. In 2019, the state government once again issued a notification asking private employers to "prefer" Kannadigas for blue-collar jobs.*

How do some states then have laws that reserve jobs for locals?

*Exercising the powers it has under Article 16(3), Parliament enacted the **Public Employment (Requirement as to Residence) Act**, aimed at abolishing all existing residence requirements in the states*



and enacting exceptions only in the case of the special instances of Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura and Himachal Pradesh. Constitutionally, some states also have special protections under Article 371. Andhra Pradesh under Section 371(d) has powers to have “direct recruitment of local cadre” in specified areas. In Uttarakhand, class III and class IV jobs are reserved for locals. Some states have gone around the mandate of Article 16(2) by using language. States that conduct official business in their regional languages prescribe knowledge of the language as a criterion. This ensures that local citizens are preferred for jobs. For example, states including Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu require a language test.

Beyond MP, have there been other recent moves on domicile-based job reservation?

In April, the Centre issued a notification reserving jobs for J&K domiciles expanding the definition to central government employees who had served in the erstwhile state for over 10 years. Before the abrogation of the special status of J&K in August last year, state government jobs were reserved exclusively for state subjects as per Article 370 of the Constitution. In Assam, a committee has submitted its report for implementation of a key provision of the 1985 Assam Accord, recommending reservation in jobs for those who can trace their ancestry in the state before 1951.

SC HITS OUT AT CENTRE ON LOAN MORATORIUM SCHEME

The Supreme Court criticised the Union government for “hiding behind the Reserve Bank of India” without making its stand clear on the loan moratorium scheme introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The top court wanted to know whether the deferment of loan interest to prop up borrowers through their financial crisis during the national lockdown would lead to accrual of further interest once the freeze is lifted on August 31. The government is yet to file its affidavit. The court noted that the issue had been pending indecisively for some months now and advised the government against adopting a blinkered vision, focusing only on matters of business of banks and not looking at the plight of the people financially dented by the “problems created by your lockdown”. It said the government was empowered to take an independent stand under the Disaster Management Act.

Striking a balance

Mr. Mehta said the government was working in tandem with the central bank and it was unfair to say it did not have an independent view. The court gave the Centre time till September 1 to file a detailed affidavit, laying bare its stand. *The court has been trying to strike a balance between the interests of the banks and the borrowers.* The debate was sparked by the RBI’s response in court that it would be imprudent to go for a forced waiver of interest, risking the financial viability of the banks it was mandated to regulate and putting the interests of the depositors in jeopardy. *The court is hearing a petition filed by Gajendra Sharma challenging the charging of interest rate on loans even during the three-month moratorium period declared amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown.* The central bank, in its affidavit, had said its regulatory package introduced amid the lockdown was “in its essence in the nature of a moratorium deferment and cannot be construed to be a waiver”. “Banks are commercial entities that intermediate between depositors and borrowers. They are expected to run on viable commercial considerations,” the affidavit said. It had reasoned that banks were custodians of the depositors’ money. Central to the challenge in the petition was the RBI notification of March 27. “The interest charged during moratorium period would be added up into the EMIs at the end of three-month forbearance. It will have to be paid in one go or be equally divided in all future EMIs. The monthly bill for customers will increase... In the present scenario, when all the means of livelihood has been curtailed by the Government of India by imposition of lockdown and the petitioner has no way to earn a livelihood, the imposition of interest will defeat the very purpose of permitting moratorium on loans,” the petition contended.



WHY THERE ARE DIFFERENT VOTERS LISTS, AND WHY THE GOVERNMENT WANTS A COMMON ELECTORAL ROLL

The Prime Minister's Office earlier this month held a meeting with representatives of the Election Commission and the Law Ministry to discuss the possibility of having a common electoral roll for elections to the panchayat, municipality, state assembly and the Lok Sabha. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often pitched for a single voters list. The Indian Express explains why we have different voters lists and why the government is keen on changing that.

How many types of electoral rolls do we have in our country and why the distinction?

In many states, the voters' list for the panchayat and municipality elections is different from the one used for Parliament and Assembly elections. The distinction stems from the fact that the supervision and conduct of elections in our country are entrusted with two constitutional authorities — the Election Commission (EC) of India and the State Election Commissions (SECs). Set up in 1950, the EC is charged with the responsibility of conducting polls to the offices of the President and Vice-President of India, and to Parliament, the state assemblies and the legislative councils. The SECs, on the other hand, supervise municipal and panchayat elections. They are free to prepare their own electoral rolls for local body elections, and this exercise does not have to be coordinated with the EC.

So do all states have a separate voters list for their local body elections?

No. Each SEC is governed by a separate state Act. Some state laws allow the SEC to borrow and use the EC's voter's rolls in toto for the local body elections. In others, the state commission uses the EC's voters list as the basis for the preparation and revision of rolls for municipality and panchayat elections. Currently, all states, except Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, adopt EC's rolls for local body polls.

Why is the Union government working on a common electoral roll for elections to all local bodies, state assemblies and Lok Sabha?

First, the common electoral roll is among the promises made by the BJP in its manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections last year. It ties in with the party's commitment to hold elections simultaneously to the Lok Sabha, state assemblies and local bodies, which is also mentioned in the manifesto. The incumbent government has pitched a common electoral roll and simultaneous elections as a way to save an enormous amount of effort and expenditure. It has argued that the preparation of a separate voters list causes duplication of essentially the same task between two different agencies, thereby duplicating the effort and the expenditure. The pitch for a single voters list is not new. The Law Commission recommended it in its 255th report in 2015. The EC too adopted a similar stance in 1999 and 2004.

How does the government intend to implement it?

In the meeting called by the Prime Minister's Office on August 13, two options were discussed. First, a constitutional amendment to Articles 243K and 243ZA that give the power of superintendence, direction and control of preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of local body elections to the SECs. The amendment would make it mandatory to have a single electoral roll for all elections in the country. Second, to persuade the state governments to tweak their respective laws and adopt the Election Commission's (EC) voters list for municipal and panchayat polls.

WHAT THE EC HAS SAID ON VOTING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

[3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



The Election Commission released guidelines for the conduct of elections during the pandemic. This effectively rules out postponement of Assembly elections in Bihar, due this year. A look at the restrictions the EC has imposed on campaigning, and why it decided against delaying polls:

How widely has Covid-19 spread in Bihar?

Bihar is among the top five states in terms of rate of growth of cases, at 4.655 per day in the last one month, second only to Andhra Pradesh among states with a major caseload. In August, Bihar's caseload has increased from about 54,000 to 1.2 lakh. Compare this to the start of July, when the count was less than 10,000. Until Monday's update by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Bihar has had 1.22 lakh cases.

So, why has the EC decided against deferring elections?

The Election Commission hasn't made any official statement on the timing of elections. Unless the EC says something publicly otherwise, it is presumed that polls will be held on schedule. According to sources, the Commission is convinced that elections can be held successfully with proper supervision and precautions as countries like Singapore and South Korea have demonstrated recently. Hence, the EC has released guidelines for elections based on feedback from political parties.

What precautions have been taken for voting during the pandemic?

Most importantly, *Covid-19 patients and suspected cases will be allowed to vote — in the “last hour of the poll day”. Others will have to mandatorily wear gloves before casting their vote on the EVM, according to the new EC guidelines for conducting elections amidst a pandemic. The EC has capped the size of the campaign squad to three people for door-to-door visits and allowed only five cars, instead of 10, in a candidate's convoy for roadshows. Only two people will accompany a candidate for filing her nomination papers. Not more than 1,000 voters, down from the current limit of 1,500, can vote at one polling station. Temperature check of all voters at the polling station, and wearing masks will be compulsory on the day of voting. “If temperature is above the set norms of MoHFW (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare) at first reading, then it will be checked twice and if it remains, then the elector shall be provided with token/certificate and will be asked to come for voting at the last hour of poll. At the last hour of poll, such electors shall be facilitated voting, strictly following Covid-19 related preventive measures,” the guidelines state. Patients under quarantine will also be allowed to vote during the last hour, while strictly following preventive measures. A separate set of guidelines would be issued for voters living in areas notified as “containment zone”.* Friday's guidelines suggest keeping sufficient number of polling staff and EVMs in reserve in case any polling personnel displays Covid-19 symptoms. Although the EC has permitted physical campaigning for candidates and political parties following social distancing norms, it has said the maximum number of attendees at a rally or a gathering should not “exceed the limit prescribed by State Disaster Management Authority for public gatherings”.

What have the political parties said in their feedback to EC?

Fifteen parties responded to EC's call for feedback. Only four parties — LJP, NCP, National People's Party (NPP) and AAP — sought postponement of elections due to the pandemic. While the RJD had earlier questioned the need to hold elections during a pandemic, it has not categorically asked the EC to postpone them. And the Congress, whose spokesperson Premchand Mishra has often demanded postponement of polls, has not said so in its feedback to the EC. The ruling JD(U) wants the state elections to be held on one day (as opposed to multiple phases) because of the pandemic. Digital campaigning has turned out to be a hot-button issue with opposition parties RJD and CPM, as well as NDA partner LJP opposing these. The Congress, CPI and CPM are against limiting campaigning to the digital medium. It has said door-to-door campaigning should be permitted, but the size of the campaign



squad should be limited to 10. The party has also called for curbs on full-page newspaper advertisements on the day of polling. While the BJP has supported virtual meetings and rallies, it has also said physical campaigning cannot be done away with since every voter cannot afford a mobile device. Interestingly, the BJP does not want convicts or undertrial prisoners to campaign virtually. That apart, the BJP has suggested that the additional expenditure on Covid-related precautions (masks, sanitisers, PPE kits) should either be exempted or charged to the party's account, or the expenditure limit for a candidate should be increased to accommodate such expenditure. The Congress and RJD suggested that elections in Bihar be conducted through ballot papers as the chances of Covid-19 spread are greater if everyone is pressing the same set of buttons on an EVM.

Why are parties opposing digital campaigning?

The main argument against virtual rallies and gatherings is that these will disturb the level-playing field and skew it in favour of the resource-rich parties that can arrange equipment for shooting and telecasting such events. The Congress has alleged that digital campaigning could be challenging to monitor for the EC and hence could be used by parties to evade the Model Code of Conduct. Most parties, including the BJP, agree that a push of campaigning exclusively in the digital mode would be unreasonable given the digital divide in the country. The EC hasn't said anything officially on digital campaigning. However, senior officers have told this newspaper that the Commission will neither accept the demand to ban it nor limit campaigning to the virtual mode. In other words, both digital and physical campaigning will be allowed in Bihar elections — the latter with mandatory precautions.

NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY

There is something about the nature of the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund that has led to demands for its scrutiny. *While the Supreme Court has rejected a writ petition calling for a funds diversion from this fund to the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and also denied the petitioners' demand that the "public charitable trust" be audited by the CAG, questions remain about its need, operation and its persisting lack of transparency.* A three-judge Bench asserted that no exception could be taken to the constitution of yet another public charitable trust at a time of a raging COVID-19 pandemic. But the need for a fresh trust when there is the PM's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) with a substantial corpus in place is not clear. Since the PM CARES Fund existed independent of budgetary support or government money, the Court's reasoning was that there was "no occasion" for a CAG audit. However, the concern is not about the legal basis or the absence of a CAG audit, or whether it is superfluous or indeed essential. As responses to RTI queries on the Fund reveal, the government is not forthcoming on questions on its transparency or accountability. Queries on the trust deed for the Fund, and its creation and operation have been summarily dismissed by arguing that the Fund was not a "public authority" even though the PM is its ex-officio chairman and three Cabinet ministers are its trustees. And, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs had also treated it as a fund set up by the Centre.

Since the trust was created, lakhs of public and private sector employees have donated a day's salary to it, with some of them claiming that this deduction was done without their explicit consent. Many public sector units and corporate entities too have made donations because of a proviso allowing uncapped corporate donations that would qualify as corporate social responsibility (CSR) expenditure. Earlier, a government panel had rightly suggested that the double benefit of tax exemption would be a "regressive incentive". *Thus far, the exact amount of donations and a clear break-up of the expenditure from the fund have not been provided apart from an announcement in May that ₹ 3,100 crore had been sanctioned from it to be spent on ventilators, migrant worker welfare and vaccine development. States have led the response to COVID-19 and their resources have increasingly been stretched by the continuing*



rise in infections and deaths, which have crossed the 2.8 million and 54,000 mark, respectively. At the very least, RTI requests that seek to understand how funds are being received and how they are being disbursed so far should be seen as legitimate. Also, more needs to be done by the government to publicise donations to the more accountable NDRF which allows for a transfer of funds to States.

ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT: A BRIEF AND NOT-SO-AFFECTIONATE HISTORY

A key component of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech on August 15 was devoted to the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. However, several bits of what he said on achieving "Atmanirbharta" were eerily similar to the language of the now-defunct Planning Commission. Are you confused about what "Atmanirbhar" actually means? Frankly, if you are not confused then perhaps you should be. *That's because "Atmanirbhar" could be interpreted either as "self-reliance" or as "self-sufficiency".* The two sounds similar but there are crucial differences when one refers to them in the context of policymaking. The confusion started from the very day this mission, as it were, was announced. On May 12, the PM had said, and I am quoting from the Press Information Bureau's official release, "The state of the world today teaches us that (AtmaNirbhar Bharat) "Self-reliant India" is the only path. It is said in our scriptures — EshahPanthah. That is — self-sufficient India". As you notice, the *PM used both the phrases to refer to "Atmanirbhar"*. So, let me quickly attempt to answer some key questions that you might have.

First up: What is the difference between self-reliance and self-sufficiency when it comes to policymaking?

When a country wants to be self-sufficient, it essentially wants to produce all the goods and services it needs by itself and does not want to depend on the rest of the world. In other words, it wants to cut down on all its imports and isolate itself. In contrast, self-reliance typically means that the country wants to have enough resources — typically foreign exchange reserves — to pay for what it wants to import. Self-reliance is accepting that no country can be self-sufficient and thus it is better to become so economically prosperous that the country has enough forex reserves to pay for what it cannot produce at home or what could be imported from abroad for cheaper.

The second key question is: Are either of these new ideas?

Actually, no. From 1951 up until 2014, when Mr Modi abolished the Planning Commission and replaced it by Niti Aayog, India followed Five Year Plans and in every plan document, achieving self-reliance or self-sufficiency was one of the core goals. Of course, *in the first two FYPs (1951 to 1961), Indian policymakers prioritised becoming self-sufficient — and this involved import substitution. But when this policy did not work, the planner of the economy shifted to achieving "self-reliance" from the 3rd FYP (1961-1966) onwards. The idea was still to reduce dependence on the rest of the world but from this point onwards the focus was more on having enough forex to buy what India needed. This was to be achieved by raising exports and reducing imports. With each passing plan-period, the country adopted more and more restrictive controls on imports such as higher import duties, massive license-permit raj on who could import what, how much and for what reason. But these good intentions were paving the proverbial road to hell. In reality, this approach only led to black marketing of imports on the one hand — those who got the licence to import then sold their quota at a higher price within the country — and promoted inefficiencies in domestic industries, on the other. The idea was that India should protect its "infant industries" and allow them to grow strong before they face competition. To aid their growth, all imports barring the "essential" ones were to be discouraged. But this created a system of perverse incentives where domestic firms had no reason to become more efficient. Of course, the eventual cost of this approach was borne by the common Indians at large because as consumers, they continued to get sub-standard goods*



*or no goods at all while inefficient industrialists prospered. It formalised a system of crony capitalism. This push for self-reliance reached its crescendo during the 6th and 7th FYP (1980-1990) when policies of import-substitution and license-permit raj ruled the roost. But all along these years, the share of India's exports in world trade was coming down; between 1953 and 1990, the share of India's exports in world trade fell by a whopping two-thirds from already meagre 1.4% to an almost insignificant 0.5%. Eventually, in June 1991, India was staring at a crisis with forex barely enough to cover for imports of 13 days! Today, thanks to liberalisation, the Indian economy is roughly six-times what it was in 1991 and we have enough forex to cover over 13 months of imports. But the fascination with self-reliance did not end in 1991 — the mantra continued to dominate FYPs. For instance, the 9th Plan (1997-2002) stated that "self-reliance must remain an important component of (India's) development policy and strategy". However, it was also becoming clear to planners and policymakers that in a free market economy — as against a "planned" one — it was not possible to control what people buy. Yet the plan document stated: "It is the responsibility of the government to create conditions by which such tendencies can be corrected by the agents [that is, individual economic agents like you and me] themselves". The instruction asking the government to "create conditions" so that people do not over-import is noteworthy. Also noteworthy is that "Atmanirbharta" as a concept is not at all new. It is as old as India itself and frankly, it is this policy — even more than having a government-dominated planned economy model (China has been dominated by the government but still grew very fast) — that is responsible for keeping Indians poor by not letting the economy grow above the *so-called Hindu rate of growth of less than 4%* for several decades. It is possible to argue that India can make Atmanirbharta — either self-reliance or self-sufficiency — work this time around. But, as the brilliant essayist Francis Bacon said, hope is a good breakfast but a bad supper. *The government has already restarted resorting to bans and handing out import licences. The justifications are also the same — be vocal for local — or, in other words, protect domestic firms and help them grow. Just remember: As in the past, the cost of this forced inefficiency will be paid by people at large.**

WHY PM MODI HAS ANNOUNCED AN EXPANSION OF THE NCC

In his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about the *expansion of the National Cadet Corps (NCC) in coastal and border districts of India. He announced that from the 173 coastal and border districts, one lakh cadets, a third of them girls, will be trained.* A look at the NCC, arguably the *world's largest voluntary uniformed youth organisation* and significance of its expansion in coastal and border districts of the country and the road ahead.

Prime Minister's Announcement.

"In border areas, the Army will train the cadets. In the coastal area, the Navy will train the cadets. And where there are air bases, the Air Force will undertake training activities. Border and coastal areas will get trained manpower to fight with disasters. Youth will acquire required skills for careers in armed forces," he said in his speech. *Expansion of NCC in the border and coastal area has been under consideration of the Ministry of Defence for quite some time. There have also been discussions about increasing the footprints of the organisation in the tribal areas too.* On May 5, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated that the MoD was determined to go ahead with the expansion in coastal and border areas.

The organisation

The NCC, which was formed in 1948, has its roots to British era uniformed youth entities like University Corps or University Officer Training Corps. Currently the NCC has a strength of around 14 lakh cadets from Army, Navy and Air Force wings. It enrolls cadets at high school and college level and also awards



certificates on completion of various phases. *Headed by a Director General of three-star military rank, the NCC falls under the purview of MoD and is led by serving officers from the Armed forces at various hierarchical positions.* The NCC currently has *17 regional directorates which govern the NCC in units in various states or groups of states and union territories.* Each school and college units have Associate NCC Officers and cadets are also assigned various leadership roles in the form of cadet appointments. Of the total 14 lakh strength, *a little less than one third are girl cadets.* The *NCC cadets receive basic military training at various levels and also have academic curriculum basics related to Armed forces and their functioning.* Various training camps, adventure activities and military training camps are an important aspect of NCC training. NCC cadets have played an important role over the years in relief efforts during various emergency situations. During the ongoing pandemic, over 60,000 NCC cadets have been deployed for voluntary relief work in coordination with district and state authorities across the country.

Significance of expansion in border and coastal area

While the NCC does have units in several border and coastal districts, officials believe there is a lot of scope for expansion. *Restructuring of the NCC was one of the key recommendations of the Committee of Experts (CoE) headed by Lt Gen DB Shekatkar (Retd) and constituted by then Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar back in mid-2016.* Speaking to Express after the Prime Minister's speech, Gen Shekatkar said, "There is certainly scope for NCC to increase its footprint *in coastal and border areas. In the coastal regions, where youth are already familiar with the sea, the training will increase interest in careers in Navy, Coast Guard and also Merchant shipping avenues. In the border area, the trained cadets can play an important role in various contingencies and also in supporting roles to the Armed forces in various roles.*"

Road ahead for the NCC

In his interaction with the NCC directorates across India on May 5, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had stressed on the 'modernisation of NCC with a view to make it more relevant to the new and changed times.' And also to 'make the NCC activities compatible with the semester system of the colleges and universities.' Lt Gen Shekatkar said, "*NCC has a dual funding model where both the centre and states or union territories provide budgetary support.* Many states have shown lack of seriousness towards this issue. However, the CoE has recommended that along with Defence Ministry, the Home Ministry and Education Ministry should also contribute towards the NCC, considering the importance of this institution to education and overall security." *From the current strength of 14 lakh, the NCC is slated to grow upto 15 lakh cadet strength when the expansion in coastal and border areas is implemented.*

BEHIND PM MODI'S THREE BIG DIGITAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi used the Independence Day speech to launch the National Digital Health Mission, announce a new cyber security policy and promise optical fibre connectivity to all six lakh villages in 1,000 days.

Optical-fibre connectivity

Modi government calls it the "world's largest connectivity project", but BharatNet — which envisages laying of about 8 lakh kilometre of incremental optical fibre cable (OFC) to all the 2,50,000-plus Gram Panchayats (GP) in the country at an estimated cost of ₹ 42,068 crore (\$6.2 billion) — has had significant snags in deployment for years now. First, it was unable to meet its March 2020 deadline for its second phase of deployment, which was shifted to August 2021. Even this month, the state-run Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) did not have any bidders for a maintenance and upkeep tender for the fibre that

[3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



has already been laid. Some told The Indian Express that the decision to keep out Chinese equipment and vendors for 4G work and the dire financial situation of the teleco could be the reason bidders are not showing interest. States have been asking for more funds for this second phase and lamenting a lack of labour resources due to the migrant exodus. Also, there aren't many private players utilising the already-laid fibre to provide services from the gram panchayats onwards, even as rural internet penetration is growing independently through private telecom players. Further, the quality of BSNL's existing fibre is subpar. "We couldn't even find OFC in some of the locations where they supposedly existed. In some other places, the fibre was cut and they were not repairing it," a BBNL official pointed out last year. *Initiated by the UPA government in October 2011, BharatNet was originally named National Optical Fibre Network or NOFN. It's being financed by the Universal Service Obligation Fund of the Department of Telecommunications, through a 5 per cent levy on the revenues of private telecom service providers. The project's primary objective is to extend fibre connectivity — available at the state capital, district headquarters and blocks — to every panchayat, thereby providing access to broadband internet services to 69 per cent of India's rural population. Phase I of BharatNet, which commenced in June 2014 after the Narendra Modi-led government took over, was completed in December 2017. It, in fact, over-achieved the 1 lakh target for this phase by covering 1,22,908 panchayats with an investment of around \$1.64 billion (Rs 11,200 crore). In the second phase, the remaining 1,29,827 gram panchayats are to be covered through 5 km of new fibre per gram panchayats. This phase incorporates a mix of both underground and aerial fibre as well as radio and satellite connectivity to reach more inaccessible locations such as Jammu and Kashmir, Northeast, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.*

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL HEALTH ID ANNOUNCED BY PM MODI?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of a national health ID for every Indian finds its roots in a 2018 Niti Aayog proposal to create a centralised mechanism to uniquely identify every participating user in the National Health Stack.

What is the national health ID system?

The national health ID will be a repository of all health-related information of a person. According to the National Health Authority (NHA), every patient who wishes to have their health records available digitally must start by creating a Health ID. Each Health ID will be linked to a health data consent manager — such as National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) — which will be used to seek the patient's consent and allow for seamless flow of health information from the Personal Health Records module. The Health ID is created by using a person's basic details and mobile number or Aadhaar number. This will make it unique to the person, who will have the option to link all of their health records to this ID.

What was the original proposal for the health ID?

The National Health Policy 2017 had envisaged creation of a digital health technology eco-system aiming at developing an integrated health information system that serves the needs of all stakeholders and improves efficiency, transparency and citizens' experience with linkage across public and private healthcare. In the context of this, central government's think-tank Niti Aayog, in June 2018, floated a consultation of a digital backbone for India's health system — National Health Stack. As part of its consultation, Niti Aayog proposed a Digital Health ID to "greatly reduce the risk of preventable medical errors and significantly increase quality of care". This, in addition to the system enabling users "to obtain a longitudinal view of their healthcare records". This proposal was then further taken up by the Central government with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the NHA, and the Ministry of Electronics and IT preparing a strategy overview document last month for "Making India a Digital Health Nation Enabling Digital Healthcare for all".



DreamIAS



Which systems does the national health ID interact with?

As envisaged, various healthcare providers — such as hospitals, laboratories, insurance companies, online pharmacies, telemedicine firms — will be expected to participate in the health ID system. The strategy overview document points out that while option of digital Health ID will be there, in case a person does not want Health ID, then also treatment should be allowed.

Have there been global instances of such a centralised health record system?

In 2005, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) started deployment of an electronic health record systems with a goal to have all patients with a centralised electronic health record by 2010. While several hospitals acquired electronic patient records systems as part of this process, there was no national healthcare information exchange. The program was ultimately dismantled after a cost to the UK taxpayer was more than £12 billion, and is considered one of the most expensive healthcare IT failures. According to The Independent, the project had been beset by changing specifications, technical challenges and clashes with suppliers, which left it years behind schedule and way over cost.

HOW THE NATIONAL RECRUITMENT AGENCY WILL STREAMLINE THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided to set up a National Recruitment Agency (NRA). The proposed NRA will conduct a common preliminary examination for various recruitments in the central government.

Why is the NRA needed?

As of now, aspirants have to take different exams that are conducted by various agencies for central government jobs. According to C Chandramouli, Secretary, Department of Personnel and Training, *on an average 2.5 crore to 3 crore aspirants appear for about 1.25 lakh vacancies in the central government every year.* As and when it will be set up, the *NRA will conduct a common eligibility test (CET) and based on the CET score a candidate can apply for a vacancy with the respective agency.*

Will the NRA conduct a test for all government vacancies?

Initially, it will organise a CET to screen/shortlist candidates for the Group B and C (non -technical) posts, which are now being conducted by the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), Railways Recruitment Board (SSC) and Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS). Later on, more exams may be brought under it. The agency will have representatives from SSC, IBPS and RRB. The test will be conducted for three levels: graduate, higher secondary (12th pass) and the matriculate (10th pass) candidates. However, the present recruitment agencies— IBPS, RRB and SCC — will remain in place. Based on the screening done at the CET score level, final selection for recruitment shall be made through separate specialised Tiers (II, III, etc.) of examination which shall be conducted by the respective recruitment agencies. The curriculum for CET would be common.

Each district to have an examination centre

To make it easier for candidates, examination centres would be set up in every district of the country. *A special focus will be on creating examination infrastructure in the 117 'Aspirational Districts'. The government says that the move will benefit the poor candidates, as in the present system they have to appear in multiple examinations conducted by multiple agencies.* They have to incur expenditure on



examination fees, travel, boarding, lodging and other things. The single examination is expected to reduce the financial burden on such candidates.

How long will the CET score be valid?

The CET score of a candidate shall be valid for a period of three years from the date of declaration of the result. The best of the valid scores shall be deemed to be the current score of the candidate. While there will be no restriction on the number of attempts to be taken by a candidate to appear in the CET, it will be subject to the upper age limit. However, the relaxation in the upper age limit shall be given to candidates of SC/ST/OBC and other categories as per the extant policy of the Government.

What will be the medium of CET?

The CET will be conducted in multiple languages. According to Minister of DoPT Jitendra Singh, *the exam will be conducted in 12 languages that are in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India.*

Will it lead to speedy recruitment?

The government says that a single eligibility test would “significantly reduce” the recruitment cycle. *Even some of the departments have indicated their intention to do away with any second-level test and go ahead with recruitment on the basis of CET scores, Physical Tests and Medical examination, say sources.*

How much money will be spent on the NRA?

Initially, the Union Cabinet has approved an amount of ₹ 1517.57 crore for the NRA, for a period of 3 years. The money will be used for setting up of NRA, and examination centres in ‘aspirational districts’.

RAILWAYS DEPLOYS ‘NINJAS’ FOR SURVEILLANCE

The Railways said it has introduced a drone-based surveillance system to enhance security at railway stations, tracks and workshops. “Eye in the Sky: Improving Surveillance System, Railways has recently procured Ninja Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAV]. With real-time tracking, video streaming & automatic fail safe mode, the drones will enhance monitoring of the railway assets and ensure additional safety for passengers.”

Training given

*An official statement said that the Railway Protection Force (RPF) had planned extensive use of drones for security purpose and had so far procured nine drones at a cost of ₹ 31.87 lakh at South Eastern Railway, Central Railway, Modern Coaching Factory, Rae Bareli and South Western Railway. Additionally, 17 more drones are planned for purchase at an estimated ₹ 97.52 lakh. In total, 19 RPF personnel have been trained in operation and maintenance of drones, of which four have received licences for flying drones. The Ninja UAV procured by Railways will be able to help inspect safety of railway assets, yards, workshops and car sheds. “It can be used to launch surveillance on criminal and anti-social activities like gambling, throwing of garbage, hawking etc in Railway premises. It may be deployed for analysis of data collected which may prove to be extremely useful in vulnerable sections for safe operations of trains,” the statement said. In addition, these drones *can also be utilised at disaster sites for helping in rescue, recovery, restoration and coordinating efforts of various agencies as well as mapping of railway assets to assess encroachments. “A drone camera can cover a large area which requires 8-10 RPF personnel,” the statement added.**



AN AIR-TIGHT CASE

A year and a half after the dastardly terror attack on a Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Pulwama that killed 40 personnel, the National Investigation Agency has filed a chargesheet against 19 people including Maulana Masood Azhar, the leader of the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed, for planning the attack. Considering the difficulties in piecing together the minutiae in the case, the agency's painstaking effort must be acknowledged. The identity of the key perpetrators was never in doubt after the JeM claimed responsibility immediately after the attack in February 2019. The chargesheet details the role of the JeM's handlers and its local associates in Kashmir and how the attack was in the works since 2016. The JeM's role was in reconnaissance, training and indoctrination, but the group could not have procured and transported the high-intensity explosives without the involvement of the Pakistani security establishment. The chargesheet's investigation, based on forensic evidence — DNA analysis of the remains of the suicide bomber, IP address tracking of the video released by the JeM claiming responsibility, examination of the battered vehicle that carried the explosives, among others — therefore makes a thorough claim on JeM's and Pakistan's role in the attack. The Pulwama attack was followed by the bombing of a "terror training centre" in Balakot in Pakistan by the Indian Air Force and retaliatory air strikes by Pakistan. These have resulted in a breakdown of diplomatic ties and deterioration of every aspect of relations between the countries. But the Pulwama investigation could present an opportunity for Pakistan to initiate meaningful changes in its approach towards cross-border terror, if indeed the Imran Khan-led government is keen on reforming its deep State.

For the Indian government, the chargesheet presents a case not just for detailing the role of Pakistan and its proxy actors in Kashmir, but to re-evaluate its strategy. *The involvement of a local Kashmiri youth in the attack as a suicide bomber, years after militancy had waned in the Valley, was also a warning about the alienation setting into the Valley. The hollowing out of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, the bifurcation of the State and the demotion of J&K as a Union Territory; the detention of scores of political leaders including mainstream actors; and the continuing restrictions on access to broadband Internet have deepened the alienation. The prevention of terror attacks will entail not only security and diplomatic measures to isolate and destroy terror outfits such as the JeM, but also addressing the roots of alienation that contribute recruits to the cause of terrorism.*

WHY THE PUNJAB CM HAS WARNED AGAINST RESTARTING SYL CANAL WORK

Opposing the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal project and staking claim to Yamuna's waters, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh Tuesday warned the Centre that his state will burn if forced to go ahead with the project. Reiterating the need for a tribunal, Amarinder said the SYL issue had the "potential to disturb nation's security". Here is a look at the decades-old issue and why it has come up again now.



What is the SYL canal issue?

At the time of reorganisation of Punjab in 1966, the issue of sharing of river waters between both the states emerged. Punjab refused to share waters of Ravi and Beas with Haryana stating it was against the riparian principle. Before the reorganisation, in 1955, out of 15.85 MAF of Ravi and Beas, the Centre had allocated 8 MAF to Rajasthan, 7.20 MAF to undivided Punjab, 0.65MAF to Jammu and Kashmir. Out of 7.20 MAF allocated, Punjab did not want to share any water with Haryana. In March 1976, when Punjab Reorganisation Act was implemented, the Centre notified fresh allocations, providing 3.5 MAF To Haryana. Later, in 1981, the water flowing down Beas and Ravi was revised and pegged at 17.17 MAF, out of which 4.22 MAF was allocated to Punjab, 3.5 MAF to Haryana, and 8.6 MAF to Rajasthan. Finally, to provide this allocated share of water to southern parts of Haryana, a canal linking the Sutlej with the Yamuna, cutting across the state, was planned. Finally, the construction of 214-km SYL was started in April 1982, 122 km of which was to run through Punjab and the rest through Haryana. Haryana has completed its side of the canal, but work in Punjab has been hanging fire for over three decades.

Why has the SYL canal come up again now?

The issue is back on centrestage after the Supreme Court directed the chief ministers of Punjab and Haryana on July 28 to negotiate and settle the SYL canal issue. Earlier, the meetings were taking place between the chief secretaries of both the states. The apex court asked for a meeting at the highest political level to be mediated by the Centre so that the states reach a consensus over the completion of SYL canal. Union Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat organised the meeting between both the chief ministers on Tuesday. The meeting remained inconclusive with Shekhawat expressing the view that the construction of the SYL canal should be completed. But Amarinder refused categorically. Now, another meeting will be held soon to take up the issue.

Why has Amarinder warned of violence in Punjab if the project is restarted?

Amarinder's warning is based on the bloody history around the SYL canal. The trouble-torn days of terrorism in Punjab started in the early 1980s when work on the SYL started. When Indira Gandhi launched the construction of SYL in Kapoori village in April 1982, Akalis launched an agitation in the form of Kapoori Morcha to protest against the proposed sharing of waters. In July 1985, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the then SAD chief Harchand Singh Longowal signed an accord for a new tribunal. A few days later, on August 20, 1985, Longowal was assassinated by militants. Five years later, a chief engineer ML Sekhri and a superintending engineer Avtar Singh Aulakh were killed by militants. Punjab feels it utilised its precious groundwater resources to grow crop for the entire country and should not be forced to share its waters as it faces desertification. It is feared that once the construction of the canal restarts, the youth may start feeling that the state has been discriminated against. The chief minister fears Pakistan and secessionist organisations like Sikh For Justice could exploit this and foment trouble in the state.

Why does Punjab want a new tribunal to look at water sharing among the many states?

The state wants a tribunal seeking a fresh time-bound assessment of the water availability. The state has been saying that till date there has been no adjudication or scientific assessment of Punjab river waters. *The BBMB had reported that availability of Ravi-Beas water had come down from the estimated 17.17 MAF in 1981 to 13.38 MAF in 2013. A fresh Tribunal could ascertain all this, Punjab believes.*

Why is Punjab not willing to share water?

Punjab is facing severe water crisis due to over-exploitation of its underground aquifers for the wheat/paddy monocycle. *According to the Central Underground Water Authority's report, its*

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



underground water is over-exploited to meet the agriculture requirements in about 79 per cent area of the state. Out of 138 blocks, 109 are “over-exploited”, two are “critical” five are “semi-critical” and only 22 blocks are in “safe” category.

BARRAGE ACROSS NARMADA: PROMISE OF SWEET WATER, WORRIES ABOUT HILSA

The Gujarat government recently awarded the contract for a barrage project to a joint venture of Dilip Buildcon Ltd and Hindustan Construction Company Ltd. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017 laid the foundation stone; Chief Minister Vijay Rupani last week announced the beginning of construction. The **₹4,167-crore Bhadbhut project in Bharuch** is meant to solve freshwater problems in this region of Gujarat. It has also faced protests from local fishermen for its likely impact on fishing patterns, notably those of hilsa.

What is the Bhadbhut project?

It is planned to be a 1.7-km causeway-cum-weir barrage with 90 gates, across the river Narmada, 5 km from Bhadbhut village, and 25 km from the mouth of the river, where it flows into the Gulf of Khambhat. *The barrage will stop most of the excess water flowing out of the Sardar Sarovar Dam from reaching the sea and thus create a “sweet water lake” of 600 mcm (million cubic metres) on the river.* The barrage will also have *a six-lane road that will connect the left and right banks of the river and provide shorten the land distance between two large industrial estates in Surat and Bharuch.* The project also aims to prevent flooding in years when rainfall is higher than normal. Embankments 22 km long will be made and will extend upstream towards Bharuch, from either side of the river.

Why was the need felt?

The main purpose of the project is to prevent salinity ingress. *At the beginning of the 21st century, an estimated 16.30 million acre feet (MAF) of water used to be released from the dam. By 2017, when the height of the dam rose, flow into the river reduced to 4.7 MAF. Due to the reduced flow of fresh water, saline seawater gushes into the Narmada estuary during high tide, thus increasing salinity along the banks. The sweet water from the reservoir will aim to meet the residential and industrial water requirements of Bharuch, Ankleshwar and Dahej.* The project is part of the larger Kalpasar Project, which entails construction of a 30-km dam across the Gulf of Khambhat between Bharuch and Bhavnagar districts. The reservoir is meant to tap the waters of the Narmada, Mahisagar and Sabarmati.

Why are fishermen upset?

The barrage is expected to interfere *with the migration and breeding cycle of hilsa. A marine fish, hilsa migrate upstream and arrives in the brackish water of the Narmada estuary near Bharuch for spawning usually during the monsoon months of July and August, and continue doing so till November. Once the barrage is built, it is expected to block their natural entry.* Fishermen in Bhadbhut village told The Indian Express that the hilsa catch between July and September every year has dropped to 10-15 fish a day from the earlier 50-100 a day. According to a study by Kolkata-based Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute (CIFRI), fish production from the Narmada estuary has fallen from 15,889 tonnes in 2006-07 to just 1,618 tonnes in 2014-15. *The hilsa catch during the same period has fallen to 419 tonnes from 5,180 tonnes. The reduced outflow of water from the dam, industrial effluents flowing into the river and salinity ingress are believed to be the major causes of this decline.*

What is the government’s stand on this?



Government officials say the entry of hilsa will not be restricted on account of the barrage. “We have planned fish passes for hilsa fish. The Kolkata-based CIFRI has been asked to study the migration patterns and they have already submitted a primary report,” said an official of the Narmada Water Resources, Water Supply and Kalpasar Department, which is executing the project. “Designs will be made by the EPC (Engineering, Procurement and Construction) contractor based on this report. Studies have been on for the last one year and it will take another year for the institute to submit its final report. *According to our estimate, the fish pass will be about 5 metres wide and that should be enough for this species to migrate into the estuary without any hindrance.* The height of this fish pass will be decided on the final report of the institute. This fish pass will remain open almost throughout the year,” the official said.

How will fishermen from Bhadbhut, and villages that are located upstream, access the river?

The barrage will have a fishermen navigation channel that will allow fishermen owning boats and living upstream on the Narmada beyond the barrage to get access to the sea. This channel will be about 10-15 metres wide and will have a gate that can be opened and shut as necessary. The barrage design also has a navigation lock to enable any future plans to run a ferry service or boats under the inland waterway scheme. The navigation lock is a passage about 18 metres wide and will allow larger vessels to cross the barrage, say officials. The Inland Waterway Authority of India has given clearance for this project.

What other areas will the project impact?

Part of Aliya Bet, and island in the delta of the Narmada and known for shrimp farming, is likely to get submerged. A portion of the forest in Aliya Bet too will get affected by the project. Most of the Aliya Bet is downstream from the barrage. “We have already got the first stage of clearances from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change,” the government official said. He declined to reveal the area that will get submerged due to the accumulation of water in Bhadbhut reservoir.

CABINET APPROVES LEASING OF 3 AIRPORTS

The Union Cabinet approved leasing of three airports — Jaipur, Guwahati and Thiruvananthapuram — through public-private partnership (PPP) for a period of 50 years.

AAI to get ₹1,070 crore

The Minister said the AAI will receive ₹ 1,070 crore as an upfront amount from the private operator for leasing the airports at Jaipur, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram and this fund will be used to develop airports in smaller cities. *These three airports were among a total of six where Adani Enterprises Limited emerged as the highest bidder last year during the privatisation process initiated by the AAI. While Lucknow, Ahmedabad and Mangaluru were approved for handing over to the private player, the remaining three airports weren't because of legal cases.* Adani Enterprises Ltd. had earlier this year sought an extension of six months for taking over Lucknow, Ahmedabad and Mangaluru airports citing uncertainty due to the pandemic. *The extra window was extended by the AAI and it remains to be seen whether the private entity will be able to take over within the mandatory six months period of being awarded an airport.*

WHAT IS THE ROW OVER THE TAKEOVER OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM AIRPORT BY ADANI GROUP?

A political slugfest has erupted between the Centre and the Kerala state government over the privatisation of Thiruvananthapuram airport in Kerala. The Centre has decided to lease out the operation,

[3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



management and development of the airport to Adani Enterprises for a period of 50 years — a move being vehemently opposed by the state government.

Why is the airport being handed over to Adani Enterprises?

The Centre decided to lease out six airports in the country — *Thiruvananthapuram, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Lucknow, Mangaluru and Guwahati* — through public-private partnership (PPP) to Adani Enterprises last year after the company emerged the highest bidder in a global competitive bidding process. *Adani Enterprises outbid eight other companies* in the process, including GMR Airports, Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC), Cochin International Airport Ltd and Zurich Airport, to win the rights to manage the six of these airports in February 2019. *According to the Ministry of Civil Aviation, other airports like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru that have been leased out on a PPP basis have witnessed creation of world-class infrastructure in addition to helping Airports Authority of India (AAI) in enhancing its revenues.*

What is Kerala government's contention?

Kerala's reservations date back to 2003, when it requested the Centre to include the state government whenever a decision to induct the private sector for managing the Thiruvananthapuram airport was taken. The Centre, at the time, assured the state that it would be consulted during the privatisation process. Shortly after the Union Cabinet approved leasing out the airport to Adani, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying the Centre's "unilateral decision" was against the wishes of the people of the state, and that "it will be difficult" for the state government to offer co-operation for implementation of the decision. *Kerala also said its claim to manage the Thiruvananthapuram airport was rejected by the Centre even after it offered to match Adani's bid.*

How has the Centre responded?

The Centre has said that after various discussions and recommendations of an Empowered Group of Secretaries, it was decided, in consultation with the state government, that the latter would participate in the bidding process for the airport through *a special purpose vehicle (SPV)*. *The Kerala SPV was also given the right of first refusal (RoFR), or a provision to match the winning bid, if its quote fell within 10 per cent range of the top bidder.* However, according to the Centre, *KSIDC's bid was 19.64 per cent lower than Adani Enterprises' making it ineligible to exercise the RoFR provision.*

DreamIAS



What is the recourse being taken by the state?

A petition was filed in the Kerala High Court last year, which was dismissed in December following which a special leave petition was filed in the Supreme Court. *While both the High Court and the apex court did not grant a stay on the privatisation process. The Supreme Court remitted the matter back to the HC, which is yet to give its final decision.* The Centre has said the Union Cabinet's approval was subject to the outcome of the writ petition. It also said that if the petitioners succeed and outcome of litigation leads to annulment or cancellation of bidding process, then Adani will handover the possession of airport back to AAI, which will be entitled to refund of the amount paid and additional investments made in the assets.

NEET EXAM: A NO-WIN SITUATION

A pandemic and the resultant delay in commencing admission to professional courses have put the Union Education Ministry in an unenviable position. It is under compulsion to strike a balance between ensuring physical and emotional well-being of aspirants and sustaining a merit-based admission process, while seeking to limit the academic disruption. The NEET is the only gateway for MBBS/BDS admissions in the country. In respect of engineering admissions, the JEE is not mandatory for State government-run and private institutions. Citing the Supreme Court's recent order declining to interfere with the conduct of the two common entrance tests, Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank has contended that the issue is being politicised. His argument is that a "silent majority" favours the exams as an overwhelming number of registered candidates have downloaded their admit cards. From an academic perspective, the Supreme Court has rightly observed that the career of students "cannot be put in peril for long". Mr. Pokhriyal is apprehensive that further delay could lead to a "zero academic year", a concern shared by many academics.

Ground realities reflect the concerns from the other side. More than the fear of contracting COVID-19 from examination centres, aspirants face practical limitations. The NEET will be conducted in 3,843 centres across 155 cities, whereas the number of applicants is about 15.97 lakh. For an estimated 8.58 lakh aspirants, the JEE will be held in 660 centres in 12 shifts. With many States not resuming public transport services and hotels remaining closed, travel and accommodation for candidates from interior regions is a major challenge. Social and cultural pressures are such that girls from villages and tier-3 towns are likely to face hurdles as travelling alone would not be encouraged under these unusual circumstances. Even if hotels are opened at short notice, the fear of the pandemic might deter a section of aspirants from staying there. Delay in admission to the IITs and medical colleges would also have an adverse bearing on BE/BTech seats in leading institutions including deemed universities as eventually they may go vacant when students opt out. Given this background, the government must explore alternatives such as allowing States to conduct medical admissions based on Class XII Board marks using standard normalisation. NEET could be limited to central institutions. Likewise, instead of the JEE, a nationwide marks normalisation could be examined but IIT Directors have argued that doing away with JEE would dilute the quality of education. Extraordinary circumstances may require extraordinary solutions. Perhaps the examination slots could be staggered and the number of centres increased drastically. Pragmatic compromises are inevitable.



THE LOGIC OF, AND DEBATE AROUND MINIMUM AGE OF MARRIAGE FOR WOMEN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that *the central government has set up a committee to reconsider the minimum age of marriage for women during his address to the nation on the 74th Independence Day.* The minimum age of marriage, especially for women, has been a contentious issue. The law evolved in the face of much resistance from religious and social conservatives. *Currently, the law prescribes that the minimum age of marriage is 21 years and 18 years for men and women respectively. The minimum age of marriage is distinct from the age of majority which is gender-neutral.* An individual attains the age of majority at 18 as per the *Indian Majority Act, 1875.*

What is the committee that the Prime Minister mentioned in his speech?

On June 2, the Union Ministry for Women and Child Development set up a task force to examine matters pertaining to age of motherhood, imperatives of lowering Maternal Mortality Ratio and the improvement of nutritional levels among women. *The task force will examine the correlation of age of marriage and motherhood with health, medical well-being, and nutritional status of the mother and neonate, infant or child, during pregnancy, birth and thereafter. It will also look at key parameters like Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), Total Fertility Rate (TFR), Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) and Child Sex Ratio (CSR), and will examine the possibility of increasing the age of marriage for women from the present 18 years to 21 years. Headed by former Samata Party president Jaya Jaitely, the committee includes Member Health at the NITI Aayog, Dr Vinod Paul, and several Secretaries to the Government of India.*

Why is there a minimum age for marriage?

The law prescribes a minimum age of marriage to essentially outlaw child marriages and prevent the abuse of minors. Personal laws of various religions that deal with marriage have their own standards, often reflecting custom. For Hindus, Section 5(iii) of The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, sets 18 years as the minimum age for the bride and 21 years as the minimum age for the groom. However, *child marriages are not illegal — even though they can be declared void at the request of the minor in the marriage. In Islam, the marriage of a minor who has attained puberty is considered valid. The Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 also prescribe 18 and 21 years as the minimum age of consent for marriage for women and men respectively. Additionally, sexual intercourse with a minor is rape, and the 'consent' of a minor is regarded as invalid since she is deemed incapable of giving consent at that age.*

How did the law evolve?

The Indian Penal Code enacted in 1860 criminalised sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of 10. The provision of rape was amended in 1927 through The Age of Consent Bill, 1927, which declared that marriage with a girl under 12 would be invalid. The law faced opposition from conservative leaders of the Indian National Movement, who saw the British intervention as an attack on Hindu customs. A legal framework for the age of consent for marriage in India only began in the 1880s. In 1929, *The Child Marriage Restraint Act set 16 and 18 years as the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys respectively. The law, popularly known as the Sarda Act after its sponsor Harbilas Sarda, a judge and a member of Arya Samaj, was eventually amended in 1978 to prescribe 18 and 21 years as the age of marriage for a woman and a man respectively.*



Why is the legal age of marriage different for men and women?

There is no reasoning in the law for having different legal standards of age for men and women to marry. The laws are a codification of custom and religious practices. The Law Commission consultation paper has argued that *having different legal standards “contributes to the stereotype that wives must be younger than their husbands”*. Women’s rights activists have argued that the law also *perpetuates the stereotype that women are more mature than men of the same age and, therefore, can be allowed to marry sooner*. The *international treaty Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), also calls for the abolition of laws that assume women have a different physical or intellectual rate of growth than men. The Commission recommended that the minimum age of marriage for both genders must be set at 18.*

Why is the law being relooked at?

From bringing in gender-neutrality to reduce the risks of early pregnancy among women, there are many arguments in favour of increasing the minimum age of marriage of women. *Early pregnancy is associated with increased child mortality rates and affects the health of the mother*. Despite laws mandating minimum age and criminalising sexual intercourse with a minor, child marriages are very prevalent in the country. *Last year, the Delhi High Court also sought the central government’s response in a plea that sought a uniform age for marriage for men and women*. The public interest litigation was filed by advocate and Bharatiya Janata Party spokesperson Ashwini Kumar Upadhyaya.

What are the grounds on which the law was challenged?

Upadhyaya, the petitioner in this case, had challenged the law on the grounds of discrimination. He argued that Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution, which guarantee the right to equality and the right to live with dignity, were violated by having different legal ages for men and women to marry. Two significant Supreme Court rulings can act as precedents to support the petitioner’s claim. *In 2014, in the ‘National Legal Services Authority of India v Union of India’ case, the Supreme Court, while recognising transgenders as the third gender, said that justice is delivered with the “assumption that humans have equal value and should, therefore, be treated as equal, as well as by equal laws”*. *In 2019, in ‘Joseph Shine v Union of India’, the Supreme Court decriminalised adultery, and said that “a law that treats women differently based on gender stereotypes is an affront to women’s dignity”*.

How common are child marriages in India?

A report published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on July 2 said that while child marriages were almost universally banned, “yet they happen 33,000 times a day, every day, all around the world”. An estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married as children, and by 2030, another 150 million girls under the age of 18 will be married. *Although advances in India have contributed to a 50 per cent decline in child marriage in South Asia—to 30 per cent in 2018, the region still accounts for the largest number of child marriages each year, estimated at 4.1 million in 2017, the report said*. In India, *an analysis of child marriage data show that among girls married by age 18, 46 per cent were also in the lowest income bracket*. UNICEF estimates suggest that each year, at least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 are married in India, which makes *the country home to the largest number of child brides in the world — accounting for a third of the global total. Nearly 16 per cent adolescent girls aged 15-19 are currently married*.

WHAT DOES THE GOVT’S MOVE TO INCREASE BIOETHANOL IN PETROL MEAN?



*The government has set targets of 10 per cent bioethanol blending of petrol by 2022 and to raise it to 20 per cent by 2030 under the ethanol blending programme to curb carbon emissions and reduce India's dependence on imported crude oil. 1G and 2G bioethanol plants are set to play a key role in making bio-ethanol available for blending but face challenges in attracting investments from the private sector. We examine key challenges to raising the ethanol blending level for petrol from **around 5 per cent currently** to the targets set by the central government.*

What are 1G and 2G biofuel plants?

1G bioethanol plants utilise sugarcane juice and molasses, by-products in the production of sugar, as raw material, while 2G plants utilise surplus biomass and agricultural waste to produce bioethanol. Currently, domestic production of bioethanol is not sufficient to meet the demand for bio-ethanol for blending with petrol at Indian Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs). Sugar mills, which are the key domestic suppliers of bio-ethanol to OMCs, were only able to supply 1.9 billion litres of bio-ethanol to OMCs equating to 57.6 per cent of the total demand of 3.3 billion litres.

Why are Indian plants not able to meet the demand for bio-ethanol?

*Experts point out that many sugar mills which are best placed to produce bioethanol do not have the financial stability to invest in biofuel plants and there are also concerns among investors on the uncertainty of the price of bio-ethanol in the future. Sugar mills have had to pay high prices for sugarcane set by the government even when there have been supply gluts. **The prices of both sugarcane and bio-ethanol are set by the central government.** An expert at a leading OMC, said the price of obtaining agricultural waste required for the production of bio-ethanol at 2G plants was currently too high for it to be viable for private investors in the country. The expert noted that state governments needed to set up depots where farmers could drop their agricultural waste and that the central government should fix a price for agricultural waste to make investments in 2G bioethanol production an attractive proposition. The three state-run OMCs Indian Oil Corporation Ltd., Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd. are currently in the process of setting up 2G bio-ethanol plants.*

What can be done to boost investment in bioethanol production?

Experts say the government could provide greater visibility on the price of bioethanol that sugar mills can expect by announcing a mechanism by which the price of bio-ethanol would be decided. The impetus for bioethanol uptake was driven by government worldwide, and a target that a certain percentage of ethanol blending be done using ethanol generated from 2G plants would help boost investment in the area. Joshipura said *2G bioethanol not only provided a clean source of energy, but also helped to provide greater income to farmers and prevent them from having to burn agricultural waste which can be a major source of air pollution.*

WHY BRAHMAPUTRA ROPEWAY IS SPECIAL

The Assam government has inaugurated a 1.8-km ropeway across the Brahmaputra river, and described it as India's longest river ropeway. The Indian Express takes stock of the project and its utility.

Why a river ropeway

Thousands of people commute every day between the capital city of Guwahati and the town of North Guwahati, where IIT Guwahati is located. The ropeway cuts travel time between the two banks to 8



minutes. The current travel options between the two banks are by ferry (30 minutes or more, depending on current and season) or by road through a bridge that usually takes over an hour in the traffic.

Tourism potential

“Apart from substantially reducing travel time, the ropeway will provide a breathtaking view of the mighty Brahmaputra and promote tourism in the State,” Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal tweeted. *Connecting Kachari Ghat (Guwahati) to Dol Govinda Temple on the northern bank, the ropeway passed the famous Umananda temple on a small island.*

Design and fare

Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who inaugurated the ropeway, tweeted: “This is one of the most advanced & longest river crossing Aerial Tramway systems in India”. The ropeway uses a “twin-track, single-haul, bi-cable double reversible jig back” system, officials said. The ropeway comprises two cabins — each with a capacity of 30 passengers plus one operator. The project was built at a cost of ₹ 56 crore. Tickets have been fixed at ₹ 100 for a round trip, and ₹ 60 for a one-way trip.

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE ATAL TUNNEL AT ROHTANG

The *Atal Tunnel at Rohtang, near Manali*, is almost complete in all respects with finishing touches being given to it before Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurates it late September. *The 9-km-long tunnel under the Pir Panjal range, named after former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, will be the world's longest highway tunnel above the altitude of 10,000 feet (3000 metres).* It was scheduled to be completed by May 2020, in a revised estimate, but the Covid-19 pandemic pushed back the completion by a few months due to lockdown conditions.

What is the strategic advantage of the Rohtang tunnel?

Cutting through the Pir Panjal range, the tunnel will reduce the distance between Manali and Leh by 46 km. The Rohtang Pass, to which the tunnel provides an alternate, is located at a height of 13,050 feet, and a journey from Manali Valley to Lahaul and Spiti Valley, which normally takes around five hours to negotiate, would now be completed in little over ten minutes. While the tunnel will be a *boon to the residents of the Lahaul and Spiti Valley who remain cut off from the rest of the country in winters for nearly six months due to heavy snowfall, the tunnel will provide almost all-weather connectivity to the troops stationed in Ladakh.* However, for full all-weather connectivity, additional tunnels will have to be built on the Manali-Leh route so that the high passes on the axis do not impede movement due to snowfall. A 13.2 km long tunnel will have to be built to negotiate the 16,040 feet high Baralacha pass and another 14.78 km long tunnel will be required at the Lachung La pass at 16,800 feet. A third 7.32 km long tunnel will be required at Tanglang La pass at 17,480 feet.

WHY PUNJAB GOVT'S TEMPORARY BAN ON NINE PESTICIDES CAN'T PUT A STOP ON THEIR USE

Punjab government, through a notification, has banned the usage of nine pesticides, generally used for Basmati and non Basmati crops, for 60 days — August 14 to October 14. There are over 10,000 pesticide dealers in Punjab and almost all of them had stocked up ahead of the sowing season. The government has directed the dealers to either return the stock to the manufactures or remove them from display of their stores. More than half of these pesticides are also used by farmers for other crops such as wheat, vegetables, fruits, sugarcane as well as for seed treatment. Farm experts, pesticide dealers and farmers



said that such temporary bans cannot stop usage of such pesticides even for Basmati and non-Basmati crop, which is the main target of the government.

What are the pesticides whose sale has been banned for 60 days?

The nine pesticide that have been banned temporarily include *Acephate, Carbendazim, Thiamethoxam, Triazofos, Tricyclazole, Buprofezin, Carbofuron, Propiconazole, and Thiophanate Methyl.*

Why is this ban only for 60 days?

Experts say that farmers use these pesticides even after the grain formation stage in the rice crop. It leads to the presence of pesticides beyond the permissible maximum residue limit (MRL) on the grains after harvesting of the crop. The EU has fixed the MRL for all these agro-chemicals at 0.01 mg per kg except for Triazophos for which the MRL is 0.02 mg. The harvesting of early varieties of Basmati and non-Basmati crops starts in late September and early October, respectively. If farmers do not stop spraying these pesticides at least 40-50 days before the harvesting, a MRL cannot be ruled out. Also, the 60-day ban has been ordered with the main focus on Basmati varieties, which is mainly grown for export. Government does not want to annoy big exporters who face rejection of the consignments by the European Union (EU), the USA, and the Middle East. The EU had earlier rejected Indian Basmati due to the presence of MRL beyond the specified limit.

Is it possible to put a complete stop on usage of pesticides on Basmati and non-Basmati crop?

An attempt to do so had failed last year when Punjab government had restricted the usage of all these pesticides during paddy season and various awareness camps were also organised for farmers across state. The farmers, however, had even used the pesticides and Punjab government admitted as much in its notification last week that samples tested in state's two labs had found pesticides in rice much above the specified MRL value.

Why was chemical residue found in grains last year despite restrictions on pesticide usage?

Most farmers stock up on the pesticides ahead of the sowing season. They used it on the crop even after the Punjab government's notification, following which Food Safety Laboratory (Kharar) had found high MRL in nine samples and Punjab Biotechnology Incubator Agri and Food Testing Laboratory (SAS Nagar) in seven samples. This year too, big farmers stocked up on a couple pesticides before the ban order came in. "Several farmers purchased the pesticides in the beginning of the season. They even use banned Carbendazim, a fungicide, to treat the seed for better germination," said Khalsa. He said that while government has warned dealers of heavy fine, there was no way to stop the farmers who already have the chemicals with them. "*Farmers in Punjab are more concerned about their crop output and don't mind using such chemicals,*" said a farmer, adding that checking of dealers in remote areas too is difficult.

How can the government stop the complete usage of these chemicals on rice crop?

The only way government can completely stop its usage on rice crop is if it bans these nine pesticides for all other crops such as vegetables, fruits, and sugarcane or bars manufacturers from producing these agro-chemicals. "Government says that safety of human beings is of paramount importance and that these pesticides should not be used then what it not putting a halt on their manufacturing," asked Khalsa, adding that an agro-chemical harmful for one crop is harmful for every other crop. "Wheat and rice are used months after their harvesting but the vegetables are consumed immediately. *We are only trying to protect the Basmati as it is exported. Ironically, the Basmati rejected by the EU was consumed in India. How was something not fit for consumption in 28 countries, was good for our people,*" he asked.



What do experts say about this temporary ban?

Agriculture department officials said that the farmers can grow every crop without using any chemical. They said of the nine banned pesticides, one — Tricyclazole — is used only for Basmati and can be permanently banned. Four of the remaining eight — Acephate, Carbofuron, Cabendenzim and Thiophinate Methyl — figure in the list of 27 pesticides proposed to be banned by Centre. For remaining four — Buprofezin, Propiconazole, Trizophos and Thiamethoxam — PAU had recommended safe alternatives as stated by government in its notification. *“Government cannot discriminate against its own people by banning these pesticides for just one crop, which is to be consumed by people in places other than India,”* said a PAU expert.

KERALA READIES TO HOST ITS FIRST DRAGONFLY FESTIVAL

The WWF-India Kerala unit has joined hands with the Society for Odonate Studies (SOS) and Thumbipuram for the first-ever State Dragonfly Festival in Kerala, named Thumbimahotsavam 2020. ‘Pantalu’ is the official mascot for the festival. Several programmes are set to be rolled out in the coming months to reach out to various sections of society. A ‘dragonfly backyard watch’ has been announced to enhance the participation of people and improve their observation skills — it will be a citizen science project in view of COVID-19 restrictions. A social media campaign is also on to spread the message around. A field guide on the common dragonflies of Kerala, and a children’s dragonfly colouring and activity book are also under development.

The events are a part of a national dragonfly festival being organised by the WWF India, Bombay Natural History Society and the Indian Dragonfly Society in association with the National Biodiversity Board, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Development Programme and the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

‘NAMATH BASAI’, A BIG HIT AMONG KERALA TRIBAL CHILDREN

‘Namath Basai’, the Kerala government’s unique programme of teaching tribal children in their mother tongue, has become a runaway hit in Attappady. The programme, implemented by the *Samagra Siksha Kerala (SSK)*, has succeeded in retaining hundreds of tribal children in their online classes by making them feel at home with the language of instruction. The SSK has distributed some 50 laptops exclusively for Namath Basai. Pre-recorded classes are offered through a YouTube channel. Most children of 192 hamlets in Attappady began enjoying the classes when lessons in Namath Basai were introduced a few weeks ago. Classes are being offered in three tribal languages in Attappady. *While the Irula language has the largest number of takers, the Muduka and Kurumba language do not have as many. Out of the 192 hamlets in Attappady, 149 belong to the Irula tribe, 24 to the Muduka tribe and 19 to the Kurumba tribe.* Naturally, *the project got its name in Irula language. ‘Namath Basai’ in Irula means ‘our language’.* The resource persons are from the locality, mainly drawn from the tribes. Though the textbooks are in Malayalam, the media of instruction are the tribal languages.

COVID-19 REACHES THE GREAT ANDAMANES, WHY IS THIS WORRYING?

Nine members of the dwindling Great Andamanese tribe have tested Covid-19 positive, setting off alarm bells in the Union Territory. While the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have so far recorded 2,985 novel coronavirus cases, 676 of which are active, it is *for the first time that cases are reported from among the five Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) living in the islands.* Besides the Great Andamanese, the *other four PVTGs are Jarawas, Onges, Sentinelese and Shorn Pens.* Among the five, *the Great Andamanese are the only ones who visit and live in the capital city of Port Blair frequently.* The



PVTGs are communities that are more vulnerable among tribal groups, and are put under a special category by the government of India. *While five among the nine Great Andamanese who are infected are residents of Port Blair, four others live in the remote Strait Island that is reserved for the tribe.*

Who are the Great Andamanese?

Anthropologists classify the Great Andamanese as part of the Negrito tribes that inhabit isolated parts of Southeast Asia and the Andaman Islands. “recent studies by geneticists indicate that the Andamanese are possibly related to the Negritos of the Malay peninsula and in the Philippines”. Originally, the Great Andamanese were ten distinct tribes, including the Jeru, Bea, Bo, Khora, and Pockiwar, each with its own separate language. In 1788, when the British first tried to colonise the islands, the Great Andamanese numbered between 5,000 and 8,000. However, several members of the tribe were killed in encounters with the British to protect their territories. Later, many were wiped out in epidemics brought in by the colonisers, such as measles, syphilis and influenza. After the 1857 mutiny, the British government sent thousands of mutineers for life imprisonment in the Andamans. A penal colony was established for the purpose. The new phase of settlement caused the death of many Great Andamanese as they succumbed to diseases and imperialist policies. “In the 1860s, the British established an ‘Andaman Home’ where they kept captured Great Andamanese. Hundreds of the tribe died from the disease and abuse in the home, and of 150 babies born there, none survived beyond the age of two,” says a report in the Survival International, which is a human rights organisation campaigning for the rights of tribes. By 1901, the population of the Great Andamanese was down to 625. By the 1930s, the number had further gone below 100. In 1970, the Indian government removed the remaining Great Andamanese to the Strait Island. At present, only about 59 members of the community survive — 34 live in the Strait Island, the rest are in Port Blair. The language of the Great Andamanese, Sare, has largely been lost, with the last surviving speaker dying earlier this year. The tribe now speaks mostly Hindi. “Major factors contributing to the diminishing population of the Great Andamanese include environmental ‘disturbances’, contagious diseases as a result of contact with city dwellers, and a high mortality rate assisted by addictions to alcohol, tobacco and opium,” write Saxena and Borin. Unlike the other PVTGs in the Andamans, the Great Andamanese are in contact with the general population since they visit Port Blair frequently, thereby making them more vulnerable to Covid-19.

LAKSHADWEEP ISLANDS TO HAVE MORE KERALA BARN OWLS TO KILL RATS

Three pairs of barn owls shipped to the Lakshadweep Islands from Kerala in 2019 have apparently proven such skilful slayers of pesky rats which have been ravaging the coconut plantations that the Union Territory is hoping to recruit more of the “winged assassins”. The Lakshadweep Administration had embarked on the ‘Pilot project on Biological Control of Rodents (Rats) by Using Barn Owls (Tyto alba) in Kavaratti Island’ after studies revealed the shocking extent of damage caused by rats to the island’s coconut yield and economy. The owls are working wonders. So much so that the report recommends expansion of the project by recruiting more barn owls to “guard” the coconut plantations. It also plans to extend the project to other islands in the archipelago. The birds “are completely healthy and have adapted to the island conditions”. The barn owl population in Kavaratti, it says, has also increased with the hatching of several owlets. The islands have no other natural predators of rodents. Using chemical agents is impossible since Lakshadweep practises organic agriculture. Moreover, coconut trees on the islands are so closely planted that their fronds overlap, allowing rats to practically live atop the trees, which is the primary reason why the administration hit upon the idea of barn owls.

EGYPTIAN MUMMY SURVIVES FLOODING AT JAIPUR MUSEUM



A 2,300-year-old Egyptian mummy was among the rare objects of historical interest which were saved from drowning at the Albert Hall Museum in Jaipur during the torrential rains that lashed the city last week. The mummy was taken out of its glass box in the museum's basement and shifted to another hall in the building. The mummy, named Tutu, a female member of a family of priests, dates back to Egypt's Ptolemaic period from early 300 B.C. to 30 B.C. It was excavated from a pyramid in Akhmim area of the ancient city of Panopolis. It is one of only six mummies in India and was gifted by the Museum of Cairo for an exhibition in Jaipur organised by the then ruler of the princely state, Sawai Madho Singh II, in 1887. Three experts from Egypt's Ministry of Culture, who came here in 2011 to conserve the mummy, had concluded that it was in good condition.

Main attraction

The mummy has been one of the main attractions of the museum, which functions *in the historic building constructed in the Indo-Saracenic style. The museum is named after King Edward VII during whose visit to the city as the heir apparent to the British throne its foundation stone was laid in 1876.*

THE MURDER CASE OF NARENDRA DABHOLKAR, SEVEN YEARS ON

Exactly seven years ago, rationalist Dr Narendra Achyut Dabholkar was shot dead by two bike-borne assailants in Pune. His murder and three more similar killings, that of communist leader Govind Pansare (February 2015), Kannada scholar MM Kalburgi (August 2015) and Bangalore journalist Gauri Lankesh, sparked nationwide debate surrounding issues of freedom of speech and various hostile forces to rational thought. The investigating agencies now say these murders are closely linked and may have some common perpetrators. A look at work and legacy of Dr Dabholkar and the probe into his murder — initially by Maharashtra police and currently by CBI — which has had its share of controversies and contradictions.

Narendra Dabholkar: The rationalist and his legacy

In late 1980s, Dabholkar revitalised the superstition thought process by founding *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS)* after leaving his decade long medical practice. He aggressively took on deep rooted superstitious practices and their proponents. Over the years, while MANS continued efforts towards eradication of superstitious activities, *Dabholkar made several attempts to build an anti-superstition legislative framework. He not only faced opposition by various organisations and political parties but also delays in enacting the law by the governments of the time. Ironically, within days after his murder, government of Maharashtra government cleared the pending anti superstition and black magic practices ordinance which became law in December 2013.* Along with being long-time editor of Marathi weekly Sadhana which champions liberal thought, Dabholkar was very active in movements dedicated to scientific temperament, and equality among various sections of the society. During his college days, Dabholkar was an award winning Kabaddi player and participated in national and international tournaments. Dabholkar was shot dead by two men while he was on a morning walk on a bridge near Omkareshwar temple in Pune on August 20, 2013. He was 67.

MUSIC LEGEND PANDIT JASRAJ PASSES AWAY

Pandit Jasraj, a doyen of Hindustani classical music, will be remembered for taking the art beyond the rarefied confines of a select set by imbuing khayal with an unmistakable element of bhakti rasa. He passed away in the U.S. after a cardiac arrest on Monday. He was 90. The foremost exponent of the Mewati gharana moved away from Dhrupad and brought an element of devotional singing to khayal by employing harkats and murkis that were associated with light classical music. The Padma Vibhushan awardee was



also a master of haveli sangeet and could speak for hours about its journey and rich history. A keen student of philosophy and spirituality, he loved to spend time with J. Krishnamurti, who loved his singing. He was married to Madhura Shantaram, daughter of the legendary filmmaker V. Shantaram and often talked about his conversations with his father-in-law who made many classical music and dance-based films.

HOW A NEW PHISHING SCAM USED E-SIMS TO SWINDLE BANK CUSTOMERS

With the Haryana Police making arrests and launching an investigation into a multi-state phishing scam involving more than 300 bank accounts, questions over internet safety and cyber-hygiene have once again come to the forefront. *In this particular case, perpetrators allegedly swapped SIMs of potential victims into e-SIMs before gaining access to their bank accounts.*

What is the case being investigated by Haryana Police?

So far, the police have pieced together the preliminary modus operandi of a new phishing racket that they suspect has been used to access over 300 nationalised and private bank accounts across five states — Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. Police are yet to ascertain the amount of money involved. But they have made five arrests — among the first in a racket involving e-SIM frauds. *And four of those five are from Jharkhand's Jamtara, a district that has gained notoriety as a hub of cyber crime*, even inspiring a popular web series. “The case is unique, with the use of e-SIMs as the main conduit and with preliminary investigations establishing procedural infirmities and lack of due diligence on the part of banks and telecom companies,” said O P Singh, Commissioner of Police, Faridabad.

How did the perpetrators allegedly defraud their victims in this case?

According to the police, what sets this case apart from other phishing cases is “the novel modus operandi adopted, and mind-boggling layering done by apparently low-tech offenders”. *To begin with, they acquire a series of mobile numbers, use all of them to try and log in to a bank account. If a number prompts an OTP, they call the number's owner and pretend to be customer care executives of the mobile operator offering to upgrade SIM cards or Know Your Customer (KYC) details. Then, they send an email to the victim containing text to be sent to the official customer care number. It's a ruse to register your email ID with the victim's number, so that you can put in an official request to convert the SIM into an e-SIM. Once done, the victim's phone number and everything else it is linked to, including the bank account, is under your control.*

How is India placed as far as internet-related monetary frauds are concerned?

In 2019-20, banks reported 2,678 card and internet-related fraud, totalling ₹195 crore in value, which was more than double the value of such frauds reported by banks in 2018-19, according to the latest data from Reserve Bank of India (RBI). In the current fiscal, between April and June, banks reported 530 fraudulent transactions involving debit and credit cards, or techniques such as phishing done over the internet, which has led to ₹27 crore being stolen until now. “The Reserve Bank is engaged in interlinking various databases and information systems to improve fraud monitoring and detection,” the RBI has said. Earlier this year in July, cybercriminals had adopted a similar e-SIM swap approach to swindle a total of ₹21 lakh from the bank accounts of several people. In the case being investigated by Haryana Police, the full extent of the monies involved is yet to be ascertained.

Have the authorities taken any measures to prevent such frauds?



The Reserve Bank of India, in June this year, said it has been taking measures to improve awareness through its e-BAAT programmes and organising campaigns on safe use of digital payment modes, to avoid sharing critical personal information like PIN, OTP, passwords, etc. However, it pointed out, despite these initiatives, “incidence of frauds continue to bedevil digital users, often using the same modus operandi users were cautioned about, such as luring them to disclose vital payment information, swapping sim cards, opening links received in messages and mails, etc.”. The central bank therefore directed all banks and authorised payment system operators to undertake targeted multi-lingual campaigns by way of SMSs, advertisements in print and visual media, etc, to educate their users on safe and secure use of digital payments. Additionally, the Maharashtra Police also recently issued advisories to people on how to avoid phishing. “The goal is to trick the person into performing a specific action that will benefit the attacker, typically, this involves getting the victims to click on malicious links, open an infected attachment or authorise a transfer of funds,” the state police’s cyber cell had warned.

WHAT ARE SUPER APPS, WHY IS INDIA GETTING ANOTHER ONE?

Salt-to-software conglomerate Tata Group is planning to launch an all-in-one super app by the end of this year or early next year. The omnichannel digital platform, expected to bring together all the consumer-facing businesses of the group, is likely to be developed by the newly formed entity Tata Digital.



DreamIAS



What are super apps?

A super app is a platform developed by a company offering various services under one umbrella. For example, China's WeChat, which started out as a messaging app, expanded into payments, cabs, shopping, food ordering, cab services to become a super app. A physical world comparison of a super app would be a mall, which allows retail space to various brands and shops across businesses and verticals.

Who makes super apps?

Typically, companies that have a slew of services and products to offer tend to consolidate these offerings into a super app. *The concept first emerged in China and southeast Asia where internet companies like WeChat, Gojek, Grab leveraged the opportunity of customer traffic on their platforms that originally came for social media and communication needs by offering these customers additional services leading to increased revenue realisations.* However, in the west Asia region, a different approach has been taken. There, traditional business conglomerates — such as real estate firms Majid Al Futtaim Group, Emaar, Chalhoub Group — having a large portfolio with presence in shopping malls, grocery and entertainment are building digital assets. According to internet consultancy firm RedSeer, these businesses observe high customer footfall and high repeat purchase frequency, which when seen from the lens of online players is the most critical parameter for a super app in any region to grow. *The plan of Tatas to get into aggregating its consumer offerings align more with firms in the Gulf region than the technology companies in China and southeast Asia.*

Which companies in India are building super apps?

The *Tata Group will be an entrant in an already crowded super app ecosystem of India.* Currently, Reliance Industries, under its *Jio* umbrella, is consolidated various services and offerings such as shopping, content streaming, groceries, payments, cloud storage services, ticket bookings, etc. Further, Alibaba Group investee *Paytm* has also brought together services like payments, ticket bookings, games, online shopping, banking, consumer finance, etc into one app. Flipkart Group-owned payments app *PhonePe* has tied up with companies such as Ola Cabs, Swiggy, Grofers, Ajo, Decathlon, Delhi Metro, booking.com, etc to offer these services from within its own app.

Why do Indian companies want to build super-apps?

A country or a region becomes super app-ready when its large base of the population is smartphone first instead of desktop and the ecosystem of apps customised to local needs is not evolved. India has already become a market where a majority of those experiencing the internet for the first time are doing so on their mobile phones. This is one of the main reasons why Indian companies are looking at building super apps. *Apart from increased revenue realisation due to consolidation of services at one place, such apps also provide companies large swaths of consumer data which can then be harnessed to learn more about user behaviour.*

What are the concerns about super apps?

The very concept of a conglomerate trying to keep a customer within its own ecosystem for most services they might require increases the possibility of a monopoly. This is in addition to concerns of privacy in cases where a super app has onboarded third-party service providers. Experts pointed out that data collected by the master app could then be used to train machines in artificial intelligence and predict consumer behaviour even more accurately. It is one of the main reasons why super apps have not picked pace in countries such as the US and the UK, the experts said.



AS HEAD OF HOUSE PANEL, CAN SHASHI THAROOR SUMMON FACEBOOK OVER ALLEGED LINKS WITH BJP?

BJP MP Nishikant Dubey has accused the Congress party's Shashi Tharoor, chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology, of violating Committee rules when he wrote to Facebook asking it to appear before the committee. Dubey, a member of the panel, has argued that Tharoor did not follow the rule that an order signed by the Secretary-General of Lok Sabha is required to summon a witness. Tharoor has rejected as "extraordinary" the idea that the panel should not take up a matter of "such great public interest" —allegations in The Wall Street Journal that Facebook's top public policy executive in India had opposed applying hate-speech rules to BJP politicians because it could damage the company's business prospects in India.

What is the Committee Tharoor heads?

Parliamentary Committees are considered an extension of Parliament and do a good deal of legislative business as both Houses of Parliament have limited time. *Standing Committees, whose tenure is continuous throughout the tenure of the House, are appointed or elected by the House or nominated by the Lok Sabha Speaker or Rajya Sabha Chairman. They work under the direction of the presiding officers. There are 24 department/ministry-related Standing Committees of which 16 are serviced by Lok Sabha and eight by Rajya Sabha. The IT Committee chaired by Tharoor has 20 more MPs from Lok Sabha and nine from Rajya Sabha. The ruling BJP has a majority representation in most of the committees. The 30-member IT panel has 15 MPs from BJP, four from Congress including Tharoor, two each from Trinamool Congress and YSRCP, two independents, and one each from Shiv Sena, TRS, CPM, LJSP and DMK.*

What is this committee supposed to do?

Committees formed to see that Parliament functions effectively, discuss Bills referred to them by the presiding officers. These MPs assemble during and between sessions, invite officials as well as experts, and are not bound by the party whips when it comes to discussion of a Bill, unlike in the House. Department-related Standing Committees consider demands for grants for the ministry, and take up any subject based on Annual Reports and long-term policy documents relating to the ministries/departments under their jurisdiction. The Committee on IT, which was constituted in April 1993 (then the Committee on Communications), has jurisdiction over subject matters dealt with by the Ministry of Communications including the Department of Posts, Department of Telecommunications, Ministry of Electronics & IT, and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

So, does it have the powers to summon Facebook?

The committee has the powers to send a letter to Facebook — or any institution — asking it to appear and give an explanation on a subject. The committee or chairman does not have executive powers, but calling a particular person or an institution as witness is possible. An invitation to appear before a Parliamentary Committee is equivalent to a summons from a court: If one cannot come, he or she has to give reasons which the panel may or may not accept. However, the chairman should have the support of the majority of the members. Any member can call for a meeting to discuss this, and if the majority of the members do not agree, the chairman may have to cancel the summoning, said Subhash Kashyap, constitutional expert and former Secretary General of Lok Sabha. Kashyap said that in the past, there were instances when the chairman summoned an individual or an institution, but with the ruling party having a majority, it was presumed that the majority was in his/her favour. The situation is different here — the BJP with the majority of members is opposing it.

What, then, is the BJP's argument?

3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



The BJP argues that Tharoor neither took the consent of the Committee nor got approval from the Lok Sabha Speaker for his move. Dubey has argued that Tharoor has violated the rules. Rule 269 (1) — Rule 269 in Parliamentary Rule Book deals with the functions of the standing committee – says: “A witness may be summoned by an order signed by the Secretary-General and shall produce such documents as are required for the use of a Committee.”

Does the BJP’s argument hold water?

Yes, if one goes strictly by the rulebook. But as experts point out, *the panel chairman can take decisions, especially when the House is not in session or when a meeting is not to take place in the immediate future, and especially when the matter is of great public interest as Tharoor has argued. But again, members can object and the majority can press the chairman to cancel the summons. The rule says a Committee shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, provided that if any question arises whether the evidence of a person or the production of a document is relevant for the purposes of the Committee, the question shall be referred to the Speaker whose decision shall be final. So, in this case the Speaker can support or reject Tharoor’s move.*

Why is this issue important anyway?

Tharoor has argued that the matter is of great public interest. *Parliamentary panels across the world have expressed concern over the role of social media giants like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc over the dissemination of disinformation and fake news on these platforms. Parliamentary panels in the UK, US, Singapore etc have summoned these giants over online disinformation and the use of social media tools for political campaigns.* The report in the WSJ alleged that Facebook, which owns WhatsApp (used extensively by BJP in recent elections), had favoured the party and *refused to block anti-Muslim posts by BJP leaders fearing a backlash.* Referring to hate-speech — a call for violence against minorities — allegedly by Telangana BJP MLA T Raja Singh, the report has cited “*current and former*” *Facebook employees as saying the intervention by Facebook public policy head Ankhi Das is part of a “broader pattern of favouritism” by the company towards the ruling party.* When the Election Commission sought their views over the conduct of polls in Bihar, a number of parties expressed concern that a digital campaign could give an undue advantage for leading parties, mainly the BJP. *During the tenure of the previous Lok Sabha, the IT panel – then headed by BJP’s Anurag Thakur — had summoned Twitter India and asked it to submit its views on the subject of “safeguarding citizens’ rights on social/online news media platform” after a volunteer group wrote to the committee, alleging the company was biased against right-wing Twitter accounts.*

Who all have alleged that Facebook is doing the BJP’s bidding?

After the WSJ report, the Congress sought a Joint Parliamentary Committee probe – a demand repeated by the CPI (M) too – into the allegations made in the report. *The Congress has asked what was the relation between Ankhi Das and Rashmi Das (her sister), who was a president of ABVP’s JNU unit. Earlier, Bloomberg had published a report in December 2017, saying Facebook employees had become de facto campaign workers for the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the elections. Another report, in The Guardian in March 2016, also spoke about Ankhi Das’s connections with the BJP.*

RS CHAIRMAN WRITES TO PANEL HEADS ON RULES

A day after Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla wrote to chairpersons of parliamentary standing committees advising them to ensure confidentiality of panel meetings, Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu too wrote an advisory on similar lines. Writing to heads of eight standing committees that come under the Rajya Sabha purview, Mr. Naidu said the committees were mandated to carry out a detailed



scrutiny of legislative proposals which was not feasible for Parliament to do so in transaction of its day-to-day business. While commending the standing committees, he wrote, "However, for some time now, it has been observed that the media has been found quoting, in their reportage, the proceedings of the committees related to the subject matters or the legislative Bills under their consideration and examination". He reiterated the rules and procedures that govern the meetings of the parliamentary panels. The meetings are confidential and "it is not permissible for a member of the committee or anyone who has access to its proceedings to communicate, directly or indirectly, to the media any information regarding its proceedings, including any part of the report or any conclusions arrived at by the committee finally or tentatively before the report has been presented to the House". Violation of this would tantamount to "breach of privilege of the House," Mr. Naidu said.

Rule 270

Mr. Birla, in a letter, had sought to remind the panel chairpersons to Rule 270 of the 'Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha', which says that a "Committee shall have power to send for persons, papers and records". However, "if any question arises whether the evidence of a person or the production of a document is relevant for the purposes of the committee, the question shall be referred to the Speaker whose decision shall be final". Mr. Birla's letter came days after BJP MPs wrote to him demanding removal of Congress leader Shashi Tharoor, who heads the parliamentary panel on IT, after he summoned Facebook.

HOW TO EFFECT BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE DURING COVID-19

In the initial days of COVID-19, towards the end of March 2020, India went into a lockdown. The number of daily new cases at that time was 87. But the fear of contracting the virus was very high. Now after five months, the number of daily new cases has crossed 75,000, but the fear of contracting the virus has reduced. Why do people misunderstand risk? One reason is that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is not novel anymore. But more importantly, behavioural science studies show that numbers don't move people. When we read that three million people in India have contracted COVID-19, most people can't make much sense of it. But when someone close to us in proximity or relationship contracts COVID-19 or succumbs to it, the fear becomes tangible. People suddenly feel vulnerable. Otherwise, people feel invincible, even though the risk of contracting COVID-19 actually keeps increasing with daily cases increasing.

Guided by emotions

Emotions cause us to misunderstand risk. For example, flying is something that many people get scared of even though flying has become an extremely safe mode of transport. Zero people died in a plane crash last year in India, while over 1,50,000 people died in road accidents. Yet, people feel scared of flying, not of driving on Indian roads. Flying evokes a powerful emotional response. You are literally up in the air, in the hands of a machine and two pilots. If something happens up there, there is nothing you can do about it. This makes flying feel unsafe even though it is among the safest modes of transport. Likewise, some people believe that they should not step out of their homes because going out means that they will catch COVID-19. In reality, going for a walk in an uncrowded area with a mask on is relatively safe. Some of the same people believe that staying at home is far safer than stepping out. So, they have started keeping their househelps at home. This is relatively risky, because distancing may not be possible within a typical home in urban India and droplets exhaled, sneezed or coughed out tend to stay in the air indoors for longer. The risk of contracting COVID-19 in any given situation can be categorised as 'very high', 'high', 'medium', 'low' or 'very low'. Visiting a gym generally would fall under 'very high' risk, while playing tennis would generally fall under 'very low' risk, even though both



activities are related to fitness. However, since each situation demands assessing the risk of contracting COVID-19, it complicates people's decision-making.

Colour-coding different tasks

To simplify decisions, people rely on short-cuts. For example, if you stay at home, you are safe. If you believe in god, you are safe. If you are healthy, you are safe. If you have a particular deity at home, you are safe. Such simplifications, using which people assess the risk, make COVID-19 a dangerous pandemic. To help people get a better understanding of risk, the government needs to devise a simple behavioural design. *Just like a traffic signal communicates 'stop', 'ready' and 'go' with 'red', 'yellow' and 'green' colours respectively, our daily activities need to be categorised as 'red', 'orange' and 'green'. Having outsiders visit your home would be 'red', visiting retail stores would be 'orange' and meeting a friend at an uncrowded park while keeping a safe distance and wearing a mask would be 'green'. If people can't judge risks accurately, COVID-19 is likely to continue to spread like a raging fire in a forest.*



DreamIAS



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

UN SECY.-GEN. GUTERRES FLAYS INDIA'S COAL SUBSIDY

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres criticised India for subsidising fossil fuels and promoting coal auctions. Mr. Guterres was delivering the 19th Darbari Seth Lecture, organised by the Delhi-based The Energy Resources Institute (TERI). "Clean energy and closing the energy access gap are good business. They are the ticket to growth and prosperity. Yet, *here in India, subsidies for fossil fuels are still some seven times more than subsidies for clean energy.* Continued support for fossil fuels in so many places around the world is deeply troubling," Mr. Guterres said in a pre-recorded message. "*Recent research on G20 recovery packages shows that twice as much recovery money has been spent on fossil fuels as clean energy. In some cases, we are seeing countries doubling down on domestic coal and opening up coal auctions.*" The UN Secretary-General, however, commended several of India's commitments to clean energy, including the initiative on the International Solar Alliance, plans for a World Solar Bank that would mobilise ₹ 70 trillion of investments in solar projects over the coming decade and, commitment to installing 500,000 MW of renewable energy by 2030. Mr Guterres' criticism of coal auctions at the event, which was presided over by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, is significant in the backdrop of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's launching of the auction of 41 coal blocks for commercial mining earlier this year as part of India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan. Mr. Modi had said the launch marked not only the implementation of reforms in the coal sector but also the creation of lakhs of jobs and would liberate the sector from decades of "lockdown". The government has decided to spend ₹ 50,000 crore on creating infrastructure for coal extraction and transport, which would also create job opportunities for locals closer to their homes, he said.

WILL LOCAL PRODUCTION MAKE APPLE'S IPHONES CHEAPER?

Apple has started manufacturing its latest phone, the more affordable iPhone SE, in India. With this, the company now produces four models of the iPhones in India through its manufacturing partners Foxconn and Wistron.

When did Apple start making phones in India?

Apple started assembling phones in India with the original iPhone SE in 2017. The phone was then already a couple of years old, but still popular in India because of its lower price points. In 2018, it moved assembly of the iPhone 6s also to India. This was followed up by the iPhone 7 in 2019. All these units were manufactured by Wistron in its Bangalore plant. Interestingly, like with the SE, the iPhone 6s and iPhone 7, were a couple of years old when their production moved to India. For Indian customers, older iPhones have traditionally offered a more affordable entry point in the Apple ecosystem. In 2019, Apple's partner Foxconn started assembling the iPhone XR at its plant in Chennai. This was a more recent phone and showed how Cupertino had started taking the Indian market more seriously. In 2020, assembly of the latest iPhone 11 started at Foxconn's Chennai plant, followed by now the iPhone SE at Wistron's plant in Karnataka. Both these are the latest offerings from the company. Meanwhile, in 2019, Apple stopped production of the original iPhone SE and the iPhone 6s in India as the models were being eased out of sales.



Will production in India bring down prices locally?

Apple usually has a global pricing strategy and that is seldom fine tuned for a local market, even where it produces hardware. There are also other reasons why prices won't be impacted by local production. For one, *the phones are only being assembled in India, and there is hardly any local sourcing of components.* So, the cost of the production is not exactly coming down. Second, Apple is still not capable of meeting the entire demand of a certain model with locally produced units. This means there will still be some imported units in the markets, and hence it would not be possible to sell Made in India units at a lower cost. However, *for locally assembled models, it is likely that Apple will be able to hold prices in case of a customs duty hike like the one affected earlier this year.*

Is Apple likely to move mode production outside China?

There have been reports that Apple is looking to move more manufacturing out of China because of pressure from the Donald Trump government as well as the impact of the pandemic. But it is unlikely that Apple will pull out of China entirely given the investment that has gone into setting up its production facilities there. But considering the units assembled in India are also exported to some markets too, there is a possibility Apple will start moving some production out of China to hedge for a situation where its entire production is impacted. In 2019, Apple moved its production of its Mac Pro computers back to the US with a \$1 billion, 3-million-square-foot campus in Austin, Texas. Apple and its manufacturing partners invested over \$200 million in the Mac Pro facility, a release at the time said. Interestingly, just this week, reports have emerged that the Taiwan-based Foxconn is among the companies looking to set up their production base in Mexico, catering primarily to the US market. However, it must be noted that Foxconn's production is not exclusively for Apple and the facility could well be for other brands. Earlier this month, Young Liu, Chairman of the Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, also known as Foxconn, said it was gradually "adding more capacity outside of China" — the ratio is already at 30 per cent of its overall manufacturing. "No matter if it's India, Southeast Asia or the Americas, there will be a manufacturing ecosystem in each," Liu said in the conference call, reported by Bloomberg, adding that while China will still play a key role in Foxconn's manufacturing empire, the country's "days as the world's factory are done."

MAGNETS FOR MANUFACTURING (STHANU R NAIR TEACHES ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC POLICY AT IIM-KOZHIKODE)

Many think that in the aftermath of the pandemic, several manufacturing companies operating from China will relocate their businesses to other destinations, including India. Many American, Japanese, and South Korean companies based in China have initiated discussions with the Indian government to relocate their plants to India. *Companies are expected to exit China due to three primary reasons. The first is the realisation that relying heavily on China for building capacities and sourcing manufacturing goods is not an ideal business strategy due to supply chain disruptions in the country caused by COVID-19. The second is the fear of Chinese dominance over the supply of essential industrial goods. The third is the growing risk and uncertainty involved in operating from or dealing with China in the light of geopolitical and trade conflicts between China and other countries, particularly the U.S.* Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to pursue the goal of a self-reliant India must be viewed against this background. Can India succeed in attracting manufacturing firms and jobs from China?

India's position

India lags far behind China in manufacturing prowess. *China ranks first in contribution to world manufacturing output, while India ranks sixth. Against India's target of pulling up the share of*

[3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur](#)



manufacturing in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 25% by 2022, its share stood at 15% in 2018, only half of China's figure. Industry value added grew at an average annual rate of 10.68% since China opened up its economy in 1978. In contrast, against the target of 12%, the manufacturing sector has grown at 7% after India opened up its economy. *Next to the European Union, China was the largest exporter of manufactured goods in 2018, with an 18% world share. India is not part of the top 10 exporters who accounted for 83% of world manufacturing exports in 2018.* This contrasting trend is not surprising because compared to China, India faces numerous constraints in promoting the manufacturing sector. They chiefly include infrastructure constraints, a disadvantageous tax policy environment, a non-conducive regulatory environment, high cost of industrial credit, poor quality of the workforce, rigid labour laws, restrictive trade policies, low R&D expenditure, delays and constraints in land acquisition, and the inability to attract large-scale foreign direct investment into the manufacturing sector. Unless these challenges are addressed, the dream of making India a manufacturing powerhouse rivalling China would be difficult to realise.

Role of states

Since India follows a federal government system, a lasting solution to these constraints cannot be possible without the active participation of State governments and effective policy coordination between the Centre and the States. *Currently, manufacturing growth in India has been powered majorly by Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.* An important requirement for the development of the manufacturing sector is the availability of land area. This could be one of the reasons why manufacturing activity is mainly concentrated in these five States which cover a substantial portion of India's geographical area. However, what is of concern is that *some States that also have large land area contribute disproportionately little in manufacturing GSDP. These include Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, and West Bengal.* The reasons for less manufacturing activity in these States have to be carefully examined, and based on this, State-specific industrialisation strategies need to be devised and implemented in a mission mode with active hand-holding by the Central government. Strong and carefully designed policy actions on the part of individual States would improve India's overall investment climate, thereby boosting investments, jobs, and economic growth. In addition to its initiatives aimed at attracting manufacturing companies looking to relocate their plants to India from China, the Centre has urged the States to evolve their plans. However, such a strategy would be more effective if the policy actions of the Centre and the States are well coordinated. In this context, a suggestion put forth by Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad is worth attempting. To promote electronic manufacturing, he suggested forming a Strategy Group consisting of representatives from the Central and State governments along with top industry executives. The purpose is to instil teamwork and leverage ideas through sharing the best practices of the Centre and States. A similar approach is needed for developing the whole manufacturing sector.



THE CHALLENGE OF CATCHING ELUSIVE TAXPAYERS (ARUN KUMAR - MALCOLM ADISESHIAH CHAIR PROFESSOR, INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES)

India's tax collection is set to decline sharply this year because of the decline in national income and fall in employment due to COVID-19. Simultaneously, expenditures related to the pandemic are ballooning. Thus, the fiscal deficit in the budget is set to rise unless other expenditures are cut. However, there are committed expenditures which cannot be curtailed and the deficit in the budget is set to climb to a new high for 2020-21. So, there is no option but to try and collect more taxes. The Prime Minister unveiled income tax reforms to make the system faceless, painless and seamless. He stated that 15 million people pay income tax out of a population of more than 1.35 billion. This is the number for the financial year 2018-19. For 2019-20, the number of taxpayers may be similar given that the economy was slowing down and unemployment was at a record high. In 2020-21, the number would drop sharply due to the impact of COVID-19 and massive unemployment in the organised sector.

Drop in number of taxpayers

The number of tax filers has increased but the number of taxpayers has dropped. *This is a result of the tax concession offered in the Budget — those filing a return up to ₹5 lakh do not have to pay a tax. Interestingly, in 2012-13, a year for which the government had released detailed data in 2016, the number of effective tax payers was 16 million.* So, in spite of an increase in population and the laws introduced in the last six years to bring the rich into the tax net, there has been little change in the number of taxpayers. *The fact that the direct tax to GDP ratio in percentage terms is stagnating at about 5.5% is another indication of this.* There are two categories of the well-off in the country: those who file a tax return and those who completely escape the tax net. If the former had declared more of their incomes, the tax to GDP ratio would have risen. If those who were outside the tax net had come into the tax net and started filing their returns, there would have been a rise both in the tax to GDP ratio and the number of taxpayers. *A 2016 report says the top 10% of Indians earned 55% of the nation's incomes. If these people could be brought under the income tax net and they paid their taxes honestly, at current tax rates, income tax to GDP ratio alone would have been about 18%.* Add to that the collection from other direct taxes, like corporate tax, and the figure would be more than 20%. This figure of 55% does not take into account the black income generation in the country. Clearly a lot of taxes are not paid out of white incomes and none from the black incomes. Demonetisation was supposed to bring out the black incomes and turn them white so that the tax to GDP ratio could sharply rise. The government made repeated announcements about how many more people had come into the tax net after demonetisation and about how more tax would be collected. No such thing has happened as the Prime Minister's statement implies. The government has been trying hard to tackle the large black economy. As soon as it started its innings in 2014, the NDA set up a special investigation team under court orders. It renegotiated the tax treaty with Mauritius to get back to India the money held abroad. But nothing seems to budge the rich (say, the top 1% in the income ladder) to pay more tax. *Actually, the rich are fleeing the country.* More than 23,000 high net worth individuals left the country in five years up to 2019. Embarrassingly, when the Defence Minister was in France last year to receive the first Rafale fighter jet, the CEO of Dassault Aviation said in a speech that India should not terrorise them with its tax and custom rules. A considerable part of the tax filing process was computerised when e-filing and, earlier, PAN were introduced. These measures tried to cajole people into filing honest returns. Former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha introduced the scheme of honouring honest tax payers. The government is again talking of it. The Vivad se Vishwas scheme was introduced to settle tax disputes. But none of these schemes seem to have delivered.

A new system



The government is able to trust neither the tax department officials nor the rich. So, it has decided to hand over the process of taxation to computers. The computer will decide who will assess the tax return of an individual. During the different stages of a case, different officers will be involved. That is why the new scheme is said to be faceless and anonymous so that no nexus can be formed between the taxpayer and the officer involved in passing the return, and money cannot be paid to evade taxes. The department is being reorganised into assessment units, verification units, review units and technical units. There will also be a small unit to take care of past matters. Apparently a pilot project was run last year to assess the efficacy of the new scheme of things. However, there is worry that the software can be manipulated by those who know the system. There is an administrative problem. The department is grossly understaffed and officers have inadequate time to scrutinise cases. A few thousand officers have to deal with lakhs of cases. What takes a clever Chartered Accountant a few months to prepare cannot be deciphered by an officer in a few hours. Incomes of salaried employees are simple to estimate but the problem lies with estimating business incomes. To estimate them one needs to know the revenue and costs. Both are fudged through under-invoicing and over-invoicing. Businessmen declare their entire household expenditure as business costs. Even if a lot of computerised data are available it may prove to be inadequate. In 2016, before demonetisation, the government had initiated an Income Declaration Scheme. To scare people, the department announced that it had data on 93 lakh high-value transactions and would use it to catch people but this had little impact. The highest tax rate has been brought down from 97.5% in 1971 to 30% (plus surcharge) now. After 1991, with new economic policies, the controls and regulations were sharply curtailed – the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act, the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, etc. were removed. But the well-off have constantly complained that tax rates are high and there are too many controls; that they pay all the taxes but get nothing in return. This lament is rather unfair since they have gained the most out of the country's development. So, at what level would there be satisfaction that tax rates and regulations are fine? This is an important pointer to the feeling of social injustice in every section of the population. The well-off who have gained the most complain of it and the poor live with injustice. There is massive alienation in society. The pandemic also points to this – the way vast numbers have suffered and why they do not heed the authorities.

WHY ARE FOREX RESERVES SHOOTING UP WHEN INDIAN ECONOMY IS HIT?

Covid-hit India's foreign exchange reserves jumped by a record \$11.9 billion in the week ending July 31 to hit a fresh high of \$534.5 billion, making it the fifth largest holder of reserves in the world. During the 10-month period between September 27, 2019 and July 31, 2020, the foreign exchange reserves have swelled by \$100 billion. At a time when the economy is under stress and the growth is expected to contract in 2020-21, the rising forex reserves have come as a breather as it can cover India's import bill of more than one year.

India's foreign exchange reserves: How has the rise been?

The trend of rising foreign exchange reserves started after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a sharp cut in corporate tax rates on September 20, 2019. While investor sentiments turned weak after the budget announcement in July to impose higher surcharge, the government's decision to reverse its budget decision relating to higher surcharge impact on FPIs along with a cut in the corporate tax rate in September played a significant role in turning the investors mood and draw them to invest in the Indian economy and markets. Between September 20, 2019 and July 31, 2020, the reserves have grown by \$106 billion and, since the beginning of April, it has grown by \$60 billion. So, in ten months India has added 25 per cent of the reserves it had till September 20, 2019. *India is now fifth in global ranking behind China (\$ 3,298 billion), Japan (\$ 1,383 billion), Switzerland (\$ 896 billion) and Russia (\$ 591 billion).*



What has led to this rise in forex reserves?

The rise has been in several stages and has been led by different factors over the last ten months. *Experts say that the rise in foreign exchange inflows through Foreign portfolio investment (FPI) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and has also been supported by decline in import bill over the last 4-5 months on account of dip in crude prices and trade impact following Covid-19 pandemic.*

Some of the key factors include:

FPI inflows: While it started with a sharp rise in FPI inflows following the government's decision in September to cut corporate tax rate. Between April and December 2019, FPIs pumped in a net \$15.1 billion, according to the RBI.

Dip in crude oil prices: India's oil import bill declined as the global spread of coronavirus since February 2020 not only roiled the stock markets but also led to a crash in the Brent crude oil prices. *While crude accounts for almost 20 per cent of India's total import bill, Brent crude oil prices fell to levels of \$20 per barrel towards March end, it dropped further and traded between \$9 and \$20 in April.* In January 2020, Brent crude was trading between \$60 and \$70 per barrel.

Import savings: Lockdown across countries in response to Covid-19 pandemic impacted global trade and has resulted in a sharp dip in import expenditure — electronics, gold and also crude oil prices among others.

FDI inflows: Between September 2019 and March 2020 foreign direct investments stood at \$23.88 billion and in April and May it amounted to \$5.9 billion. Market experts say that a lot of FDI has also come in June and July too, especially the ₹ 1 lakh crore plus investment by global tech giants in Jio Platforms. Thus FDI inflow has been a significant contributor to the rise in foreign exchange reserves.

Dip in gold imports: *Gold which was a big import component for India witnessed a sharp decline in the quarter ended June 2020 following the high prices and the lockdown induced by the Covid-19 pandemic.* According to the World Gold Council (WGC), gold imports plummeted by 95 per cent to 11.6 tonnes in the quarter as compared to 247.4 tonnes in the same period a year ago due to logistical issues and poor demand. The value of gold transacted during the June quarter fell to ₹ 26,600 crore, down by 57 per cent as compared to ₹ 62,420 crore a year ago, WGC said.





What does the rising forex reserves mean?

The rising forex reserves give a lot of comfort to the government and the Reserve Bank of India in managing India's external and internal financial issues at a time when the economic growth is set to contract by 5.8 per cent in 2020-21. *It's a big cushion in the event of any crisis on the economic front and enough to cover the import bill of the country for a year. The rising reserves have also helped the rupee to strengthen against the dollar. The foreign exchange reserves to GDP ratio is around 15 per cent.* Reserves will provide a level of confidence to markets that a country can meet its external obligations, demonstrate the backing of domestic currency by external assets, assist the government in meeting its foreign exchange needs and external debt obligations and maintain a reserve for national disasters or emergencies. "Adequate forex reserves should provide room for the RBI to cut rates and support recovery. We estimate that the RBI can sell \$50 bn to defend the rupee in case of a speculative attack. Of note, RBI action to support growth should attract FPI equity flows," says a Bank of America report.

What does the RBI do with the forex reserves?

The Reserve Bank functions as the custodian and manager of forex reserves, and operates within the overall policy framework agreed upon with the government. The RBI allocates the dollars for specific purposes. For example, under the *Liberalised Remittances Scheme, individuals are allowed to remit up to \$250,000 every year. The RBI uses its forex kitty for the orderly movement of the rupee. It sells the dollar when the rupee weakens and buys the dollar when the rupee strengthens. Of late, the RBI has been buying dollars from the market to shore up the forex reserves. When the RBI mops up dollars, it releases an equal amount in the rupees. This excess liquidity is sterilised through issue of bonds and securities and LAF operations to prevent a rise in inflation.*

Are forex reserves giving returns to India?

Only gold reserves have given big returns to India. While the RBI has not disclosed the actual returns from forex reserves, experts estimate India is likely to get only negligible returns as interest rates in the US and Eurozone are around one per cent. On the contrary, India could be facing a cost to keep the reserves abroad. *Out of the total foreign currency assets, as much as 59.7 per cent was invested in securities abroad, 33.37 per cent was deposited with other central banks of other countries and the BIS and the balance 7.06 per cent comprised deposits with commercial banks overseas as of March 2020. Further, as at end-March, 2020, the RBI held 653.01 tonnes of gold, with 360.71 tonnes being held overseas in safe custody with the Bank of England and the Bank for International Settlements, while the remaining gold is held domestically.* With gold prices shooting up around 40 per cent to over ₹ 55,000 per 10 grams this year, the value of gold holdings has shot up.

CHINESE FIRMS HIT AS INDIA'S QUALITY CONTROL AGENCY HOLDS UP APPROVALS

Chinese firms like Xiaomi are facing delays getting approvals from India's quality control agency for their goods, five industry sources told Reuters, as the business environment deteriorates after a clash on their Himalayan border. The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) has in recent weeks delayed approvals for mobile phone components and televisions, jeopardising the plans of firms such as Xiaomi as well as Oppo. BIS Director General Pramod Kumar Tiwari did not respond to requests for comment. China's commerce ministry and the foreign ministry did not immediately respond. Xiaomi declined to comment, while Oppo did not respond. India's trade ministry did not respond to a request for comment. *A senior Indian official said the government was working on a new standards policy in a bid to target low-quality products from China and elsewhere. But those deliberations have stalled approvals for even branded Chinese companies' hoping to step up sales, an Indian industry source said. Chinese smartphone brands, including Oppo and Xiaomi, account for eight of every 10 smartphones sold in India.* While the



two companies assemble most of their models in India, several components are imported from China. A source briefed at a smartphone maker in China, which has been affected by delays, said BIS applications were typically processed within 15 days but had now “been left in limbo”. As of Friday, 643 applications were pending for registration, with 394 pending for more than 20 days, the BIS website said. It did not say how many were from Chinese companies. A BIS official, on condition of anonymity, said additional checks were being made in consultation with several ministries before clearing any applications.

WILL THE IMPORT RESTRICTIONS ON TELEVISIONS PUSH UP PRICES?

The government has imposed fresh restrictions on the imports of various types of colour television sets, including LCDs, as part of its ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ campaign. The move is especially expected to wean India off its import dependence on China for various electronic goods.

How dependent is India on imports for television sets?

India’s television industry is pegged at around \$2 billion, of which, 36 per cent is catered to by South East Asian countries and China, according to data from the commerce ministry. However, when it comes to commonly bought foreign TV brands, *the companies selling them, including Samsung, Xiaomi, OnePlus, Sony and LG, have already either been manufacturing the sets or their components in India or have announced plans to make them here. For instance, Tokyo-headquartered Sony has already been manufacturing its Bravia sets in India. Chinese firm Xiaomi has been locally manufacturing its Mi TVs since 2018, and last year announced it would be scaling up production by bringing in component manufacturers as well. “A number of companies like LG and Samsung already have manufacturing capabilities here. There are also original equipment manufacturers for a number of these brands. We have the capacity,”* added an industry executive on condition of anonymity. “Gradually, we are expanding this capacity.”

What does the government’s latest move mean?

The Directorate General of Foreign Trade on Thursday imposed restrictions on imports of nine categories of coloured TV sets. This does not mean that imports have been banned. What it does mean is that importers will now have to seek a no-objection certificate from the DGFT before they can bring these products into the country. However, the move has been brought in as a non-duty action in the face of an existing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that India has with countries from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The agreement does allow these countries to export their products here at favourable or zero-duty rates and does not allow India to increase these duties. There has also been reported concern that China has been routing its products to India through ASEAN countries. In 2019-20, India imported \$780.84 million of the TVs that have been placed in the restricted category. ASEAN country Vietnam contributed around \$428 million of these imports, while China catered to roughly \$292 million.



Will your TV become more expensive now?

It is still unclear how the restrictions are going to play out for high-end TV products that are currently not manufactured in the country at all, as this is a non-duty measure. However, *given that the restrictions are only on finished goods and not on the components used to make them, some industry experts feel that the move could push India towards self-reliance, starting with the assembly of the final product here.* “For popular brands bought in the country, the impact of the government’s latest move is unlikely to lead to a surge in prices for the end user, according to others.

How is India increasing its self-reliance in TVs? What other consumer electronics are in focus?

During a virtual conference on July 14, commerce minister Piyush Goyal had flagged televisions and air conditioners as areas that the government was targeting to build self-reliance, stating that there was “no rocket science here”. The issue of India’s dependence on imports for air conditioners had previously also been raised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had said over 30 per cent of the country’s demand was being met through imports. To boost India’s capabilities in televisions, the government has exempted duties on TV components like open cells, chips on films and printed circuit boards assembly (PCBA). A Phased Manufacturing Programme (PMP) for televisions is underway, according to the ministry.

ISSUES IN GST COMPENSATION

With Centre-state friction over pending compensation payments under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) taking a new turn in the 41st GST Council meeting on Thursday, strain on the finances of states is likely to continue in the near term. Several states have opposed the two options to borrow that were proposed in the meeting as a way to bridge the revenue shortfall. GST compensation payments to states have been pending since April, with the *pending amount for April-July estimated at Rs 1.5 lakh crore.* The GST compensation requirement is estimated to be around Rs 3 lakh crore this year, while the cess collection is expected to be around Rs 65,000 crore – an estimated compensation shortfall of Rs 2.35 lakh crore.

What was discussed at the meeting?

The legal opinion on borrowing was discussed. *The opinion of the Attorney General of India was cited to buttress the argument that GST compensation has to be paid for the transition period from July 2017 to June 2022, but the compensation gap cannot be bridged using the Consolidated Fund of India.* The AG has suggested *the compensation cess levy can be extended beyond five years to meet the shortfall,* State Finance Ministers, barring a few including those of Assam and Goa, pressed for borrowing by the Centre to bridge the revenue gap. Towards the end of the meeting, the Centre offered two options. *The first was a special window to states, in consultation with the RBI, to borrow the projected GST shortfall of Rs 97,000 crore, and an amount that can be repaid after five years of GST, ending June 2022, from the compensation cess fund. A 0.5% relaxation in the borrowing limit under The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act would be provided, delinked from the conditions announced earlier as part of the pandemic package linked to the implementation of reform measures such as universalisation of ‘One Nation One Ration Card’, ease of doing business, power distribution, and augmentation of urban local body revenues.* The **SECOND OPTION** was *to borrow the entire projected shortfall of Rs 2.35 lakh crore – both on account of faltering GST collections and the expected shortfall due to the pandemic – facilitated by the RBI. No FRBM relaxation has been mentioned for this option so far.*

What are the views of the states on these?



Five states and Union Territories – Kerala, Punjab, West Bengal, Puducherry and Delhi – have voiced their concerns over the proposals.

KERALA: Finance Minister Thomas Isaac said enforcing a cut in compensation and bringing in a distinction between GST and Covid-related revenue loss is unconstitutional. He has said that the states' FRBM limit should be raised by at least 1.5 percentage points if the entire Rs 2.35 lakh crore has to be borrowed.

PUNJAB: Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal has said these options were thrust upon the states, and the borrowing would translate into "mortgaging of the future to live for the present".

DELHI: Deputy CM Manish Sisodia has said the Centre's refusal to pay states is the "biggest betrayal" in the history of federalism in India, and has expressed concerns about Delhi's inability to borrow via the RBI to bridge the compensation gap, given its status of a UT with state legislature.

WEST BENGAL: Finance Minister Amit Mitra said borrowing by states will increase their debt servicing liability, and any other interpretation of the compensation-related Section 18 of The Constitution (One Hundred and First Amendment) Act is unjustifiable. *Section 18 of the amendment says Parliament shall, on the recommendation of the GST Council, provide for compensation to states for the loss of revenue arising out of implementation of the GST for five years.*

States have asked the Centre for details of the two options. They will then have seven working days to get back with their views.

What is the significance of GST for states?

States no longer possess taxation rights after most taxes, barring those on petroleum, alcohol, and stamp duty, were subsumed under GST. *GST accounts for almost 42% of states' own tax revenues, and tax revenues account for around 60% of states' total revenues. Finances of over a dozen states are under severe strain, resulting in delays in salary payments and sharp cuts in capital expenditure outlays amid the pandemic-induced lockdowns and the need to spend on healthcare.* The Finance Secretary said GST collections had been severely impacted by the pandemic. Revenues are expected to be hit further; the economy is projected to record a recession this year. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday referred to the Covid-19 outbreak as an "ACT OF GOD" that would result in a contraction of the economy in the current fiscal.

In 'act of god', coercive not cooperative federalism (Manpreet Singh Badal - Finance Minister of Punjab. Rajeev Gowda - former Member of Parliament and Chairman of the Congress party's Research Department)

It is beyond anyone's imagination that the Government of India would invoke the "Force Majeure" clause against its own people. Unfortunately, this has become reality at a time when every Indian State is massively burdened by the COVID-19 crisis and governance has been severely affected. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's statement that the financial crisis facing the States is a result of an "act of God" is symptomatic of the callousness with which the Narendra Modi government treats State governments. This abdication of responsibility strikes a cruel blow to the social contract that exists between the Government of India and State governments, who are equal representatives of the 1.3 billion citizens of India.

Centre is best placed



The central government has the ability to raise resources through means that are not available to States. Monetary measures are the monopoly of the central government. Even borrowing is more efficient and less expensive if it is undertaken by the Central government. Over the last six years, the Centre has continually cornered resources that should have been shared with States. The Fourteenth Finance Commission allotted 42% of central government tax revenues to States. However, *Accountability Initiative's analysis of State Budgets shows that States received only 30% of central tax collections during the 2015-19 period. The Centre raised an estimated ₹3,69,111 crore revenue through cesses and surcharges in 2019-20 alone.* These are not shareable with States. Similarly, *cesses on petroleum products have resulted in the Centre receiving 60% of petroleum tax revenues, with only 40% going to States.* In 2013-14, the ratio was 50-50.

WHY RBI SENT RS 73,615 CRORE TO ITS CONTINGENCY FUND

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the government's banker, has retained a whopping amount of Rs 73,615 crore within the RBI by transferring it to the Contingency Fund (CF) of the central bank, thus leading to a sharp fall in the transfer of surplus to the government in the current year. As a result, the CF has swelled to a new high of Rs 264,034 crore, according to the Annual Report of the RBI. *The central bank's main risk provision accounts – Contingency Fund, Currency and Gold Revaluation Account (CGRA), Investment Revaluation Account Foreign Securities (IRA-FS) and Investment Revaluation Account-Rupee Securities (IRA-RS) — together now amount to Rs 13.88 lakh crore.*

What is the Contingency Fund (CF)?

This is a specific provision meant for meeting unexpected and unforeseen contingencies, including depreciation in the value of securities, risks arising out of monetary/exchange rate policy operations, systemic risks and any risk arising on account of the special responsibilities enjoined upon the Reserve Bank. This amount is retained within the RBI. With a higher provision of Rs 73,615 crore towards CF, the balance in CF as of June 2020 was Rs 264,034 crore as compared to Rs 196,344 crore in June 2019 and Rs 232,108 crore in June 2018. Last year, it withdrew Rs 52,637 crore from CF to pay a higher surplus to the government.

What did the government get as surplus this year?

The Central Board of the RBI recently approved the transfer of Rs 57,128 crore as surplus – or dividend — to the Central government for the accounting year 2019-20, sharply lower by 67.5 per cent from Rs 1.76 lakh crore that it paid to the government last year. While the RBI's transfer this year is as per the economic capital framework (ECF) adopted by the RBI board last year, last year's transfer included Rs 123,414 crore of dividends due from the previous financial year 2018-19 and Rs 52,637 crore taken out from CF as per the revised ECF. As per Section 47 of the RBI Act, profits or surplus of the RBI are to be transferred to the government, after making various contingency provisions, public policy mandate of the RBI, including financial stability considerations.

Why did surplus transfer rise last year?

The government, which was looking for funds to bridge the deficit, sought higher surplus from the RBI pointing out the high reserves/ surplus retained by the RBI. It was initially resisted by the RBI which was then headed by Urjit Patel. The RBI relented later appointed the **BIMAL JALAN COMMITTEE** to work out the modalities of the transfer. Last year, the RBI said as the central bank's financial resilience was within the desired range, the excess risk provision amounting to Rs 52,637 crore was written back from Contingency Fund to income, facilitating the transfer of Rs 1.76 lakh crore surplus to the government.



What's the CGRA account?

The Currency and Gold Revaluation Account (CGRA) is maintained by the Reserve Bank to take care of currency risk, interest rate risk and movement in gold prices. Unrealised gains or losses on valuation of foreign currency assets (FCA) and gold are not taken to the income account but instead accounted for in the CGRA. Net balance in CGRA, therefore, varies with the size of the asset base, its valuation and movement in the exchange rate and price of gold. CGRA provides a buffer against exchange rate/ gold price fluctuations. It can come under pressure if there is an appreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis major currencies or a fall in the price of gold. When CGRA is not sufficient to fully meet exchange losses, it is replenished from the CF. During 2019-20, the balance in CGRA increased from Rs 664,480 crore as on June 30, 2019 to Rs 977,141 crore as on June 30, 2020 mainly due to depreciation of rupee and the rise in the international price of gold.

Why did RBI's income decline this year?

The RBI's income declined by 29 per cent to Rs 149,672 crore as of June 2020 when compared to Rs 193,036 crore in 2018-19. *This is because the previous year's income included a write-back from Contingency Fund amounting to Rs 52,637 crore which was then transferred to the government. A comparison excluding the same from previous year's income, shows a marginal increase in the income for 2019-20. The expenditure of the Reserve Bank for the year 2019-20 is Rs 92,540 crore which includes a risk provision of Rs 73,615 crore towards Contingency Fund as compared to an expenditure of Rs 17,045 crore in 2018-19. The year ended with an overall surplus of Rs 57,128 crore which will be transferred to the government this year.*

What are IRA-FS and IRA-RS accounts?

The unrealised gains or losses on revaluation in foreign dated securities are recorded in the Investment Revaluation Account Foreign Securities (IRA-FS). The balance in IRA-FS increased from Rs 15,735 crore as on June 30, 2019 to Rs 53,834 crore as on June 30, 2020. Similarly, the unrealised gains or losses on revaluation is accounted for in Investment Revaluation Account-Rupee Securities (IRA-RS). The balance in IRA-RS increased from Rs 49,476 crore as on June 30, 2019 to Rs 93,415 crore as on June 30, 2020 due to increase in portfolio of rupee securities and decline in yields on government of India securities held by the Reserve Bank during the year.

THE ALLEGATIONS AND ANTITRUST PROBE AGAINST FLIPKART

Walmart-owned Flipkart has moved the Supreme Court against an order passed by the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) on March 4, which had asked the Competition Commission of India (CCI) to initiate a probe against the company for "abuse of dominant position".

What was the case against Flipkart?

In 2018, a group of more than 200 retailers, which used to sell their products on sites such as Flipkart, Amazon, Snapdeal, and others, approached the CCI with a complaint that Flipkart was adopting predatory pricing mechanisms, which resulted in losses for small retailers. The CCI's mandate is to "eliminate practices having adverse effect on competition, promote and sustain competition, protect the interests of consumers and ensure freedom of trade in the markets of India". In their complaint, these retailers, under the umbrella of All India Online Vendors' Association, told CCI that Flipkart bought products from small retailers and sold them at a discounted price to WS Retail Services Private Limited – and subsequently, WS Retail re-sold the same products on Flipkart's site. The vendors association also alleged that Flipkart and WS Retail were using a veiled corporate structure, which had a direct conflict



with other manufacturers selling on their platform. WS Retail too, had been founded by Flipkart founders Sachin and Binny Bansal. The vendors association also asked CCI not to clear any pending “combinations” until final orders were passed in the case. In 2018, Flipkart was in talks with Walmart for sale of majority stake in its business. The deal went through in August 2018, and Walmart bought 77 per cent stake in Flipkart for \$16 billion.

What was CCI's decision?

The CCI held in a detailed order that according to the market structure in 2018, it could not be said that any one player was “commanding any dominant position”, since a low entry barrier had allowed many e-commerce players to enter the market. However, the CCI also noted that new players would find it difficult to breach the marketplace presence gained by incumbents, despite the low threshold for entry. In its observations, CCI said that e-commerce was still in a relatively nascent stage in the country, and commissions to retailers formed an important part of that marketplace model. “Recognizing the growth potential as well as the efficiencies and consumer benefits that such markets can provide, the Commission is of the considered opinion that any intervention in such markets needs to be carefully crafted lest it stifles innovation,” the CCI said.

Why did the NCLAT set aside CCI's order?

In its order asking the CCI to constitute a Director General-level probe against Flipkart for abuse of dominant position, the NCLAT relied up on a judgment by the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal (ITAT). The ITAT had in that judgment noted the observations of an income tax assessing officer who had probed a senior vice president of the company. The senior vice president had, according to ITAT's judgment, accepted that the “strategy of selling at a price lower than the cost price (predatory pricing) is to capture market share and to earn profits in the long run”. Though the ITAT had ruled in favour of Flipkart and set aside a tax demand against it, it had in its judgment also observed that the manner in which Flipkart was operating in the market could be said to be an abuse of dominant position, and that the e-commerce company had resorted to “predatory pricing”, the NCLAT said. Since the All India Online Vendors' Association had “prima facie” made out a case against Flipkart for abuse of its position, the same should indeed be probed, the appellate tribunal ruled.

What now for Flipkart?

Flipkart has approached the Supreme Court against the probe into its alleged abuse of dominant position in the Indian e-commerce market. Though the company had told the CCI that WS Retail had stopped selling on Flipkart as of 2017, the anti-trust body will still have to probe the nature of predatory pricing that has been alleged against the company. The CCI will also have to probe the allegations of the corporate veil around Flipkart and its associates, and whether they had any conflict of interest with other retailers and manufacturers on the platform.

CHANGES IN CSR RULES THAT BENEFIT COMPANIES WORKING ON COVID-19 CURES

In a move to boost India's efforts to find effective medicines and vaccines against Covid-19, the *government is temporarily allowing investment towards such efforts to be considered as fulfilment of a company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) obligations.*

What are the changes?

This includes pharmaceutical, vaccine and medical device firms, which are expected to undertake research and development of new drugs, vaccines and medical devices as part of their regular business activities.



In fresh amendments to the Companies (Corporate Social Responsibility) Rules, 2014, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has inserted a provision that would allow firms to claim CSR benefits for such activities until the 2022-2023 financial year.

What are the amended provisions?

The amendments temporarily remove a provision that would have excluded “activities undertaken in pursuance of its (the company’s) normal course of business” from being considered as CSR activities. For now, firms engaged in “research and development activity of new vaccine, drugs and medical devices in their normal course of business” will be eligible for CSR benefits for their R&D work related to such activities for Covid-19 products, *provided the work is “in collaboration with” any of the institutes or organisations mentioned in item (ix) of Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013.* In the normal course, such institutes and organisations, “or any other” central or state fund for socio-economic development and relief, as well as funds for the welfare of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, other backward classes, minorities and women. However, *the ministry has also amended this schedule to substitute it with incubators or research and development projects in the field of science, technology, engineering and medicine that are funded by the central or state Government, a Public Sector Undertaking or any government agency. It also now includes public-funded universities, Indian Institute of Technology (IITs), National Laboratories and autonomous bodies established under Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Department of Science and Technology (DST), Department of Pharmaceuticals, Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and other bodies like the Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). “Details of such activity shall be disclosed separately in the Annual Report on CSR included in the Board’s Report,” stated the latest amendments.*

WHY ANIL AMBANI FACES BANKRUPTCY PROCEEDINGS

The Mumbai bench of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has allowed the initiation of insolvency proceedings against Anil Ambani after two companies promoted by him failed to pay dues on Rs 1,200 crore that they had borrowed from State Bank of India (SBI). The insolvency process will be initiated against Ambani as he had given personal guarantee against the loans provided to his firms.

Is this a case of personal insolvency against Anil Ambani?

The case is significant as it is one of the first cases of insolvency against a major business group head. In 2015, Anil Ambani-promoted Reliance Communications Limited (RCom) and Reliance Infratel Limited (RITL) approached the Project Finance Strategic Business Unit of the SBI, and sought two loans of Rs 565 crore, and Rs 635 crore respectively. Anil Ambani gave a personal guarantee equivalent to the loan amount of Rs 1,200, which was disbursed in 2016. On failure to repay the credit extended to RCom and RITL, State Bank invoked the personal guarantee given by Ambani. However, before the same could be enforced, both his companies were admitted into insolvency on an application moved by Ericsson India Private Limited. Since the companies were admitted into insolvency, all the loans and assets of the company as well as promoters were placed in a moratorium. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) then did not have provisions for personal insolvency as well. The rules for initiation of personal insolvency were notified last year in December.

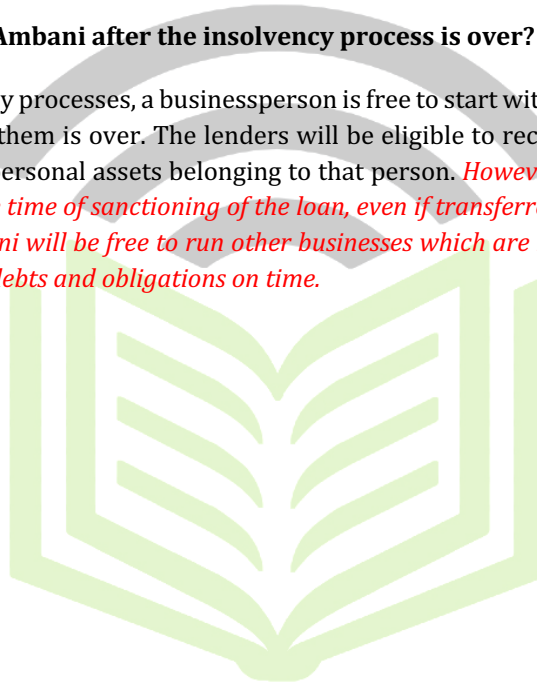
What is the process for personal insolvency?



As the NCLT has allowed the appointment of an interim resolution professional (IRP) in the matter, SBI will now approach the IRP with a list of the assets provided by Ambani as a personal guarantee when his companies had sought the loan. In the case of banks providing loans against personal guarantee, the guarantor has to furnish a list of assets whose value is equivalent to the total amount of loan being given. In case of failure to pay these assets, these guarantees can be invoked. For example, if Ambani's assets are worth Rs 2,000 crore and the bank's claims are worth Rs 1,200 crore, there is a possibility that the bank can recover all its dues. However, if Ambani claims to have personal assets less than the value of the personal guarantee given by him, the banks will have to make do with what they get. "In the case of personal guarantees being invoked, the banks can claim rights only over the personal assets. Only those assets get attached. The bank can not claim rights over the assets of his wife or children," Saurav Kumar, partner at IndusLaw said.

What happens to Anil Ambani after the insolvency process is over?

Like corporate insolvency processes, a businessperson is free to start with a clean slate after a personal insolvency case against them is over. The lenders will be eligible to recover their dues only from the collateral deposited or personal assets belonging to that person. *However, any or all assets mentioned in the list provided at the time of sanctioning of the loan, even if transferred to someone else, can also be attached and sold. Ambani will be free to run other businesses which are not under insolvency, or which are able to service their debts and obligations on time.*



DreamIAS



WHAT IS ASTEROID 2018VP1, HEADED FOR EARTH THIS NOVEMBER?

A day before the US will vote in its presidential elections, an asteroid that is on a collision course with Earth could come very close to the planet, according to the Centre for Near Objects Studies at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. While many on social media expressed alarm at the news of the asteroid, NASA played down its risk and tweeted Sunday: "Asteroid 2018VP1 is very small, approx. 6.5 feet, and poses no threat to Earth! It currently has a 0.41% chance of entering our planet's atmosphere, but if it did, it would disintegrate due to its extremely small size."

What is 2018VP1, the 'Election Day Asteroid'?

The asteroid, dubbed 2018VP, was first discovered at the Palomar Observatory in California's San Diego County two years ago. A 13-day observational arc followed, after which the asteroid was not detected again. When it was discovered, the asteroid — which has a two year orbital period — was around 2,80,000 miles away from the Earth, according to Science Alert. This year, however, the asteroid could be as close as 4,700 miles according to NASA's close approach database.

Asteroid 2018VP1: Should we be worried?

According to The Planetary Society, there are estimated to be around 1 billion asteroids having a diameter greater than 1 metre. Objects that can cause significant damage upon impact are larger than 30 metres. The Chicxulub impactor, the celestial object that caused the sudden extinction of most dinosaur species 66 million years ago, had a diameter of over 10 kilometres. 2018VP1 has a diameter of all but 2 metres, around the size of a small automobile, and would likely burn up into an impressive fireball after entering the Earth's atmosphere before reaching the ground. According to NASA, such an event happens about once every year. As per NASA's Near-Earth Object Observations Programme, asteroids that are 140 metres or larger (bigger than a small football stadium) are of "the greatest concern" due to the level of devastation their impact is capable of causing. However, it has been pointed out that no asteroid larger than 140 metres has a "significant" chance of hitting the Earth for the next 100 years.

HOW THE WORLD'S SECOND LARGEST ICE SHEET IN GREENLAND MELTED 'PAST POINT OF NO RETURN'

The world's second largest body of ice, the Greenland Ice Sheet, is melting at an unprecedented rate due to rising temperatures induced by climate change, and may now be past the point of no return, a recent study has warned. The study published by a team of researchers from the Ohio State University, suggests that the glacier is melting at such a rapid rate that the annual snowfall is not enough to replenish it anymore. Even if climate change is somehow contained, the Greenland Ice Sheet will continue to lose ice. "We've passed the point of no return but there's obviously more to come," Once the ice sheet melts completely in less than a hundred years, sea levels will rise drastically — leaving coastal cities across the globe completely submerged.

How was the study conducted?

The team of researchers analysed 40 years-worth of monthly satellite data from more than 200 large glaciers across Greenland's ice sheet, which are currently melting and draining into the ocean around the country. The researchers measured the amount of ice that broke off from Greenland's glaciers and ice shelves to form icebergs, floating freely in the ocean. They also observed the total amount of melted



ice that directly mixed with the ocean water. They went on to measure the amount of snowfall received in the region, each year — to assess the extent to which the glaciers were replenished after large swathes of ice were lost.

What were the major findings of the study?

In the period between 1980 and 1990, researchers found that snowfall was largely able to replenish the amount of ice lost from the melting of glaciers — maintaining a delicate balance. During this time, ice sheets lost around 450 gigatons (about 450 billion tons) of ice each year, which was then recharged by ample snowfall. It was only at the turn of the century, in the year 2000, when the amount of ice being lost annually began increasing. At this point, the ice sheet started to lose around 500 gigaton of ice each year. While the amount of snowfall remained the same, temperatures continued to soar, causing Greenland's Ice Sheet to shrink faster than it was being replenished. Since 1985, Greenland's many glaciers have retreated about 3 km on an average. Due to this, many of them are now floating in the water as icebergs — the warm water causes the glacier ice to melt further, making it difficult for it to return to its previous location. "Even if the climate were to stay the same or even get a little colder, the ice sheet would still be losing mass." Given the sweltering heat caused by rising temperatures over the last two decades, researchers believe that Greenland's Ice Sheet will only be able to gain mass once every hundred years or so.

What is causing temperatures to rise at such a rapid rate?

A study conducted in 2019 by a team of researchers from the University of Bern in Switzerland, found that global temperatures in the 20th century were rising at a higher rate than seen in over 2,000 years. The study showed that climate change during recent centuries was not caused by random fluctuation, but instead by anthropogenic emissions of CO₂, as well as other greenhouse gases. With increased human activities — like burning fossil fuels, deforestation and farming — during and after the industrial age, the rise in temperature has become more marked.

What does this mean in the long run?

Currently, the ice sheet is already the single greatest contributor to the rise in sea levels worldwide — with over 280 billion metric tonnes of melting ice flooding the ocean every year. Greenland's ice sheet could melt completely by the year 3000, resulting in a 23-foot rise in sea levels across the planet, according to a Business Insider report. Due to melting glaciers, the sea level rises by more than a millimetre each year. Climate change is accelerating this phenomenon to a point where researchers fear that the world's heaving oceans could potentially wash away a huge chunk of coastal land, CNN reported. According to Michaela King, the loss of ice over the years has been so monumental, that it has caused a change in the gravitational field over the country. After melting or breaking off from Greenland's ice sheets, the frigid ice is carried by the Atlantic Ocean and then brought to the other oceans of the world. "It's always a positive thing to learn more about glacier environments, that can only help us with adaptation and mitigation strategies. The more we know, the better we can prepare."



THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF OUTER SPACE (SYED AKBARUDDIN HAS SERVED AS INDIA'S PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE AT THE UN)

Growth of the space industry

Technological changes augur well for the peaceful use of outer space. The price tag for reaching low Earth orbit has declined by a factor of 20 in a decade. NASA's space shuttle cost about \$54,500 per kg; now, SpaceX's Falcon 9 advertises a cost of \$2,720 per kg. In a decade, the cost could be less than \$100 per kg. It not only enhances human space travel possibilities by leveraging new commercial capabilities but will usher in applications dismissed earlier as science fiction. According to a Bank of America Report, the \$350 billion space market today will touch \$2.7 trillion by 2050. Space industries are likely to follow a path akin to the software industry. When Apple allowed developers to design apps for the iPhone, it unleashed innovations that put more technology in the hands of common people and transformed lives. *Starlink, the constellation being constructed by SpaceX to provide global Internet access, plans more than 10,000 mass-produced small satellites in low Earth orbit. It hopes to transcend the digital divide and provide everyone, everywhere access to services such as distance education and telemedicine. Amazon's Project Kuiper received U.S. Federal Communications Commission approvals for more than 3,000 micro-satellites. In a decade, 80,000 such satellites could be in space compared to less than 3,000 at present. Companies such as Planet, Spire Global and Iceye are using orbital vantage points to collect and analyse data to deliver fresh insights in weather forecasting, global logistics, crop harvesting and disaster response.* Space could prove attractive for high-tech manufacturing too. In short, an exciting new platform is opening up for entrepreneurs. However, what is technologically feasible is not easily achievable. The challenges to fulfilling the potential of space are many.

Challenges in fulfilling potential

First, as outer space becomes democratised, commercialised and crowded, the multilateral framework for its governance is becoming obsolescent. *Space law is a product of a golden age of two decades — the 1960s and 1970s. The Outer Space Treaty of 1967 enshrines the idea that space should be "the province of all mankind" and "not subject to national appropriation by claims of sovereignty". The Rescue Agreement, Space Liability Convention, and the Space Registration Convention expanded provisions of the Outer Space Treaty. The Moon Treaty of 1979 was not ratified by major space-faring nations. Space law does not have a dispute settlement mechanism, is silent on collisions and debris, and offers insufficient guidance on interference with others' space assets. These gaps heighten the potential for conflict in an era of congested orbits and breakneck technological change. Second, the legal framework is state-centric, placing responsibility on states alone. However, non-state entities are now in the fray for commercial space exploration and utilisation. Some states are providing frameworks for resource recovery through private enterprises based on the notion that this is not expressly forbidden for non-state actors. U.S. President Donald Trump's Executive Order on Encouraging International Support for the Recovery and Use of Space Resources of April 2020 falls in this category.* According to NASA, *the asteroid named 16 Psyche is so rich in heavy metals that it is worth \$10,000 quadrillion. The incentive to proceed is evident. On the other hand, some scholars and governments view this as skirting the principle of national non-appropriation, violating the spirit if not the letter of the existing space law.* The lack of alignment of domestic and international normative frameworks risks a damaging free-for-all competition for celestial resources involving actors outside the space framework. Third, strategists extol the virtues of holding the high ground. Space is the highest ground. States are investing in military space systems for communications, navigation, and reconnaissance purposes, so as to ensure operability of a range of capabilities. Reliance of militaries on satellite systems means that space assets become potential targets. So investment in technologies that can disrupt or destroy space-based capabilities is under way. *The space arms race is difficult to curb, especially since almost all space technologies have military*



applications. For example, satellite constellations are commercial but governments could acquire their data to monitor military movements. Despite concerns about military activity in outer space for long, not much progress has been made in addressing them. The UN General Assembly passes a resolution on Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space since 1982. Chinese- and Russian-backed Treaty proposals were initiated in 2008 and updated in 2014. For various legal, technical, and political reasons these have not advanced at the Conference on Disarmament. Groups of Governmental Experts have not helped in making progress. The EU's International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities has not gained traction. The current geopolitical situation does not hold hope for addressing concerns of a space arms race.

Need for a space legislation

India has invested enormous resources in its space programme through the Indian Space Research Organisation. More importantly, our space assets are crucial for India's development. India's future plans are ambitious. These include a landing on the Moon; the first Indian solar observatory; the first crewed orbital spaceflight mission; and installation of a modular space station in 2030. *This calendar is designed to establish India as a major space-faring nation by the end of the decade.* The proposed involvement of private players and the creation of an autonomous body *IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre)* under the Department of Space for permitting and regulating activities of the private sector are welcome efforts. However, the space environment that India faces requires us to go beyond meeting technical milestones. We need a space legislation enabling coherence across technical, legal, commercial, diplomatic and defence goals. Our space vision also needs to address global governance, regulatory and arms control issues. As space opens up our space vision needs broadening too.

DWARF PLANET CERES IS NOW AN 'OCEAN WORLD'. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Researchers have shed new light on the dwarf planet Ceres, which lies in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter and is also the largest object in that belt. Ceres now has the status of an "ocean world", after scientists analysed data collected by NASA's Dawn spacecraft. Their findings have been published as a series of papers in the journals Nature Astronomy, Nature Communications and Nature Geoscience.

What is a dwarf planet?

There are officially five dwarf planets in our Solar System. The most famous is Pluto, downgraded from the status of a planet in 2006. The other four, in order of size, are Eris, Makemake, Haumea and Ceres. The sixth claimant for a dwarf planet is Hygiea, which so far has been taken to be an asteroid. Last year, using observations made through the European Space Organisation's SPHERE instrument at the Very Large Telescope (VLT), astronomers found that *Hygiea may possibly be a dwarf planet since it satisfied the four criteria set by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) for a celestial body to be called a dwarf planet. These four criteria are – that the body orbits around the Sun, it is not a moon, has not cleared the neighbourhood around its orbit (which means it is not the dominant body in its orbit around the Sun and this is what differentiates a planet from a dwarf planet) and has enough mass for its gravity to pull it into a roughly spherical shape.*

Ceres exploration in the past

The dwarf planet was first spotted by Giuseppe Piazzi in 1801, who assumed that Ceres was the missing planet between Mars and Jupiter. It was classified as a dwarf planet in 2006 and is the first dwarf planet to be orbited by a spacecraft. In 2015, NASA's Dawn reached it to study its surface, composition and



history. *Dawn was launched in 2007 and visited Vesta and Ceres. In 2015, it went into the orbit around Ceres and the information it collected reinforced the idea that dwarf planets could have hosted oceans over a significant part of their history. The mission concluded in 2018.*

Why do researchers study Ceres?

Scientists are interested in this dwarf planet because it hosts the possibility of having water, something that many other planets do not have. Therefore, scientists look for signs of life on Ceres, a possibility that has also maintained scientists' interest in the planet Mars, whose atmosphere was once warm enough to allow water to flow through it. The possibility of the presence of water on celestial bodies makes them more intriguing for scientists since "almost everywhere we find water on Earth, we find life," as NASA puts it. Another reason why scientists are interested in the dwarf planet Ceres is because studying it can give insights about the formation of the Solar System since it is considered to be a fossil from that time.

What does it mean to be an 'ocean world'?

The observations from Dawn suggest the presence of briny liquid water under Ceres's surface. Before the mission ended in October 2018, the spacecraft dipped to less than 35 km above the surface of the dwarf planet, due to which it was able to collect data in a higher resolution. Now, by analysing this data, which was collected at the end of the mission, scientists have determined that Ceres has a brine reservoir located about 40 km deep and which is hundreds of miles wide, making the dwarf planet, "water rich". Significantly, in the papers, scientists note that an ocean world in Ceres was not expected, since it is too far away from the Sun and is too small to have radioactive materials to keep the oceans liquid for most of the dwarf planet's history. There are other dwarf planets and moons in our solar system where oceans exist, including the moons of Saturn and Jupiter.

HOW SEVERE IS PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN?

It is well-known that pollution from plastic, especially smaller microplastics, have reached the oceans and even some of the most remote corners of the Arctic. Even so, there is uncertainty about the magnitude of plastic pollution in marine environments and it cannot be exactly said how much pollution does plastic, especially microplastics cause. Now, *a new study published in Nature Communications has estimated the amount of microplastic pollution in the Atlantic Ocean and put it at 11.6-21.1 million tonnes, indicating that the inputs and stocks of ocean plastics are much higher than determined previously.* That microplastic pollution in oceans is underestimated is also not a novel finding, but the new study is one of the few that have tried to put a number to the amount of microplastic pollution that is present in the oceans.



What are microplastics?

Microplastics are plastic debris smaller than 5mm in length, or about the size of a sesame seed. While they come from a variety of sources, one of them is when larger pieces of plastic degrade into smaller pieces, which are difficult to detect.

How does plastic reach the oceans?

There are multiple pathways. For instance, riverine and atmospheric transport from coastal and inland areas, illegal dumping activities and direct-at-sea littering from shipping, fishing and aquaculture activities, scientists have said. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), *at least 8 million tonnes of plastic end up in the oceans every year and makes up about 80 per cent of all marine debris from surface waters to deep-sea sediments.*

Why is plastic pollution especially harmful?

The durability of plastic, which, on the one hand, makes the material suitable for widespread use from packaging to storing food is also a bane because it implies that plastic can take *hundreds to thousands of years to decompose depending on the type of plastic and where it has been dumped.* In the oceans, *plastic pollution impacts marine life, ocean health, coastal tourism and even human health.* Over the past few years, various news reports have shown that *marine animals such as whales, seabirds and turtles unknowingly ingest plastic and often suffocate.* One of the most popular images in the last few months was that of *a dead sperm whale that washed up on a Scottish beach in December 2019 with an estimated 220 pounds of tangled debris, including netting, rope and plastic, inside it.* Even so, it was not clear if the debris was responsible for the whale's death. *While all sorts of marine species are prone to get impacted by plastic pollution, typically, bigger marine species tend to get more attention because of the amounts of debris they can hold up.* For humans, too, marine plastic pollution is harmful if it reaches the food chain. For instance, *microplastics have been found in tap water, beer and even salt. One of the first studies to estimate plastic pollution in human ingestion that was published in June 2019 said that an average person eats at least 50,000 particles of microplastic each year. Consumption of plastic by humans is harmful since several chemicals that are used to produce plastics can be carcinogenic.* Even so, since microplastics is an emerging field of study, its exact risks on the environment and human health are not clearly known.

So what does this mean?

In the study, scientists studied pollution of the Atlantic Ocean caused by three types of plastics: polyethylene, polypropylene, and polystyrene, which were suspended in the top 200 metres of the ocean. These three types of plastic are most commonly used for packaging. *Smaller plastic particles are a hazard, the scientists note, as it is easier for them to sink to greater ocean depths and some marine species such as zooplanktons show preferential ingestion of smaller particles, making them easier to enter the food chain and their conversion to fast-sinking faecal pellets.* Scientists say that pollution caused by microplastics has been "severely" underestimated in previous assessments and that a considerable amount of small microplastics are lost from the surface and are stored in ocean interiors. They also estimate that based on plastic waste generation trends from 1950-2015 and considering that the Atlantic Ocean has received 0.3-0.8 per cent of the global plastic waste for 65 years, the Atlantic waters could hold 17-47 million tonnes of plastic waste. "To date, a key uncertainty has been the magnitude of contamination of the ocean and our findings demonstrate that this is much higher in terms of mass than has been estimated previously," they note.

WHY DOES A ZEBRA HAVE STRIPES? MANY OLD THEORIES, SOME NEW FINDINGS



Why does a zebra have stripes? It is a question that has intrigued generations of scientists, including Charles Darwin, and they have proposed a number of possible answers over the years. Research into the subject continues, with the latest study published on Wednesday in the journal 'Proceedings of the Royal Society B'. While this study looks extensively into one possible reason why a zebra has stripes — that these help confuse blood-sucking parasites — let us begin by looking at all the major ideas proposed over the years.

So, what are these ideas?

CAMOUFLAGE: One idea is that the stripes provide the zebra with camouflage from predators by creating a kind of optical illusion. The stripes on a zebra, the hypothesis goes, blends with the lines of the tall grass around it. This might not work for a human observer, for the black and white stripes would stand out against the coloured grass. But the zebra's main predator, the lion, is colour-blind: Proponents of the camouflage hypothesis note that a lion would not be able to differentiate between zebra stripes and lines of grass. And yet, this theory has also been contested. In 2016, researchers published a study that showed that in treeless habitats, lions could see the outline of striped zebras just as easily as they could see similar-sized prey with solid-coloured hides.

TEMPERATURE REGULATION: By this theory, the stripes help a zebra keep cool in the heat. Retired amateur naturalist Alison Cobb, who has studied zebra stripes for more than 40 years, has found that the temperature of the black stripes is considerably warmer than that of the white stripes. In a study published in 2019, she and her zoologist husband Stephen Cobb proposed that these temperature differences cause air flows between the black and white stripes, which could help cool the zebras by speeding up the evaporation of sweat.

MUTUAL RECOGNITION: This is a much simpler idea. It is known that every individual zebra has a unique pattern of stripes, just like every human has a unique set of fingerprints. This hypothesis goes that the unique stripes help individual zebras recognise one another.

CONFUSING BLOODSUCKERS: This is the subject of the latest study. According to this theory, the black and white stripes create an optical illusion for flies and other parasites that would have sucked on the zebra's blood. Essentially, because of the stripes, flies have been seen to miscalculate the moment when and speed at which they should land on the zebra.

Does the new research validate this theory?

These researchers did find evidence to back up this theory. But that was in a previous study, published in 2019. Then, they showed experimentally how flies got confused by zebra stripes. In the study published this week, they investigated the mechanism that makes this happen.

So, what did the 2019 study find about confused flies?

In the 2019 study, Dr Martin How of the University of Bristol and research colleagues investigated the behaviours of horse-flies around captive zebras and domestic horses, using video analysis techniques. From a distance, horse-flies circled both zebras and domestic horses at the same rate. However, when they approached a zebra, the horse-flies failed to slow down. Slowing down is essential for a successful landing. On horses, successful landings were found to be more frequent. But when approaching zebras, the horse-flies either flew over the stripes, or bumped into them. The takeaway: it is most likely the stripes that are confusing the horse-flies.

And how do zebra stripes confuse the flies?



This is what this week's study looked at. Specifically, the researchers looked at a trick of light called the aperture effect. For a human example, consider the "barber-pole illusion". Such striped poles are hung outside barbershops in some countries. The cylindrical pole rotates horizontally, around its vertical axis. But because of the way the stripes are aligned, our brains process the movement in a way that it appears the stripes are continuously moving upward.

Is the same kind of illusion at play when a fly approaches a zebra?

Apparently not. This is what experiments by Dr How and colleagues showed. "The idea is that the stripes induce an optical illusion that confuses the visual system of the fly, convincing them that the striped object is not an object at all, so the fly carries on past without landing," Dr How told The Indian Express, by email. The reason the study ruled it out is that flies were confused not only by zebra stripes, but also by rugs in stripe and chequered patterns. "In our experiment, we showed that checked rug patterns were equally effective at repelling biting flies. Checked patterns do not induce the aperture effect, so this illusion cannot be responsible for the anti-biting fly effect of zebra stripes," Dr How said.

Then, what could be the mechanism for zebra stripes confusing flies?

"We still don't know," Dr How said. But he proposed two ideas. One idea is that a different optical illusion could be at play. This is known as temporal aliasing. "A human example of this is the wagon-wheel illusion from cowboy and western films. Spokes on the wheels of the wagon make it look like the wheel is spinning at different speeds due to a mismatch between the spokes over time. Perhaps zebra stripes (and checked patterns) induce this illusion in the eyes of flies," Dr How said. "Another possibility is that the stripes and checks break up the object so that it no longer fits a search image that the fly needs to find a host," he said. "We still don't know."

SMELL MATTERS

Scientists have finally solved the mystery behind the armpit's ability to produce the pungent smell of body odour. *Bad odour in the armpit is mainly due to a mixture of volatile organic compounds with volatile fatty acids and thioalcohols being the primary components.* Thioalcohols are found in trace amounts but are the most pungent. *Thioalcohols are released as a by-product when certain bacteria (Staphylococcus hominis) convert compounds present in sweat.* The role of the microbes in the armpit for the formation of body odour is well known. But the molecular mechanism of how the bacteria seen in armpits produce body odour was not known. Researchers at the University of York, U.K. traced the source of underarm odour to a particular enzyme in a certain microbe that lives in the human armpit. *The enzyme converts a precursor alcohol to thioalcohols.* The researchers found that the odour-producing bacteria have this enzyme, according to a study published in Scientific Reports. This gives the S. hominis bacteria the ability to produce thioalcohol, which was previously unknown. The understanding of how specific bacteria biochemically contribute to malodour in human armpits will help in developing more targeted strategies to inhibit body odour.

WHY FACEBOOK THINKS AN IOS14 FEATURE WILL IMPACT ITS BUSINESS MODEL

Facebook is miffed with Apple. To be precise, Facebook is miffed with Apple's iOS 14 software update that will start rolling out to users across the world in a couple of months. The latest version of Apple's iPhone operating system has one feature that could potentially damage the social network's business model, at least among those using iOS devices. Once on the latest version of the software, Apple will give users the choice to decide whether they can be tracked across apps using a unique identifier. At WWDC, *Apple's annual developer conference, the company announced that with iOS 14, users will get a*



pop up asking them if they want to be tracked by a specific app. Since this will also give users the freedom to say no, it will cut the amount of data an app like Facebook is able to collect about a specific user with the help of unique identifiers. While this will help preserve consumer privacy, for apps like Facebook it will reduce the effectiveness of ad campaigns via its Audience Network as it will reduce attribution that helps identify if an ad was successful in triggering an app install or payment.

What is IDFA?

IDFA or Identifier for Advertisers is the random device identifier Apple assigns to an iPhone across apps. Advertisers like Facebook use this to deliver and track customised advertising. For instance, if someone is shown an ad to download a game on Facebook, this number helps authenticate if the same device finally ended up downloading the app. However, Apple does this without identifying the user itself. This is also used to track effectiveness of mobile advertising campaigns as well. Google uses a similar tech called Google Play Services ID for Android (GPS ADID) and even gives users the ability to reset this from their settings and even offers an opt out. However, the options are not upfronted to the user like Apple wants to. The fear is that if given a choice, most users will say no to tracking.

What is Facebook's grouse?

In a blogpost, Facebook said it was "addressing" the changes triggered by the iOS 14 feature. "For developers and publishers using Audience Network, our ability to deliver targeted ads on iOS 14 will be limited," it said, adding that *this will mean some iOS users won't see any ads from Audience Network while others will see less relevant ones. It warned that this will bring down revenues for app developers and publishers across ad networks on iOS devices.* Facebook claimed a revenue drop of 50 per cent "when personalization was removed from mobile app ad install campaigns" in testing and warned of an even severe impact in real life scenarios.

Why is Apple's move significant?

While iOS is just about 25 per cent of the global mobile market while Android lords over almost the entire remaining pie, it is a more monetisable operating system as iPhone users are generally of a better economic strata. So any change in ads policy or monetisation on iOS has a disproportionate impact on ad and developer businesses across the world. For instance, an app install campaign on Android might drive much more users than iOS, but the campaign on the latter will give more actual potential paying users.

What does this mean for users?

A lot of experts have been lauding the move by Apple as one that gives users the choice and control. More relevant ads is not as much a user requirement as it is an advertiser requirement. And a lot of users do find some of the ads as intrusive as they have suggest the advertiser knows what the user has been up to till the point the 'relevant ad' is served. However, while there will be impact on the relevancy of ads for sometime, new technologies could help players like Facebook track and target users effectively. There are startups which claim to have had some success in the space of universal user identification which will work across operating systems and devices.

WHAT IS 'CANCEL CULTURE'?

For the longest time, the meaning of the term 'cancel' hasn't been very complex, but sometime in the past decade, it has acquired a new definition, particularly in context of internet lingo. Today, everything and everyone can be 'cancelled' if the internet collectively decides that it needs to be so. The term



'collectively' is important here because the cancelling of something is really a result of a mass movement, collective in form and force. J.K. Rowling is 'cancelled' because of her transphobic views. Cardi B and Nicki Minaj are 'cancelled' because they made homophobic comments. Trump is 'cancelled' because of his racist, inappropriate conduct and words towards women, people of colour and immigrants. Kanye West is 'cancelled' for saying slavery was a 'choice' and for supporting Trump. But it isn't only public figures who get 'cancelled' by forces-that-be in the realms of the online space. Very simply, cancelling means to stop giving support and credence to something or someone, including organisations and establishments, and so anyone in public consciousness can be subjected to this cancelling.

What is cancel culture?

Cancel culture is relatively new; it only surfaced in the last five to six years and has been largely a product of internet culture. One of the reasons why the term's exact meaning is still being ascertained is perhaps because it is relatively new and its scope is still evolving with developing online behaviour. *The most visible examples of cancel culture occur when a celebrity or public figure says or writes something or engages in an act that is deemed offensive and inappropriate by the public. It works like this; when a large number of people on social media platforms collectively object to any action by a public figure, it leads to calls to 'cancel' the person. This cancelling occurs by pressuring the individual's workplace to fire them, pressuring brands to drop their association with the offending individual, using threats of boycott or engaging in any other action that impacts the individual's reputation or finances.*

WHY A US GOVT BODY SAYS MEN SHOULDN'T HAVE MORE THAN ONE GLASS OF ALCOHOL A DAY

In its new advisory report for the government's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which is updated every five years, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has said that men should limit their alcohol intake to one drink a day. This is a change from the current recommendation that says men can take up to two drinks a day, while women can take up to one drink a day.

DreamIAS



What does one drink a day mean?

In the US, a standard alcoholic drink would mean 14 grams of ethanol, which is the same as 12 fluid ounces, or roughly 350 ml (a pint) of beer with 5 per cent alcohol, or about 150 ml of wine with 12 per cent alcohol, or a typical shot of a distilled spirit with 40 per cent alcohol content. One gram of ethanol has about seven calories, which means a standard drink would have about 100 calories, with more calories added by the non-alcoholic components.

What classifies as excessive drinking?

While there is no exact definition for excessive drinking, it typically translates to the consumption of five or more drinks per occasion for men and four or more drinks per occasion for women (binge drinking), or more than 15 drinks per week for men and 8 or more drinks per week for women (heavy drinking). Frequent binge drinking would mean drinking those amounts on five or more days during the past month. About a quarter of all adults older than 21 years of age reported past-month binge drinking and among these, 25 per cent reported frequent binge drinking. Even so, most people who drink excessively are not alcoholics or alcohol-dependent.

What are some of the health risks of consuming alcohol?

Short-term health risks include injuries such as motor vehicle crashes, drowning, falls and burns, alcohol poisoning, violence and risky sexual behaviours. Long-term health risks, on the other hand, include high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer of the breast, mouth, throat, liver or colon, weakening of the immune system, mental health problems and alcohol use disorders or alcohol dependence.

HOW MOSQUITOES STOPPED MOSQUITOES FROM SPREADING DENGUE IN A CITY

Two years ago, researchers infected mosquitoes with bacteria and released them into parts of an Indonesian city. On Wednesday, they announced the results of their unique experiment: In areas where such mosquitoes were deployed, dengue incidence was 77% lower than in areas where they were not. These findings have implications for combating dengue on a larger scale, and possibly other mosquito-borne diseases.

How can mosquitoes bring down dengue, which is spread by mosquitoes?

The key to this is a bacterium, Wolbachia, which occurs naturally in some species of insects. While such insects include some mosquitoes, Wolbachia does not occur naturally in Aedes aegypti, the mosquito species that spreads dengue and other diseases such as chikungunya, Zika and yellow fever. In 2008, the Australian-based research group World Mosquito Program (WMP) discovered that Aedes aegypti mosquitoes can no longer spread dengue when they are carrying Wolbachia, This is because the dengue virus struggles to replicate inside the mosquito when these bacteria are present.

But will people not be infected when other mosquitoes bite?

The reasoning is that once you release mosquitoes carrying the Wolbachia bacteria, they will interbreed with the local wild mosquitoes. Over time, several generations of mosquitoes will be carrying Wolbachia naturally. A stage will eventually be reached when those carrying Wolbachia represent a large proportion of the local mosquito population, so that a bite is less likely to transmit the virus to humans.

How significant are the findings?



Incidence of dengue has grown dramatically around the world in recent decades, with a vast majority of cases under-reported, according to the World Health Organization. WHO estimates 39 crore dengue virus infections per year, of which 9.6 crore show symptoms. India registered over 1 lakh dengue cases in 2018 and over 1.5 lakh cases in 2019, according to the National Vector-Borne Disease Control Programme. The researchers believe the strategy will likely work for other viruses transmitted by *Aedes aegypti*. *"It not only blocks one virus, it blocks many flaviviruses. It is like a magic bullet,"* Jewell said. "But would it work? Here, we finally demonstrated it worked in practice."

Is this being tried on a larger scale?

The French company InnoVaFeed, which produces insects to feed livestock, is partnering with WMP to develop the first industrial-level production of mosquitoes, according to a report by the news agency AFP.

DENGUE MAY POSE RISK OF MISDIAGNOSIS

Can dengue be sometimes mistaken for COVID-19? Two independent research studies — one from a group in Israel and another from the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-Indian Institute of Chemical Biology (CSIR-IICB) in Kolkata — show that tests specific to check for dengue sometimes led to a positive SARS-CoV-2 test and this, the scientists warn, could lead to misdiagnoses and skew public health responses in places where dengue is endemic and known to seasonally spike. This also prompts deeper investigation into whether there are crucial similarities in the structure of these viruses. The study from Israel, that was published in the peer-reviewed *Clinical Infectious Diseases* last week, describes testing 55 people, who had been confirmed to have a SARS-CoV-2 infection, for dengue. This was done using a serology test, or a blood-based test, where antibodies produced by the body during a dengue infection are used to probe for the presence of the virus.

IN HEART CELLS, CLUES WHY COVID-19 IS SEVERE IN THE ELDERLY

Researchers have published findings that provide one more clue about the reason why Covid-19 infection tends to be more severe with age. *Certain genes in the body, which play an important role in allowing the novel coronavirus SARS-Cov-2 to invade heart cells, become more active with age*, according to the research published in the *Journal of Molecular and Cellular Cardiology*. When the novel coronavirus first emerged, it was taken to be primarily a respiratory illness. But as research has progressed, it has become clear that Covid-19 patients, particularly older ones, are also affected by heart problems. An international team of researcher investigated the link between Covid-19 and heart failure. Specifically, they examined cells known as **cardiomyocytes**, *which make up the heart muscle and are able to contract the relax. Damage to these cells can lead to heart failure. The researchers compared cardiomyocytes from five young (ages 19-25) males and five older (63-78) males. They found that the genes that give the body instructions to make key proteins that the virus uses to hijack the cell — including the now well-known ACE2 receptors — were significantly more active in cardiomyocytes from the older males.* This suggests that there is likely to be an increase in the corresponding proteins in aged cardiomyocytes.

U.S. FDA NOD FOR RAPID, INEXPENSIVE SALIVA TEST

In what could prove a game-changer in the global battle against COVID-19, a new, rapid diagnostic test for the novel coronavirus that uses saliva samples was granted an emergency use authorisation by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Saturday. The inexpensive test, called *SalivaDirect*, developed by a team from the Yale School of Public Health, has high sensitivity and can detect the virus even when the number of virus copies in the saliva sample is as low as 6-12 copies per microlitre. In



contrast, tests using nasopharyngeal swabs lead to false negative results due to errors at the time of sample collection. *The sensitivity of the new test was about 93%*, according to a preprint posted on medRxiv. Stephen Hahn, the Food and Drugs Administration Commissioner, said the new saliva test would increase efficiency and avoid shortage of crucial test components such as reagents. Collecting and testing saliva samples involves three steps — collecting saliva without preservative buffers, proteinase K treatment and heat inactivation, and dualplex RT-qPCR virus detection.

Open source protocol

Dr. Grubaugh and Dr. Wyllie said they are not seeking to commercialise the method and instead want the simplified testing method to help those most in need. The testing protocol has been provided as an “open source”, allowing laboratories in the U.S. to perform the tests. *“Thus, SalivaDirect will be free to use by diagnostic labs. NGOs may apply for a licence. While the licence will be free, if you represent a for-profit organisation, we may issue a licence. The licence will be free, but we will want to negotiate how much you charge for the tests. We made this to be inexpensive, and we need those savings to be transferred to your customers,” Yale said. The new test makes sample collection non-invasive and reduces the need for trained healthcare workers to collect the samples, reducing the risk of infection during collection. The collection of a nasopharyngeal sample requires a swab to be inserted into the back of the nostrils, very often causing irritation, leading to sneezing and coughing, thus exposing healthcare workers to the virus. Collecting nasopharyngeal samples can also be uncomfortable, discouraging people from getting tested. The easier saliva test is likely to increase testing compliance.* The saliva sample can be collected in any sterile container. The diagnostic test also does not require the use of preservatives at sample collection, does not require specialised reagents or equipment for nucleic acid extraction. The researchers validated SalivaDirect using several common and available reagents. They claim the test is inexpensive costing between \$1.29-4.37 per sample.

- *On August 15, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a new method of testing for Covid-19 — processing saliva samples — and termed it “ground-breaking”. Israel’s Centre for Geographic Medicine and Tropical Diseases, too, has developed a saliva test that it claims will detect the novel coronavirus “in less than a second”, Reuters reported. That test, however, is still in the process of getting regulatory approval.*

What are the advantages of a saliva test?

First, as noted in a yet-to-be-peer-reviewed study by Yale researchers, saliva *“does not require a certified swab and collection receptacle and does not necessarily have to be obtained by a skilled healthcare provider, both of which increase diagnostic-associated costs”*. Therefore, cost is the biggest advantage. Second is *accuracy*: A saliva test is reported to be prone to less error than has been reported in nasal swab collection, which sometimes give false negatives. Third, the test is *less invasive* than a procedure that goes to the back of the nose to collect the swab. It is also *safer* for healthcare workers who collect the swab. Inserting the swab into the back of the nose often results in sneezing and coughing. Spectrum Solution claims that use of saliva kits delivers an over 90% reduction in PPE usage compared to current swab collections for Covid-19 testing. Fourth, it is a convenient option that does not require travelling to a hospital or lab.

Apart from sampling methods, how is the saliva test different from RT-PCR?

Like RT-PCR, a saliva test too converts the virus RNA into DNA, then amplifies the DNA to detect presence of the virus. What makes the SalivaDirect kit unique is that the Yale researchers have done away with a separate step or specialised equipment to extract the virus RNA. “Our approach can be broadly



implemented as it does not require saliva collection tubes containing preservatives and does not require specialized reagents or equipment for nucleic acid extraction," the Yale study states.

What are the limitations of the saliva test?

In the case of the kit developed by Rutgers, the specimens must be transported and stored at ambient temperature and tested within 48 hours of collection. Again, the possibility of false negatives remains. As noted by the US FDA, SARS-CoV-2 nucleic acid is generally detectable in saliva specimens during the acute phase of infection. "Negative results do not preclude SARS- CoV-2 infection and should not be used as the sole basis for patient management decisions. Negative results must be combined with clinical observations, patient history, and epidemiological information. Negative results for SARS-CoV-2 RNA from saliva should be confirmed by testing of an alternative specimen type if clinically indicated," the FDA states. The Yale researchers have also flagged the fact that saliva from patients can contain blood or mucus, which can interfere with testing and results.

Where are saliva tests being used?

Yale's saliva test, even before it got emergency approval, was tested on a group of National Basketball Association players and support staff. "SalivaDirect is being further validated as a test for asymptomatic individuals through a program that tests players and staff from the NBA," Yale University said. The Rutgers test too has been used by NBA teams and other sportspersons.

WHAT IS RLF-100 OR AVIPTADIL, THE 1970 DRUG BEING EXPLORED FOR COVID-19 TREATMENT

An old drug formulation — RLF-100 — is being probed to treat Covid-19 patients after initial studies have shown that the drug is able to halt SARS-CoV-2 virus replication in lungs. In Mumbai, doctors have begun prescribing this drug although it is not available in India.

What does RLF-100 do?

RLF-100, also called Aviptadil, is a formulation of synthetic human Vasoactive Intestinal Polypeptide (VIP). VIP is released throughout the body, but remains mostly concentrated in lungs. It is produced by immune cells and nerve endings and acts as a neurotransmitter. It helps improve muscle activity and blood flow in gastrointestinal tract. But it also plays another important function. Studies have shown *VIP has anti-inflammatory and anti-cytokine activity properties.* Preliminary studies have shown *this protects alveolar type II cells that are responsible for oxygen exchange in lungs. Since coronavirus attacks lungs and the alveolar cells, the drug may be helpful in preventing SARS-CoV-2 onslaught in alveolar cell and limit damage in lung.* Houston Methodist Hospital was first to report recovery in a 54-year-old man who developed Covid-19 and became critical. The man had undergone a double lung transplant and later contracted Covid-19 infection. Doctors administered RLF-100 under emergency use and the patient could be weaned off ventilator in four days.

RLF-100 is not a new finding. It was discovered in 1970 by Dr Sami Said, a pulmonary medicine specialist. In 2001, US FDA gave RLF-100 an orphan drug designation to treat acute respiratory distress syndrome, and in 2006 for acute lung injury. US FDA also granted investigational new drug (IND) licenses for human trials of Aviptadil. But it has not shown significant progress in those trials in treating lung diseases.

The drug is currently not available in India.



LUNG DAMAGE, CLOTTING SIGNS IN POSTMORTEM OF COVID-19 CASES

A new postmortem study of Covid-19 patients has found severe damage to the lungs of the deceased, and signs of blood clotting in major organs. Ten postmortem examinations were conducted. Although the numbers of patients examined is small, this is the largest study to date of postmortem examinations on Covid-19 patients in England, said the researchers. The study was led by researchers at Imperial College London and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and is published in *The Lancet Microbe*. It found that *all these patients had lung injuries and early scarring of the lungs as a result of the coronavirus, as well as injury to their kidneys. Nine patients also had thromboses (a blood clot) in at least one major organ (heart, lung or kidney). The researchers believe that the findings could help guide clinicians on treating complications as a result of Covid-19, such as using blood thinners to prevent blood clots from developing.* They also hope that better understandings of the key complications in severe cases could help clinicians develop new ways to monitor and treat the disease.

WHAT IS VACCINE NATIONALISM?

The United States has entered into multi-billion-dollar agreements with at least six big pharmaceutical companies for assured supplies of a combined 800 million doses of vaccines that they are separately developing for novel coronavirus. That is more than two doses for every American citizen. The agreements mean that if any of these companies are successful in developing a vaccine, they would be obligated to provide the agreed supplies to the United States before anyone else. The United Kingdom has entered into similar agreements with multiple companies to secure about 340 million doses, or about five doses per capita. Similar arrangements have been reached by European Union, and some other countries like Mexico, as well. A novel coronavirus vaccine is still some distance away — if we discount the vaccines developed by Russia and China for which the international demand is not very well evaluated. But the way countries are pre-booking vaccine supplies, often throwing billions of dollars at candidate vaccines whose success as of now is uncertain, has led to questions over the accessibility and affordability of a vaccine, whenever it is finally developed. It has also given rise to a term called “vaccine nationalism”.

Why is ‘vaccine nationalism’ a concern?

The concerns arise from the fact that these advance agreements are likely to make the vaccine inaccessible to large parts of the world that do not have the money to bet on candidates whose success is not guaranteed. After all, there is limited capacity to produce a vaccine. The wait for a vaccine for these countries could get prolonged because whatever is produced in the first few months or years would have to be sent to the richer countries to fulfil the contractual obligations. Also, not all the candidate vaccines are likely to succeed. The ones that do would be in great demand, especially from the countries that have entered into advance agreements that have clauses to enable increased supplies for more money. It would thus drive up the prices of the vaccine, making it potentially unaffordable for a large number of countries. An ideal situation would be to ensure that the vaccines are first made available to whoever needs them the most. Experts agree that frontline health workers, those on emergency duties, the elderly and the sick, pregnant women, and other similarly vulnerable population groups across the world must be given first access to the vaccines. But that is not what seems to be happening.

Why do countries hoard vaccines?

The coronavirus vaccine is being used by governments across the world as an opportunity to make an impression on their own people, as well as the international community. *To their citizens, the governments want to show how concerned they are about their safety and health, for which they want to*



hoard as many vaccines as they potentially can. And for the international community, and also for their own public, they want to flaunt their scientific capability and expertise. This is also the reason why China and Russia have gone ahead in approving vaccines that have not yet completed necessary trials to prove they are safe and effective. There are political dividends for declaring oneself the first one to develop a vaccine.

Are there precedents of such pre-booking in other outbreaks?

Indeed, the fears about scarcity and unaffordability of the novel coronavirus vaccine are not unfounded. There have been precedents: *In 2009, following an outbreak of H1N1 influenza, or swine flu, rich countries had hoarded vaccines in a way similar to the pre-booking happening now. As a result, many countries in Africa had no access to these vaccines for months. The US and some European countries finally agreed to release 10% of their stocks for other countries, but only after it had become evident that they did not need the vaccines for themselves any longer. Similarly, anti-retroviral drugs for the treatment of HIV patients were unavailable in Africa, the worst affected region, for several years after being developed in the 1990s. Scientists and experts have been maintaining that such a strategy might not work out very well even for the countries that are able to stock up on the vaccines. If some parts of the world continue to reel under the epidemic because of lack of access to the vaccine, it would keep the virus in circulation for much longer than it would otherwise have been. That would mean that other countries too would remain at risk, at least economically, because of continued disruptions in global supply chains due to movement, work and trade restrictions in large parts of the world.*

So, what is the way forward for addressing this issue?

It is not that there is no alternative way to this “me-first” approach that the richer countries have been taking. *The World Health Organization (WHO), along with some other international alliances, have launched a platform called **ACT (or Access to Covid19 Tools) Accelerator Programme**. Its objective is to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines, and also therapeutics and drugs. The vaccine part of the programme is called the **COVAX facility**. COVAX is supposed to do for the world what the richer countries are doing at an individual level —invest money into the leading candidate vaccines to accelerate their development and production. But it also has another important objective — to ensure that the successful vaccines are made equally accessible to all, at an affordable price. It seeks to achieve this by ensuring that all participating countries are provided supplies to cover at least 20% of their populations, at a uniform price. Then as more vaccine doses become available, they would be distributed to countries in proportion to their population size and the extent of the problem they face. Like the US and other countries that are getting into advance agreements, COVAX is supposed to fund the research and development of multiple vaccine candidates. As of now, the facility is backing nine leading candidates. It is asking countries to join the platform and contribute funds, so that everyone can benefit. But while more than 170 countries are in discussions, very few of them have agreed to fund the initiative. Recently, the WHO noted that while it needed at least \$100 billion for the COVAX facility, not even 10% of the amount had so far been collected.*

WHO MAY FIRST GET COVID-19 VACCINE IN INDIA, OTHER COUNTRIES

Recently, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the government would offer free doses of Covid-19 vaccine to the entire 25 million population, putting into focus a rather tricky issue nations are grappling with across the world: who should get the vaccine first — and why. Most nations, including India, are unanimous on the first recipients — frontline health workers directly interacting with Covid-19 patients. However, there is no straight answer to which population group comes next. For this purpose, several countries have set up expert committees to decide on the next tier of



distribution as initially only a limited amount of vaccines will be available before mass production. In June, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had come out with a tentative plan of “strategic allocation” of the coronavirus vaccine. It said healthcare workers should be given priority first followed by adults older than 65 and those having comorbidities such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, or chronic respiratory disease.

The government has set up a National Expert Group to deliberate on principles for prioritisation of population groups for vaccination among other things. The Indian Council of Medical Research has said the vaccine should be made available to the health workers first. A similar view was echoed by Union Minister of State for Health Ashwini Kumar Choubey. *“Our scientists are working very hard on it. Three vaccines against COVID-19 are in various stages of testing. And, if we do succeed in getting a vaccine, our COVID warriors will be the first one to receive the dose,” Choubey said. Recently, on Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the entire roadmap of vaccine production and delivery to the public in the shortest time was ready.*



DreamIAS