

CURRENT AFFAIR FOR UPSC

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INTERNATIONAL

RETHINKING AMERICA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The 2020 U.S. presidential election has been one of the most bitterly polarised democratic exercises in recent memory. The winner, Democrat and former Vice-President Joe Biden, has won over 74 million votes, and his rival, incumbent Republican president Donald Trump, has garnered over 70 million votes. The fact that this election has seen one of the highest turnout numbers since 1960 suggests that voters and both campaigns pushed hard to get their chosen candidate elected. But despite the presence of both a 'blue wave' and a 'red wave', the final outcome came down to the wire, and hinged on narrow vote margins in a handful of 'swing States'. These circumstances have fuelled anger over the lack of direct representation in the electoral system and has raised questions surrounding the viability of the institution, the 'Electoral College', that renders the popular vote insufficient to determine the victor.

How does the Electoral College work?

*The Electoral College refers to the process by which the winner of the popular vote in each State is allocated a pre-specified number of electoral delegates, or electors, per U.S. State, and these electors go on to decide who the President of the country will be. The electors of each State are appointed by the Democratic and Republican Parties (and third parties, where applicable) of the State. The college follows a **winner-takes-all** rule for the popular vote, giving the first candidate past the post all of the electors of that State. For example, if more than 50% of the voters in North Carolina vote for the Republican Party, then all the electors allocated to that State will be Republican. **Each State has the same number of electors as it does members in its Congressional delegation, namely one for each member in the House of Representatives and two Senators. Across the U.S., there are 538 electors.** To win the presidency, **a candidate would be required to secure at least 270 votes** in the Electoral College.*

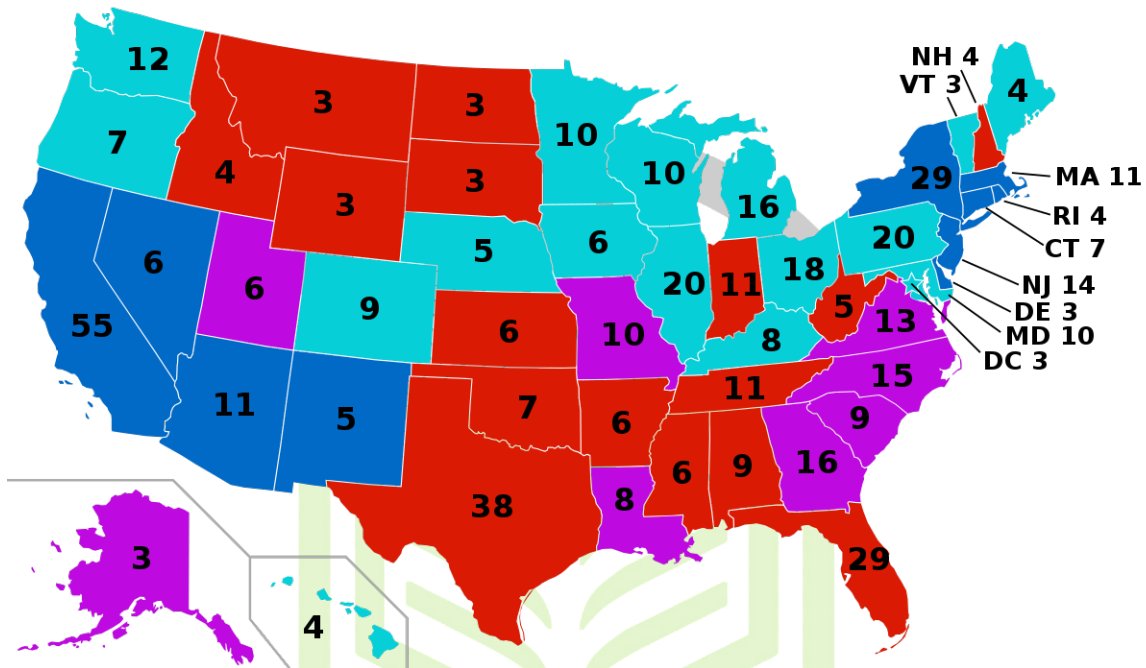
Are there any exceptions and caveats to this system?

*The minor exceptions to this system are Maine and Nebraska, which appoint individual electors based on the winner of the popular vote for each Congressional district and then two electors based on the winner of the overall State-wide popular vote. Although it is rare for either State to have a split vote, that occurred in Nebraska in 2008 and in Maine in 2016. Once the votes are in, the electors are required to meet on **the first Monday after the second Wednesday of December** to cast ballots for the President and the Vice-President. In 2020, that will be on **December 14**. A caveat in the Electoral College system that might end up being salient to the 2020 election is that while an overwhelming majority of electors cast their vote for the President based on their prior party affiliation, there have been occasions in the past, howsoever rare, when the electors have surprised the college by picking another candidate than the one they were pledged to choose. These electors are known as "**faithless electors**". Had Mr. Biden not won a significant number of Electoral College votes, a few such faithless electors might have endangered his prospects of entering the Oval Office.*



Why is there frustration over the Electoral College today?

At the broadest level, there are two reasons why the Electoral College, as a mechanism for representing the will of the people, might be considered suboptimal. Firstly, under this system, *surprisingly few voters truly matter in an election*. The reason is that except for a handful of 'swing States', which have the potential to flip from one party to the other, all the others have historically only voted for the same party, and are likely to do so this time too. The swing States of the 2020



election included *Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin*. Even with a historically high turnout this year, not all voters in these States would likely be independent or undecided voters, capable of switching votes from one candidate to another. This puts, according to some analyses, *the proportion of voters actually determining the outcome of the U.S. presidential election well below 10% of the total population*. If the Electoral College were done away with, and the popular vote at the precinct or county level became the criterion for victory in a presidential election, this would considerably expand the extent to which the preferences of the voting population were truly represented in the choice of political leaders. Second, the *Electoral College also comes packaged with complex and potentially self-defeating contingency proceedings in unusual election circumstances, some of which have occurred in the 2020 election*. Consider this: If Mr. Biden had not obtained an undisputed majority of Electoral College votes, a 'contingent election' might have had to be held under the 12th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Under this system, *the election of the President would have become the responsibility of the House of Representatives, with each State delegation casting one vote for its preferred candidate*. This would also happen in a scenario where legal cases filed by the Trump campaign delay the confirmation of the final result. Given that red States outnumber blue States in this election, such a process might have led to Mr. Trump, rather than Mr. Biden, being confirmed by Congress as President. However, according to the Congressional record, only two presidential elections have been decided in the House, in 1800 and 1824 respectively.



How did the Electoral College come into being and why has it not been replaced by direct representation?

Some among the framers of the U.S. Constitution were of the view that Congress ought to elect the President, while some preferred that the power rest with State legislators or Governors. It was James Wilson of Pennsylvania, one of the founding fathers of the U.S., who suggested the Electoral College system as a compromise, wherein “electors would serve as informed intermediaries between the masses and their government and have independence to break from the popular vote in their States when they deemed that necessary”. Ironically, another founding father of the country, *Alexander Hamilton, endorsed the system in 1788 on the grounds that it guaranteed that U.S. Presidents would be “characters preeminent for ability and virtue” and not merely adept at “the little arts of popularity”*. Congressional proposals to pass a constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College in favour of a direct, popular election, were put forth in 1969, and again a decade later, but the measures never reached the required two-thirds majority. Efforts by Democratic Senators to revive this discussion in 2019 have not advanced either. Resistance to such change comes not only from swing States, which receive outsized focus from presidential candidates during election campaigns, but also from smaller States with relatively minuscule populations, who fear loss of voice in the federal government system, should the Electoral College be abolished.

Contingent election

If no candidate gets a majority in the Electoral College, Congress will hold a “contingent election” — the House will choose the President and the Senate the Vice-President. The U.S. had held contingent elections thrice in the past — in 1801, 1825, and 1837. In the vote for Vice-President, each Senator has a vote. In the election for President, not all Representatives could vote. Each State delegation in the House will get a single vote (District of Columbia does not have a vote) — which means the party that controls more States will have a majority. Currently, the Republicans control 26 of the 50 State delegations, while the Democrats have 22. Even if the electoral process drags on to this stage, the whole process has to be completed before January 20, the constitutionally mandated Inauguration Day for the new President. If a new President is not elected by January 20 noon, the House Speaker — Democrat Nancy Pelosi — would become the acting President.

CAN US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP PARDON HIMSELF?

With Donald Trump’s presidency entering its final weeks, the former businessman and television personality is expected to make full use of the outgoing presidential tradition of granting pardons. Some fear that the US President will wield his expansive power to pardon some of his closest aides, family members and maybe even himself. Trump — who faces a host of legal challenges, including multiple lawsuits and fraud allegations — will no longer have the extensive legal protections of the presidency once he formally exits the White House on January 20. Possibly pre-empting these legal issues, Trump has been asking aides whether he can self-pardon since 2017, according to a CNN report. In fact, an official told the news network that Trump was “obsessed with the power of pardons”.

How does the presidential pardon work?

All modern presidents of the United States have the constitutional right to pardon or commute the sentence of people who have broken federal laws. The US’ Supreme Court had held that this power is “granted without limit” and cannot be restricted by Congress. The President has the power to pardon



individuals for nearly any crime committed in the country. He is not answerable for his pardons, and does not even have to provide a reason for issuing one. But there are a few limitations. For instance, *the President cannot issue a pardon in the case of impeachment of officials.* Further, *the power only applies to federal crimes and not state crimes.* Therefore, even if he were somehow pardoned, President Trump would still have to face state investigations into his finances and business dealings. *But given that the president's pardoning powers are very broad, Trump — much like many presidents before him — can pardon his friends and family without issue. This happened earlier this year, when he commuted the prison sentence of his long-time ally Roger Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress and witness tampering in 2019. But Trump is not the first president to issue such self-serving pardons. On his final day in office, former President Bill Clinton pardoned his own half-brother Roger Clinton for drug charges after he had served the entire sentence more than a decade earlier. Former President George HW Bush pardoned as many as six former officials for their role in the Iran-Contra scandal, in which Bush himself was suspected of criminal involvement.*

So, can Trump pardon himself?

Since no president has ever tried to self-pardon in the country's history, the courts are yet to weigh in on the legality of the issue in question. Despite this, Trump has insisted over the years that he has the "absolute right" to pardon himself. According to a report by the Washington Post, Trump's legal team even looked into the legalities of the president pardoning himself and his family in case something particularly incriminating were to emerge from the Russia probe headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in 2017. Experts argue that self-pardoning is unconstitutional as it *violates the basic principle that no one should be the judge in his or her own case.* A 1974 Justice Department Office of Legal Counsel memo echoed this sentiment: "Under the fundamental rule that no one may be a judge in his own case, the President cannot pardon himself." *The memorandum was issued right before former President Richard Nixon resigned after facing impeachment proceedings for his role in the Watergate scandal. His successor, and former Vice President, Gerald Ford, later pardoned him for any federal crimes he may have committed while in office.*

Can Vice President Mike Pence pardon Trump?

While the justice department said that Nixon could not pardon himself, it also laid down an alternative that President Trump, too, could opt for — the president could temporarily step down, be granted a pardon by his Vice President and then regain power. The 25th amendment of the US constitution allows an incapacitated president to temporarily resign and hand over the reins to the Vice President, who will act on his behalf until he returns to the office. There is a remote possibility that Trump could resign before Inauguration Day after brokering a corrupt deal with Vice President Pence. Pence would then become the 46th president and could use his presidential power to pardon Trump. But such an agreement could land Trump in more trouble. For starters, it would violate the US' federal bribery statute, which states that a public official can face criminal charges if he or she "corruptly demands, seeks, receives, accepts, or agrees to receive or accept anything of value personally or for any other person or entity" in return for "being influenced in the performance of any official act". A deal like this would also appear to be like a blatant admission of guilt.

Would a presidential pardon protect Trump completely?

No, it wouldn't. Since a presidential pardon only applies for federal crimes, it will not be able to protect Trump and the Trump Organisation from *the criminal investigation which is being conducted by the Manhattan district attorney, who is a state prosecutor. The probe is looking into*



possible bank and insurance fraud by Trump and his companies. But a presidential pardon will erase a criminal conviction for any possible federal crime. Legal experts say that it makes most sense for Trump to opt for this route as a defence if convicted of a federal crime.

What are the presidential pardons Trump has already issued?

President Trump has issued a slew of controversial presidential pardons since being elected. In 2017, he pardoned former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was found guilty of being in contempt of court for ignoring a federal judge's order to stop arresting immigrants solely based on the suspicion that they were residing in the US illegally. He has also pardoned people like right wing commentator and campaign fraudster Dinesh D'Souza, and Michael Milken, a financier convicted of securities fraud. But not all of his pardons were problematic. Some were even widely celebrated. Earlier this year, he granted a full pardon to Alice Marie Johnson, who received a life sentence for a first-time drug offences and whose concerns were first raised by businesswoman and reality TV star Kim Kardashian West. In 2018, he issued a posthumous pardon to boxer Jack Johnson, who was jailed over a hundred years ago for violating the racist 'White Slave Traffic Act' by crossing state lines with a white woman.

WHAT THE US LEAVING THE PARIS ACCORD MEANS, AND HOW A BIDEN PRESIDENCY COULD REJOIN

The United States formally left the Paris Climate Agreement, three years after President Donald Trump announced his intention to undo what had been seen as a key achievement of his predecessor Barack Obama. The same day, Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden, who has expressed confidence about winning the 2020 election, announced that his administration (if elected), would rejoin the landmark accord in 77 days — on January 20, 2021, the day the country's next president gets inaugurated.

What is the Paris Agreement?

In December 2015, 195 countries signed an agreement to slow the process of global warming by making efforts to "hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels". This basically means that the countries would try to limit the increase in global temperature rise. While poor countries and island states had requested a lower goal considering threats of droughts and sea-level rise, climate experts have said maintaining a 2 degrees increase will be a challenge in itself. The agreement came into force on November 4, 2016. Another crucial point in this agreement was the decision to limit the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by human activities to a level that can be naturally absorbed by trees, soils and oceans. Nations have pledged "to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century". Climate experts told The Guardian that this meant attaining "net zero emissions" between 2050 and 2100. According to the UN's climate science panel, net zero emissions must be attained by 2070 to avoid dangerous warming. Developed countries were also told to provide financial resources to help developing countries in dealing with climate change and for adaptation measures. As part of a review mechanism, developed countries were also asked to communicate every two years the "indicative" amount of money they would be able to raise over the next two years, and information on how much of it would come from public financial sources. In contrast, developing countries have only been "encouraged" to provide such



information every two years on a voluntary basis. A key feature of the Paris Agreement has been the way the agreement reflects the *principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities'* (CBDR), which has been invoked four times in the CBDR principle. Emerging nations stressed on the developed world to take greater responsibility for climate actions since *they are largely responsible for emitting almost all of the greenhouse gases from about 1850 to the 1980s.* The agreement also includes *a mechanism to address financial losses faced by less developed nations due to climate change impacts like droughts, floods etc.* However, developed nations *won't face financial claims* since it "does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation".

So, why did the US leave the Paris agreement?

During his 2016 presidential campaign, *Donald Trump had described* the Paris Agreement as *"unfair" to US interests,* and had promised to pull out of the agreement if elected. Trump had also sought to portray that election as a referendum on the policies of former President Obama, who had played a pivotal role in stitching together the complex and far-reaching agreement. So in June 2017, months after his inauguration, Trump announced his government's decision to quit the accord. *Environmentalists fiercely criticised the move, saying that America's exit would seriously jeopardise the agreement's objective of keeping the global temperature rise to within 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial times, especially since the US was (and still is) the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases. The US could not immediately exit the Paris Agreement, however, as United Nations rules permitted a country to apply for leaving three years after the accord came into force, i.e. November 4, 2019. The US formally applied to leave on that day, and the departure automatically came into effect on November 4, 2020, at the end of a mandatory year-long waiting period.*

If he wins, how can Joe Biden rejoin the Paris accord?

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has long maintained that the US should commit to policies addressing climate change, and during his campaign proposed a \$2 trillion spending plan that includes promoting clean energy and climate-friendly infrastructure. Biden on Wednesday announced that upon election, his administration would rejoin the Paris treaty on its first day in office– January 20, 2021. *To do so, the US would have to formally inform the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the body which created the Paris accord, about its intention to rejoin. Thirty days after formally applying to the UNFCCC, the US would again become a part of the Paris framework, and would be required to submit its emission-reduction targets for 2030.*

A possible American re-entry in the WHO

Apart from the Paris agreement, a Biden administration is also widely expected to rejoin the World Health Organisation, the UN's health arm which has played a guiding role for the world during the coronavirus pandemic. Trump had announced Washington's intention to leave the WHO in May this year after accusing the body of having undue deference to China. In July, the US formally informed UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres of its intention to leave which unless revoked by Biden would take effect July 6, 2021, after the completion of a one-year notice period. The US, a founding member of the WHO as well as its biggest donor, has long exercised a strong influence over the organisation. It has played a key role during the 2014 Ebola epidemic, the humanitarian response in Afghanistan and Iraq, combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and efforts to eradicate polio and tuberculosis, among several other achievements.



SCIENCE VS. TRUMP

The categorical endorsement by renowned science journals of the Democratic contender in the U.S. presidential race is a plausible response to Donald Trump administration's comprehensively hostile stance towards all evidence-based research and scientific institutions. Premier academic journal Nature and its more popular counterpart, the Scientific American, have openly backed former Vice-President Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the contest, emphasising his faith in the enterprise of science and his commitment to the multilateral framework. The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) has adopted a seemingly more circumspect position, urging voters to deny Mr. Trump a second term. *The London-based Nature's recent editorial is perhaps the most sweeping of all the criticism, as it repudiates the President's anti-science, anti-immigrant and blatantly xenophobic policies. The journal deplores the so-called 'America first' approach as no more than a subterfuge for 'Trump first', as the President has gone about withdrawing Washington from the landmark Paris climate deal, from the Iran nuclear agreement in 2018, and the World Health Organization this year.* The NEJM's editorial, "Dying in a leadership vacuum", is the first time in its more than 200-year-old history that the institution has weighed into a presidential contest. It is also only the fourth instance that all of its editors have thrown their weight behind the widely-read column. The failure of the leadership in the U.S. is, in its view, why the country accounts simultaneously for the largest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, and over 215,000 deaths now. Particularly scathing is the observation that "Instead of relying on expertise, the administration has turned to uninformed opinion leaders and charlatans who obscure the truth and facilitate the promulgation of outright lies". *The NEJM highlights another glaring contrast — the mortality rate from the disease has been three deaths per million in China, the country home to the world's largest population, compared to over 500 deaths per million in the U.S., the world's richest nation.* Further, the ratio of tests conducted per infected person in the country is way below than in nations with meagre medical capacity, such as Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. *The intervention by the top-ranking peer-reviewed journals into the 2020 presidential contest is evidently uncharacteristic, if not entirely unprecedented. Noteworthy is Nature's June 1933 editorial, unequivocally condemning the consequences for academic freedom arising from Germany's expulsion of eminent intellectuals and artists under the sway of Adolf Hitler's fanatical ultranationalism.*

A slew of missteps

The candour of the three publications underscores the dangerous levels to which the trust, confidence and credibility of various specialised agencies have been undermined during the Trump administration. The administration, anxious to announce a breakthrough COVID-19 vaccine ahead of the November 3 election, recently sought to block the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from releasing additional guidelines in order to boost public confidence. Earlier, the agency was pressured into authorising the malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, to treat hospitalised COVID-19 patients, before the manifestation of side-effects forced a reversal of the decision. Instructions issued in July to hospitals to transfer data concerning patients directly to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services raised concerns that the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was being bypassed. The body has since come under pressure over norms on reopening of schools and gathering in public places. The CDC's crucial guideline for passengers and employees to wear masks in public transportation has been overruled. Against this gloomy backdrop, the three journals have clearly determined that silence would amount to complicity.



INDIA AND BIDEN

While U.S. Democratic Party contender and former Vice-President Joseph Biden still needs to tie up some loose ends for an official seal to his victory, it is clear that New Delhi is now preparing to work with a new U.S. administration. The win is a mixed bag for the government. On the one hand, *Mr. Narendra Modi invested considerably in the Trump administration, which included the Houston and Ahmedabad rallies with Mr. Trump, that indicated a virtual endorsement for his re-election. The External Affairs Minister's snub to the Democrat-led House Foreign Affairs Committee and the invitation to senior Trump officials, for "2+2" talks just before the U.S. elections, also played into the impression of New Delhi expecting a Trump win.* On the other hand, Mr. Biden, a long-time supporter of the U.S.-India relationship, brings to his presidency both the comfort of his understanding of foreign policy and the promise of future strategic ties. Foreign policy itself may not be his immediate priority, given the U.S.'s battle with the coronavirus pandemic, and the President-elect's goal, which he articulated on Sunday, to *"heal" rifts in its polity and "restore the soul of America"*. However, it is clear that he will make moves to reverse some of the Trump-era policies.

For India, these could include the U.S.'s return to the Paris climate accord, which would help with its energy transformation, and a return to Iran nuclear negotiations, which will facilitate its regional connectivity ambitions. He is unlikely to reverse the Afghan pull-out and instead might make it a more measured exit. On China, he is likely to adopt a less confrontational attitude while maintaining a pushback. *Where he will no doubt press a hard nerve is on the issues of human rights, Jammu and Kashmir, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, given a policy paper his campaign released in June 2020 that quoted him as being "disappointed"*. But these are more likely to be areas of engagement, and New Delhi should be prepared to hold its own in tough conversations on these sensitive issues. Mr. Biden's presidency promises a change in leadership style, with broader powers to advisers and process-driven decisions. His belief in building up U.S. traditional trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific alliances might be at odds with America's more transactional trends. *No sudden moves such as Mr. Trump's withdrawal of India's GSP export status may be expected, and policy consistency is likely to be preferred to a more personalised summit style.* Above all, as New Delhi prepares to adjust its responses to the new dispensation, it would welcome Mr. Biden's stated intention to re-energise the multilateral global order, and to restore the U.S.'s position in "leading not by the example of [its] power, but by the power of example".

WHAT DOES PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN MEAN FOR INDIA, ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US?

Democrat Joe Biden has been declared the winner of the 2020 US presidential election, defeating Donald Trump, according to news agency The Associated Press.

So, will Joe Biden be good for India?

This is something every Indian wants to know. Here is what his stance could be like in some key areas, judging by his past record and statements.



Has Joe Biden been a friend of India?

Much before he became Vice President in the Barack Obama administration, Biden had advocated a stronger relationship with India. Biden played an important role, both as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and later as Vice President, in systematically deepening strategic engagement with India. In fact, in 2006, three years before he became the Vice-President of the US, Biden announced his vision for the future of US-India relations: “My dream is that in 2020, the two closest nations in the world will be India and the United States,” he had said. *Although (then) Senator Obama was initially hesitant to support the Indo-US nuclear deal, Biden led the charge and worked with both Democrats and Republicans, to approve the nuclear deal in the US Congress in 2008.*

What was Joe Biden’s contribution during his term as VP in the Obama administration?

Biden was one of the key advocates of strengthening the Indo-US partnership, especially in strategic areas. During that time, the US officially declared its support for India’s membership in a reformed and expanded United Nations Security Council. This had been a key demand of successive Indian governments, which was fulfilled by Washington during Biden’s term as VP. *The Obama-Biden Administration also named India a “Major Defense Partner” – a status approved by the US Congress – which made it easier to share advanced and critical technology to India to strengthen defence ties. This was crucial since it was for the first time that any country was given this status, outside of the US’s traditional alliance system.* In fact, *in August 2016, at the fag end of the Obama administration, the two sides signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the first of the three “foundational pacts” for deeper military cooperation. LEMOA allows the militaries of the US and India to replenish from each other’s bases, and access supplies, spare parts and services from each other’s land facilities, air bases, and ports, which can then be reimbursed. LEMOA is extremely useful for India-US Navy-to-Navy cooperation, since the two countries are cooperating closely in the Indo-Pacific.* To put the usefulness of this agreement in simple terms, it is like being able to stop at a friend’s garage or workshop to refuel your car or get it repaired when you are far away from your own home or workshop. Later on, Trump administration signed the remaining foundational pacts – COMCASA and BECA.

What has Biden’s approach been towards terrorism?

Obama and Biden also strengthened cooperation with India to fight terrorism in each of their countries and across the region. *“Biden believes there can be no tolerance for terrorism in South Asia – cross-border or otherwise”,* his campaign document says. While there is not much he said during his time in the administration on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, New Delhi hopes that he will be carrying forward the legacy of the US administration’s approach towards India-Pakistan when it comes to cross-border terrorism.

How is the Biden administration going to look at China?

Over the last few years, there has been a realisation in Washington about China’s aggressive behaviour and there is a somewhat bipartisan consensus amongst the Democrats and the Republicans on China as a strategic rival and a threat. *While the Trump administration has been extremely vocal in India’s support in the last six months of the border-stand-off with China, New Delhi will expect a similar approach from the Biden administration as well.* One will have to wait and watch if Biden follows the same path, but there could be nuancing of the language and the rhetoric



from US officials. “A Biden Administration will also work with India to support a rules-based and stable Indo-Pacific region in which no country, including China, is able to threaten its neighbours with impunity,” his campaign document says. While Trump administration officials including Secretary of State Michael R Pompeo had been attacking the Communist Party of China quite openly, Biden administration’s language might be more calibrated.

What about immigration and visas for Indians, specially H1B visas for skilled professionals?

This has been a major concern for Indians under the Trump administration. *As Democrats are seen to be more liberal on immigration, Biden is expected to be softer towards Indians who go to the US to study, work and live there, and aspire for a better life.* He has promised to support family-based immigration, increase the number of visas offered for permanent, work-based immigration, reform the temporary visa system for high-skill, specialty jobs, eliminate the limits on employment-based green cards. He has also promised to restore the naturalisation process for green card holders. But as the Trump administration has tightened the rules, it may not be very easy for Biden to reverse some of the approaches adopted in the last four years.

What about his attitude towards the human rights issues, especially since Kamala Harris — his Vice-President — is a fierce advocate for human rights?

This is a major concern for the Indian government, which has got support from the Trump administration on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Although some US Congressmen and women had raised red flags on the human rights situation following the revoking of Article 370 and passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act alongside the proposed nationwide NRC, the Trump administration had not taken any actions beyond making some perfunctory statements. *But with Democrats in power, the Indian government can expect some tough statements from the Biden administration on these issues.* Biden has been “disappointed by the measures that the Government of India has taken with the implementation and aftermath of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act into law”, the Biden campaign’s policy paper had said. “As the world’s oldest and largest democracies, the United States and India are bound together by our shared democratic values: fair and free elections, equality under the law, and the freedom of expression and religion. These core principles have endured throughout each of our nations’ histories and will continue to be the source of our strength in the future,” Biden’s campaign document says. How he follows up on his campaign commitment will be something to watch out for.

Overall, will he be a good President for India?

Over the last 20 years, every US President — Bill Clinton, George W Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump — had differences on many issues, but if there was one common theme on which all of them agreed was this: a stronger relationship with India. *What that means is that there has been a tradition of bipartisan support in favour of better ties with India, and every US President has made it better than what he inherited from his predecessor over the last two decades.* So, to cut a long story short, there is no reason to believe that Biden will not continue the tradition — but of course, he will have his own style and nuances, and will put his personal stamp on the relationship.



HOW A BIDEN PRESIDENCY MAY AFFECT INDIA'S ECONOMY

By now it is clear that both Donald Trump's rise to the White House as well as his exit were products of the electorate's reactionary responses. In 2016, the Republican voters chose him to thumb their noses at the career politicians such as Hillary Clinton as well as a recoil from Barack Obama's presidency. In 2020, the Democrats outvoted the Republicans primarily to get rid of Trump. Trump and his supporters, however, have alleged foul play. Their essential grouse is perhaps best captured in Tom Stoppard's (a British writer) words: "It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting". It is another matter that in Trump's case, it might be more appropriate to quote what Thucydides wrote as long back as 431 BC: "In a democracy, someone who fails to get elected to office can always console himself with the thought that there was something not quite fair about it." Anyway, in choosing Biden over Trump, the American voters have most likely changed the course of the global economy. This is why everyone has been so keenly following the twists and turns of the presidential elections in the US. Apart from the likely reduced uncertainties in global trade, what may be of immense importance is the fact that Biden understands the need to control the Covid pandemic before any sustainable economic recovery can take place — either in the US or elsewhere. Biden's approach — in stark contrast to Trump's — could have a salutary impact on how the US leads the rest out of this tricky phase for the world economy when so many countries are witnessing a strong surge in Covid infections. So, what might be the impact on the Indian economy, presuming, of course, that Biden manages to seamlessly transition from President-Elect to the 46th President of the US in January 2021? There are several ways in which the US economy, its health and the policy choices of its government affect India. For one, *the US is one of those rare big countries with which India enjoys a trade surplus*. In other words, we export more goods to the US than what we import from it. A recent analysis by Madan Sabnavis of CARE Ratings shows that *over the past 20 years, India has always had a trade surplus with the US. The trade surplus has widened from \$5.2 billion in 2001-02 to \$17.3 billion in 2019-20. "Trade surplus had peaked at \$21.2 billion in FY18 (2017-18) and has moderated to some extent," points out the report. In 2019-20, India exported goods worth \$53 billion to the US — that's roughly 17 per cent of all Indian exports that year — and imported goods worth \$35.7 billion in return — that's roughly 7.5 per cent of all Indian imports. Apart from trade in goods, "India accounts for nearly 5 per cent of USA's services imports from the World," according to Sabnavis. Between 2005 and 2019, US services imports from India have grown at a compounded annual growth rate of 14 per cent. In 2019, US imports of services from India were \$29.7 billion. Beyond trade, over the past two decades, the US is the fifth-biggest source for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into India. Of the total \$476 billion FDI that has come in since April 2000, the US accounted for \$30.4 billion — roughly 6.5 per cent — directly. Only Mauritius, Singapore, Netherlands, and Japan have invested more FDI since 2000. Apart from FDI (or investment in the physical assets inside India), the US also accounts for one-third of all Foreign Portfolio Investments (that is, investment in financial assets) into India. FPI data shows that, as of September 2020, total Assets Under Custody were Rs 33.22 lakh crore and the US accounted for Rs 11.21 lakh crore of this amount.* On trade, Biden is likely to be less obtrusive than the current Trump administration. *In the Trump worldview, trade was a zero-sum game. In other words, a country had to lose for another to gain. Of course, that is not the case most of the time. More often than not, trade is mutually beneficial — while it may be true that it may not be "equally" beneficial to all countries.* Under a Biden administration, India's trade with the US could recover from the dip since 2017-18. A Biden presidency may also see a renewed push towards a rules-based trading system across the world — instead of outright ad-hocism as was the case under Trump — as well as a move away from the protectionist approach that has been getting strong



across the world. Combined with the control of Covid infections and the economic recovery, the US could yet again provide a growth impulse to the global economy that countries such as India need to boost their exports and grow. Apart from these very direct ways in which the US is important to India, there are massive policy concerns as well. For instance, how a US President looks at the *H1-B visa* issue, affects the prospects of Indian youth far more than the youth of any other country. Under President Trump, who severely curtailed the visa regime, thanks to his policy of “America First”, India had suffered the most. That could change under Biden, who is unlikely to view immigrants and workers from India with Trump-like suspicion. Similarly, *India’s exclusion from the US’ Generalized System of Preference could come up for reconsideration under Biden*. Other points of contention between India and US — such as the tricky issue of *data localisation or capping prices of medicines and medical devices* — have a better chance of getting towards a resolution as we move away from the radical approach of President Trump to the pragmatism of a Biden presidency. Further, *under the Trump administration, the US sanctions on Iran severely limited India’s sourcing of cheap crude oil*. For an economy such as India, which needs a regular supply of cheap oil to grow fast, *a normalisation of US-Iran relationship (and lifting of sanctions) would be more than useful*. On China, too, while the US apprehensions are unlikely to be fewer even under a Biden administration, *it is more likely that a Biden administration will help India against China, instead of clubbing the two together*. Last but not the least, *Biden has promised to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, and this may help countries such as India in dealing with the massive challenges — both technical and financial — on this front*. Of course, many of these benefits may also imply that a Biden administration takes a *closer look at civil liberties and democratic rights in India* — an aspect to which the Trump administration was largely blind.

WHY THE US STATE OF MISSISSIPPI GOT A NEW FLAG

On November 3, voters in Mississippi approved a new flag, “The New Magnolia”, featuring a magnolia flower. *The flag will replace the old one that has been in use for 126 years, and which carried the Confederate battle emblem on it*. The Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag received nearly 3,000 submissions, from which the magnolia was chosen on September 2. *Mississippi is nicknamed the “Magnolia State”, a reference to the magnolia trees that grow there*.

Why did Mississippi change its flag?

Mississippi was the last state in the US to have a flag that featured the Confederate battle emblem. In the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter protests that followed the death of African American George Floyd this May, the state was under pressure to change its flag, with some protesters demanding the removal of statues or monuments that could be perceived as symbols of racism, including some Confederate monuments. In June, protestors tore down a statue of Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia. Davis was the president of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War. Late in June, Mississippi’s Republican governor signed a bill that removed the status of the 126-year-old flag and on November 3, voters from the state approved the design of the new flag. The old flag was adopted nearly three decades after the Civil War and in a 2001 referendum, nearly two-thirds of the voters reaffirmed this flag.

How is the new flag different from the old one?

As per the Mississippi Historical Society (MHS), the state did not officially adopt a flag till 1861, when the state seceded from the US and joined the Confederate States of America. On January 26,



1861, the delegates approved the report prepared by a committee that was appointed to design a suitable flag, an emblem that became known as the Magnolia flag, which featured a Magnolia tree in the centre. But Mississippi became a part of the Confederacy in March the same year, which authorised the governor to have a Confederate flag. Even so, the Magnolia flag remained the official state flag till 1865, as per MHS. The new flag is designed by Rocky Vaughan and features a white magnolia on a blue banner with red and gold bars on each end. The flower is encircled in 20 five-point stars and the words "In God We Trust". An additional star on the flag represents the indigenous Native Americans. On July 1, 2020, Mississippi retired the state's flag that had been in use since 1894. The legislature then said that the new design should not contain that flag and must include the words "In God We Trust."

What are the Confederate symbols?

The Confederate States of America or the Confederacy refers to the government of 11 Southern slaveholding states that seceded from the Union in 1860-61 in the American Civil War after they felt threatened by the election of Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln as the US President in 1860. These pro-slavery states operated under the presidency of Jefferson Davis and vice president Alexander Stephens. Soon, the Confederacy acquired symbols such as the Confederate flag and their own stamps. These states carried out all their affairs separately until they were defeated in 1865. States that were a part of the Confederacy included South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Texas, among others. On July 10, 2015, South Carolina state troopers ceremonially lowered the Confederate flag after 21-year-old white supremacist Dylann Storm Roof, who massacred nine African Americans at a black church in Charleston in June 2015, was seen holding the flag. The flag, which is used to honour the Confederates who died in the Civil War, is seen by many white supremacists as a symbol of Southern pride. Confederate names and symbols can be found on commemorative licence plates, public schools, statues, military bases, parks, roads and counties. According to a report in Politico, there are over 220 Confederate symbols in the state of Virginia alone, which include three military bases named after Confederate war heroes. According to the Southern Poverty Law Centre, there are more than 1,700 such symbols across the US, including more than 700 Confederate statues.

A CONSPIRACY THEORY FEEDING VIOLENCE

YouTube announced that it would take additional measures to block content that promotes QAnon, a pro-Donald Trump conspiracy theory or movement. QAnon has been under the spotlight in recent times. In July, Twitter and TikTok blocked some hashtags and removed some accounts related to it. In August, Facebook announced a ban on QAnon groups. Last year, the FBI said fringe political conspiracy theories including QAnon are a domestic threat and likely to "motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to engage in criminal or violent activity".

So, what is QAnon?

It took shape around 2017 when an anonymous user called "Q" or "Q Clearance Patriot" started posting conspiracy theories. "Q" refers to a security clearance given by the US Department of Energy for access to top-secret information. Q, who claims to be a high-ranking intelligence officer with access to sensitive information of the Trump administration, started posting on the platform 4chan in 2017, and now posts on 8kun, a website run by the founders of 8chan (which was shut down after



the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas in 2019 — the killers had posted hate content on 8chan). It is not clear if Q is a single user.

What is the conspiracy theory?

QAnon followers believe that the world is being run by a cabal of paedophiles who worship Satan and that one of Trump's aims as US President is to unmask the cabal and punish them. According to the conspiracy theorists, Trump is secretly preparing for a day of reckoning, "The Storm", when members of the "deep state" will be executed. This theory has been gaining traction among some far-right voters ahead of the November 3 presidential election. The conspiracy theorists believe that Democrats such as Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and Hollywood actors Tom Hanks and Oprah Winfrey, are part of a global child sex-trafficking ring. This takes off from the "Pizzagate" theory, long debunked, which circulated during the 2016 presidential election. Far-right activists had claimed that Clinton, who contested against Trump, was running a child trafficking racket from the basement of a pizza parlour in Washington, DC.

Has Trump reacted to such ideas?

"I just don't know about QAnon," Trump said at the NBC News Town Hall in Miami on Thursday. Trump has, however, been known to retweet posts from accounts that have posted QAnon-related content. Critics have also noted Trump's failure to denounce the movement and that he has said it is "very strongly against paedophilia".

What kind of people believe in QAnon?

Some QAnon supporters hold anti-Semitic views. They include people who believe that Covid-19 is a hoax and that vaccines are controlled by Jewish people; deny the safety of vaccines; question the truth about the 9/11 attacks; and believe in alien landings. Some QAnon supporters have been implicated in crimes that they claimed were inspired by their beliefs in the movement. These include: a man arrested in 2018 for plotting to plant a bomb in the Illinois Capitol Rotunda to make Americans aware of "Pizzagate"; a man arrested the same year for using an armoured car to block traffic on a bridge in Nevada; a woman arrested in Colorado for plotting an armed raid to kidnap her child whose custody she had lost; and a man charged with murdering a mafia figure in New York in 2019. The man arrested in the New York case, who believed the murder victim was part of the "deep state", displayed QAnon symbols during his court hearing.

How widespread is it?

In a survey by the Pew Research Centre in February-March this year, 76% of US adult respondents reported not knowing anything about the conspiracy, 20% reported knowing a little, and 3% reported knowing a lot (the rest had no answer). *Recent media reports have said the movement is gaining new followers globally, particularly in Germany, possibly due to anti-Semitic beliefs among far-right Germans.* A report in The New York Times said QAnon has "already evolved from a fringe internet subculture into a mass movement" in the US and some of its theories are now "metastasizing" in Europe, including the Netherlands, the Balkans and Britain.

U.S. SENATE LIKELY TO CONFIRM BARRETT TO SUPREME COURT

The Republican-controlled U.S. Senate is expected to confirm President Donald Trump's nominee, Amy Coney Barrett, as the next justice to the Supreme Court, a move that will tilt the country's highest



court further to the right for years to come. No nominee to the Supreme Court has ever been confirmed by the Senate this close to a presidential election, with more than 58 million ballots already cast ahead of Election Day on November 3. The rush to confirm Judge Barrett, 48, has bitterly divided Democrats and Republicans, who are expected to split along party lines on the final vote. Trump has said repeatedly he wants her in place to vote on any election-related cases that go to the court. Several Republicans who previously expressed concerns about rushing the process are expected to approve Judge Barrett's nomination. Senate Democrats and some Republicans expressed unease at the possibility that Vice-President Mike Pence, several of whose close aides have tested positive for COVID-19, might attend Monday's vote. *With Judge Barrett confirmed, the Supreme Court will have a solid 6-3 conservative majority.* She is expected to participate in a hearing on November 10, where Republicans will ask the court to strike down the Affordable Care Act.

WHAT IS ORIGINALISM, WHICH US SUPREME COURT NOMINEE AMY BARRETT BELIEVES IN?

US Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett, who is widely expected to be confirmed by Republican lawmakers before the November 3 election, has described "originalism" -- or interpreting the country's Constitution as per the intentions of its 18th-century founding leaders -- as her legal philosophy. Earlier this week, the Conservative judge was asked during her confirmation hearing what it meant to be an "originalist", to which Barrett answered, "In English, that means I interpret the Constitution as a law. The text is text, and I understand it to have the meaning that it had at the time people ratified it. It does not change over time, and it is not up to me to update it or infuse my own views into it." *Barrett, 48, is slated to be the third judge to be appointed by President Donald Trump to the country's 9-member top court-- where justices can potentially serve for life.* The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whom Barrett is to replace, died last month at 87, having served on the bench for 27 years. *A US Supreme Court judge's legal philosophy, thus, has a major impact on divisive and consequential issues facing the country -- such as abortion, gun control, healthcare and voting rights.*

So, what does 'originalism' mean?

In legal philosophy, this theory prescribes that while resolving disputes, judges should interpret the constitution as it was understood at the time it was ratified, irrespective of whether they personally agree or disagree with the outcome of a case decided this way. *According to originalists, the meaning of the constitution is fixed at the time of its framing, either in the form of the meaning of the words used, or the intentions of the drafters.* The job of the court is to stick to this original meaning. *The word 'originalism' was coined in the 1980s, and has since been popular among US conservatives, who have sought to promote judicial restraint on the country's federal courts.* Adherents of originalism believe that social change should be brought about by new laws made by elected representatives, and not through judicial activism, in which judges make new interpretations of the constitution. *A self-described originalist, Judge Barrett has been mentored by the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia -- considered a strong champion of constitutional originalism and judicial conservatism in recent decades.*



Criticism of originalism

Critics say that the originalists' core belief -- that the constitution should be interpreted the way it was written -- is unviable, given that the document's meaning has remained uncertain despite the efforts of countless jurists since its ratification in 1787 at the close of the American Revolution. *Some have denounced it as another name for right-wing political agenda, and have accused originalists of trying to chip away at hard-earned social reforms by applying outdated beliefs of the 18th and 19th centuries to modern-day legal disputes.* Originalists contest these accusations, and claim that it is their method which in fact delivers less biased decisions. In a TIME opinion piece, US Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, another self-proclaimed originalist and Trump appointee, argues, "Originalism is a theory focused on process, not on substance... The fact is, a good originalist judge will not hesitate to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution's original meaning, regardless of contemporary political consequences." Defending the legal theory, the late Justice Scalia had famously said, "We are governed by laws, not by the intentions of legislators."

'Living constitution' theory

The legal philosophy which is said to be the opposite of originalism is 'living constitution' or 'modernism'. This theory, espoused by likes of the late Justice Ginsburg, believes that the constitution should be updated with times to encompass changing societal needs. Originalists consider this theory as judicial overreach, and criticise living constitution jurists as "activist judges". Justice Gorsuch says in the TIME piece, "... many living constitutionalists would prefer to have philosopher-king judges swoop down from their marble palace to ordain answers rather than allow the people and their representatives to discuss, debate, and resolve them. You could even say the real complaint here is with our democracy."

WHY AMY CONEY BARRETT SPARKED CONTROVERSY BY USING THE TERM 'SEXUAL PREFERENCE'

During her confirmation hearings on Capitol Hill earlier this week, US Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett sparked considerable outrage when she used the widely denounced term 'sexual preference' while discussing LGBTQI rights. Barrett referenced the phrase when questioned about the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which overturned a ban on same-sex marriages across all 50 US states. Hawaii Democratic Senator Mazie Hirono condemned her choice of words, calling the term both "offensive" and "outdated". Meanwhile, Barrett's remarks received widespread backlash on social media, with several members of the LGBTQI community and advocacy groups calling her out for being insensitive. In fact, noted reference book and dictionary publisher Merriam Webster even updated its online definition of the term 'sexual preference' after the incident, to indicate its offensive nature.

What was the controversial statement Amy Coney Barrett made?

On the second day of confirmation hearings for President Donald Trump's Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett, Senator Dianne Feinstein asked whether the nominee shared her mentor late Justice Antonin Scalia's views on same-sex marriage. Justice Scalia was known to routinely rule against gay rights, Feinstein pointed out. Feinstein asked if Barrett, too, would "be a consistent vote to roll back hard-fought freedoms and protections for the LGBT community". To this, Barrett responded that she had "no agenda", a line that Scalia himself used during his own confirmation hearing. "I do want to be clear that I have never discriminated on the basis of sexual preference and would not



discriminate on the basis of sexual preference,” she added. *Barret’s Supreme Court nomination has irked LGBTQI groups and advocates across the country as many fear that her ultra-conservative personal views and legal approach could threaten the rights of sexual minorities.* During the hearing, Barrett refused to tell senators if she would vote to overturn decisions that provide legal protection to same-sex marriage.

But, why is the use of the term ‘sexual preference’ controversial?

The term ‘sexual preference’ is often deemed offensive by members and advocates of the LGBTQI community as it implies that sexuality is a choice. The phrase suggests that who a person chooses as a romantic or sexual partner is merely based on personal preference, which has the potential to be changed. *In an article published in 1991, the American Psychological Association (APA) wrote, “The word preference suggests a degree of voluntary choice that is not necessarily reported by lesbians and gay men and that has not been demonstrated in psychological research.”* “The term ‘sexual preference’ is typically used to suggest that being lesbian, gay or bisexual is a choice and therefore can and should be ‘cured’,” prominent US LGBTQI alliance GLAAD notes in a media reference guide. The idea that sexual minorities can be “cured”, implying that their sexuality is an illness, has long been promoted by right-wing Christian groups in the United States. Today, *the term ‘sexual preference’ has widely been replaced by ‘sexual orientation’, as it erases ambiguity and acknowledges that sexuality is a key part of a person’s identity.*

What was the response to her statement?

Senator Mazie Hirono later slammed the nominee for using the “offensive and outdated term”. “It is used by anti-LGBTQ activists to suggest that sexual orientation is a choice. It is not,” the senator said. She went on to say that if Barrett really believed that “sexual orientation is merely a preference”, then the LGBTQ community should be “rightly concerned” about whether the judge will uphold their constitutional right to marry if she were to be confirmed. Apologising for her comments, Barrett said that she didn’t mean to “cause any offence in the LGBTQ community”. “So if I did, I greatly apologise for that,” she said. “I simply meant to be referring to Obergefell’s holding with regard to same-sex marriage.” Barrett’s remarks also sparked widespread backlash on social media. Sharing a video of the incident on Twitter, the Washington DC-based National Women’s Law Centre wrote, “It’s not a ‘preference’, Judge Barrett.” GLAAD, too, condemned her comments. *“The correct term is sexual orientation. ‘Sexual preference’ is a term often used by anti-LGBTQ activists to imply that sexual orientation is a choice,”* the organisation tweeted. Soon after, *Merriam Webster* updated its online definition of the term ‘sexual preference’ to indicate its offensive nature. “The term sexual preference as used to refer to sexual orientation is widely considered offensive in its implied suggestion that a person can choose who they are sexually or romantically attracted to,” the updated entry now reads. *The dictionary publisher has since confirmed that the entry was, in fact, updated due to Barrett’s controversial comments at her Supreme Court confirmation hearing.*

WHAT HAS BEEN THE VATICAN’S STANCE ON SAME-SEX CIVIL UNIONS OVER THE YEARS?

Pope Francis has explicitly voiced his support for same-sex couples and their right to be legally protected under civil union laws, marking a radical shift from the Roman Catholic Church’s otherwise unwavering stance on homosexual relationships over centuries. The remarks were made in a new documentary called ‘Francesco’ that premiered at the Rome Film Festival, and have since garnered



both widespread praise and calls for immediate clarification from his more conservative critics. *The 83-year-old Pope's comments are particularly significant since Catholic teaching maintains that a marriage can only be between a man and a woman, and the church has repeatedly opposed recognition of same-sex unions.* In fact, *a document published by the Vatican in 2003 laid down why it was "necessary to oppose legal recognition of homosexual unions".* The document claimed that same-sex couples "obscure certain basic moral values and cause a devaluation of the institution of marriage".

What did Pope Francis say in the documentary?

The film 'Francesco', directed by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Evgeny Afineevsky, is based on Francis' papacy over the last seven and a half years and documents his response to different issues that plague humankind — such as racism, sexual abuse, income inequality, climate change and even the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. When asked about his take on homosexuality at one point in the documentary, the Pope said, "Homosexual people have a right to be in a family. They are children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable over it." "What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered. I stood up for that," he added. *His comments appear to be in reference to his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires, where Francis first endorsed civil unions for gay couples as an alternative to same-sex marriages.* However, this is the first time he has publicly endorsed civil unions as Pope. He is also the first pontiff in history to do so. In the past, too, the Jesuit Pope has made headlines for his relatively progressive take on homosexuality. In 2013, soon after he was elected, he famously remarked, "Who am I to judge?" when asked a question about gay priests. In a papal exhortation three years later, the Pope said, "Every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence." Recently, *the Pope urged people not to discriminate based on sexuality, adding that too much emphasis was being put on the "adjective" (gay), rather than the "noun" (person).* "There are people that prefer to select or discard people because of the adjective. These people don't have a human heart," he said in a BBC documentary.

What does the Pope's support for gay civil unions mean for the LGBTQI community?

While the Pope's comment is not likely to result in a change in Catholic doctrine, several members and advocates of the LGBTQI community have welcomed it as representing a shift in the church's attitude towards sexual minorities and their relationships. But Francis has not yet indicated his openness to same-sex marriage. In fact, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he pushed for same-sex civil unions as an alternative when the Argentinian government was deciding whether to legalise same-sex marriage. *Civil unions or civil partnerships are legally recognised arrangements much like marriages. They were created primarily to provide legal recognition to same-sex couples.* Pope Francis has faced criticism for his vehement opposition to same-sex marriages in the past. Even so, experts say that acceptance of civil unions from one of the most revered public figures in the world could help change perspectives in countries where the LGBTQ community has been denied its rights so far. "It is an historic moment when the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, long seen as a persecutor of LGBTQ people, moves in such a supportive direction for lesbian/gay couples and their families. It signals that the church is continuing to develop more positively its approach to LGBTQ issues," Francis Debernardo, Executive Director of US Catholic LGBT+ advocacy group New Ways Ministry, told Reuters.



What does the Bible say about homosexual relations?

Most references to homosexuality in the bible only refer to sexual relations between two men. But over the years, conservative Christians have said that the principles apply to the entire LGBTIQ community. In the Bible, homosexual relations are forbidden in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus 20:13 reads, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death." In some of his letters, which are included in the Bible, St Paul condemns homosexuality, calling it "unrighteous", and claims that people who practise it will not inherit the kingdom of God.

HITTING WHERE IT HURTS

The Trump administration has once again tightened the screws on the country's immigration system in a manner that is likely to directly impact Indian companies contracting with American firms for on-site work. This week *the State Department proposed to stop issuing temporary or B-1 business visas relating to occupations normally classified as falling under the H-1B speciality or skilled visa category. The argument is that under the guise of the business-related entry of personnel, companies were sending their technology professionals for short-term stays to work on U.S. jobs, potentially undercutting the wages and employment prospects of U.S. workers.* The proposed policy action, just ahead of the November 3 presidential election, is significant for following closely on the heels of other, similar moves to tighten restrictions on the entry of foreign nationals, including raising the minimum salaries payable to those applying for H-1B visas and to stop the issuance of such visas entirely until December 31, 2020. Taken together, it would be reasonable to expect a painful economic fallout on legal skilled migration from India. For example, *the analysts predict that Mr. Trump's June 22, 2020 ban on new H-1B visa issuance could impact up to 219,000 workers, who would be unable to take up potential jobs in the U.S.*

To date, there has been no retaliatory policy from India, at most perhaps diplomatic parleys where South Block has sought to emphasise that technology and innovation via the trade in services remain a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership and highly-skilled Indian professionals working in the U.S. help bridge the skill gap there, imparting a technological and competitive edge. In the backdrop of the steady clampdown on visa issuance is Mr. Trump's rhetoric on protecting U.S. jobs from foreigners, especially in cases where lower wages drive substitution effects. The pressure on the White House to increase the cadence of the drumbeat for this form of "protectionism" has risen owing to the pandemic's job-killing effects. U.S. joblessness spiked to an unprecedented 14.7% in April 2020.

WHO IS THE WOMAN FEDERAL INMATE THE US IS SET TO EXECUTE, THE FIRST IN 70 YEARS?

The US has scheduled executions of two federal inmates convicted of heinous murders. One of these is Lisa Montgomery, who will become the first female federal inmate to be executed in almost 70 years. The other is Brandon Bernard, convicted of killing two ministers on a military reservation in 1999.

What are federal executions?



In the United States, depending on the severity of the crime they have committed, people can either be tried at a national level in federal courts, or at a regional level in state courts. *While as many as 22 US states — including New York, Hawaii, and Minnesota — have abolished the death penalty at a regional level, it can still be awarded at a federal level in all 50 states.* However, it is rarely used. At present, there are 62 inmates on federal death row, most imprisoned in the Terre Haute prison complex. In 1972, the US Supreme Court struck down capital punishment both at the state and federal level. However, it was reinstated by Congress over a decade later, in 1988. With the passing of the Federal Death Penalty Act of 1994, the list of crimes that could lead to federal execution grew substantially.

WHO WERE THE CHICAGO 7, AND WHAT HAPPENED DURING THEIR TRIAL?

The year 1968 is often seen as the most turbulent year in 20th century American history. The Vietnam war had started out, civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated resulting in violent riots, and the presidential election turned out to be a referendum on the war set against the background of protests and clashes between the public and state authorities. Filmmaker Aaron Sorkin, in his recent historical drama, took an important leaf out of this dramatic year. *'The trial of Chicago 7' that was released on Netflix earlier this month is the story of the seven (initially eight) anti-Vietnam war protesters who were charged with conspiracy and inciting riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.* The film follows the drama that unfolded during the trial of the Chicago 7, on many occasions pulling out dialogues straight from the courtroom as they had been uttered. By the end of the trial, five out of the seven defendants were convicted for inciting riots and all of them were given lengthy sentences for contempt of court. However, in 1972, the convictions were overturned by the United States Court of Appeals for the seventh circuit on the ground that the judge was racially and culturally biased in his verdict. *The trial of the Chicago seven was an important moment in the history of America as it raised questions on the first amendment to the constitution and brought to light the culture clash in the country.*

What was the Vietnam War about?

A regional conflict that got intensified by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. It began after the government of North Vietnam defeated the French colonial administration in 1954, and wanted the entire country under a single communist regime, modeled after Soviet Union and China. However, the South Vietnamese government wanted to be aligned with the West. Hence, the two sides pitted against each other, with the United States increasingly sending in troops. *The number of personnel increased dramatically under the presidency of Lyndon B Johnson — from about 16,000 advisors in non-combat roles in 1963 to 5,25,000 in 1967, many in combat roles. More than three million people, including over 58,000 Americans, died in the Vietnam War, what is known as the American War in Vietnam.*

What were the anti-war protests in the US about?

An era known for its political counter culture, student movements that started as part of the Civil Rights Movement, grew to demand free speech on college campuses, increased in scale as US involvement in the Vietnam war became the focal point of the protests. *News coverage of the war, which included graphic visual testimonies, also contributed in turning the public opinion against the war. What first began among peace activists and leftist intellectuals on college campuses gained national prominence in 1965 after the US began bombing North Vietnam in earnest.* With more



young American men being enlisted, opposition against *the 'draft' system grew manifold as it mainly drew men from minorities and lower and middle class whites, drawing the ire of students and blue-collar workers.* This year had been of violence, political turbulence, and civil unrest, with riots taking place in more than 100 cities, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Who were the Chicago seven (eight)?

In August 1968, the streets of Chicago were thick with demonstrations, rallies, marches and rock concerts protesting against the Vietnam war. In the course of the protests, violent clashes broke out between the demonstrators and the police, and swelled into a full fledged riot. The police used tear gas, verbal and physical intimidation to keep the protesters out of the streets. In the course of the next few days, the police made several arrests and aggressively stopped journalists from covering the incident. Among the thousands on the streets, eight organisers came to be accused by the federal justice system of having incited the riots. *The Chicago eight were important faces in different activist groups. The only thing tying them together was a shared critique of the American government. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were co-founders of the highly theatrical, counter-culture revolutionary movement called the Youth International Party, whose members were popularly known as 'Yippies'. David Dellinger led the 'National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam', and was one of the senior-most among the eight. Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis were former leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society. Lee Weiner was a research assistant in Northwestern University and John Froines was professor of Chemistry at Oregon University. The eighth defendant, Bobby Seale, was the founder of the Black Panthers Party at Oakland, California, a Black political organisation that carried out armed citizens patrol, monitoring the behaviour of the Oakland police force. Seale and the judge, Julius Hoffman were constantly at odds, with the latter making racist statements against him. Hoffman ordered Seale to be gagged, and finally declared a mistrial in his case, sentencing him to four years in prison. Consequently, seven defendants were left in the trial.*

What happened in Chicago during the protests?

Several youth groups had planned to protest outside the Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago in late August, to select the party's candidates for the 1968 presidential election. Different groups had organised rallies, demonstrations and marches close to the convention site. Although Chicago's Mayor Richard J Daley had refused permits to most demonstrators, and heavily deployed the streets with 12,000 police officers, 5,600 members of the Illinois National Guard and 5,000 Army soldiers. *Eventually, the police and military forces violently clashed with the protesters, resulting in hundreds of injuries and 668 arrests during the four-day convention.* While the crowd pelted the police with food, rocks, and chunks of concrete, and the police fired tear gas and chased the demonstrators, beating them with clubs and rifle butts.

What is the Rap Brown law, under which the group was charged?

The Rap Brown law, or the Anti-Riot Act, tagged onto the Civil Rights Bill, which made it a federal crime to cross state lines (also through mail, use of the Internet, or phone calls) in order to riot or to conspire to use interstate commerce to incite rioting. It was not enforced as such in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. However, it has made headlines recently during Black Lives Matter protests. Attorney General William Barr had cited the Act while speaking about those who were protesting.



What happened during the trial?

The trial began during the fall of 1969 and went on for the next five months. The Chicago eight were charged with conspiring to cross interstate boundaries with the intent of causing riot. Historian Bruce Ragsdale in his research paper, 'The Chicago seven: 1960s radicalism in the federal courts' wrote about the trial, "the defendants and their lawyers used the courtroom as a platform for a broad critique of American society and an almost anarchic challenge to the legitimacy of governmental authority." "The nearly five-month long trial illustrated the contentious and often theatrical nature of public affairs during the late 1960s and early 1970s." What stood out during the trial was the amount of theatrics employed by the defendants and their lawyers in putting forth their case. For instance, Rubin pleaded not guilty with a raised fist, while Hoffman, on being introduced to the jury, blew them a kiss. In what was one of the most dramatic moments in the trial, Hoffman and Rubin entered the courtroom in judicial robes, flung them to the door and stomped on them as a way to demonstrate contempt against judicial authority. With judge Hoffman reacting all too easily to the courtroom demonstrations, it only added to the drama of the proceedings. The defence called more than a hundred witnesses, many of them bystanders who testified about the unprovoked police violence and injuries among the demonstrators. Well known writers and performers like Allen Ginsberg, Dick Gregory, and Judy Collins too testified to the peaceful intent of the demonstrators. After the argument phase, while the jury deliberated on the verdict, Judge Hoffman cited the defendants and their lawyers for 159 counts of criminal contempt. "Some of the convictions were for courtroom outbursts and profanities, many were for laughter and others were based on the refusal of a defendant to rise as the judge entered or left the courtroom," noted Ragsdale. Finally on February 19, 1970 the jury returned its verdict. Froines and Weiner were acquitted, while the remaining defendants were convicted of having crossed state lines with the intent of inciting riots and giving inflammatory speeches. They were fined \$5000 dollars each and sentenced to five years in prison. Two, years later though, the sentence was overturned. Sorokin's cinematic representation of the trial ends on a rather memorable note, as Haydon (played by Eddie Redmayene), offers a statement to the court right before the sentence, reading out the names and age of the 4,752 officers from the US troops who had been killed in the Vietnam war since the proceedings against the eight of them began.

WHY PROTESTS IN BELARUS COULD GET A FILLIP FROM US ELECTION RESULTS

Belarus has been hit by protests since August after a disputed election allowed President Alexander Lukashenko a sixth term in office. However, over the past few days, these protests have gained momentum after exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya called for a nationwide strike, demanding Lukashenko's resignation. The president, for his part, has ignored these calls for resignation and has instead unleashed local police on protesters, hundreds of whom have been detained following public demonstrations. In addition to unleashing police upon protesters, Lukashenko has also urged his own supporters to hold public rallies, but these have been much smaller in scale in comparison.

Will US election results have any impact?

A day after results of the US elections were called by the Associated Press in favour of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, thousands of protesters from across Belarus tried to enter central Minsk but were prevented by riot police, news reports said. According to a report by DW, human rights organisation Viasna said 830 citizens were detained this past weekend, including prominent



public figures like model Olga Khizhinkova, a former Miss Belarus. *After the results came out, Tikhonovskaya, who has sought refuge in Lithuania, took to Twitter to congratulate Biden and thanked him for his "solidarity".* During the campaign trail for the 2020 US elections, *Biden had openly expressed support for the anti-government protests in Belarus and had called Lukashenko's rule illegitimate and had published at least two posts on social media in support of the Belarusian protests.* "Although President Trump refuses to speak out on their behalf, I continue to stand with the people of Belarus and support their democratic aspirations," Biden had said in a statement on his official campaign website. "I also condemn the appalling human rights abuses committed by the Lukashenko regime." "No leader who tortures his own people can ever claim legitimacy....I will continue to join Svetlana Tikhonovskaya and the people of Belarus in calling for the peaceful transfer of power, the release of all political prisoners, and free and fair elections so the Belarusian people are finally able to exercise the democratic rights for which they have sacrificed so much," Biden's statement had said. *Now with the hope of a new government in the US in January, Tikhonovskaya and protesters may be looking for assistance from the Biden-Harris government to put pressure on Lukashenko to give up control of the government in Belarus. If the Biden-Harris government were to act upon Tikhonovskaya's calls for assistance, it would be in addition to recent action initiated by the European Union and Canada. This past week, the European Union officially imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and blacklisted his 44-year-old son Viktor, who serves as Lukashenko's security adviser. Under the terms of these sanctions, Lukashenko and his son are now banned from obtaining EU visas and their assets in the European Union have been blocked.* At least 59 people in the Belarus government have been put under sanctions as of November 6, according to a DW report. *Canada had announced that it too was imposing sanctions on Belarusian government officials,* although it was not clear whether Lukashenko himself was included in this list.

A FRAGILE FRENCH REPUBLIC

The recent series of terrorist attacks have come at the worst possible time for France. For months, the country has been struggling with a surge in COVID-19 cases. The recent lockdown, with its onerous paperwork requirements and sharp restrictions on everyday life, has been greeted with a weary shrug by most French people. This time, they know what to expect. It is much the same with the spectre of terrorism, which has been around for far longer than COVID-19. The French have become grimly accustomed to watching news reports about attacks committed against French citizens in the name of Islam. Even the media carousel has become familiar. There is footage of the crime scene, cordoned off, with the flashing lights of police cars and ambulances. This is followed by a brief period of uncertainty about the cause or the perpetrators, usually accompanied by the sombre faces of politicians. Finally, as information starts to trickle out, the emotions flood in, the chat shows light up, and the public pronouncements begin.

The symbol of Samuel Paty

Yet, despite the predictable storyline, all but the most cynical observers were taken aback by the assassination of the schoolteacher Samuel Paty. Ambushed and beheaded on October 16, 2020 in a leafy, genteel distant suburb of Paris, Paty stood accused by his assailant of having violated the long-standing Muslim tradition that prohibits representations of the Prophet Muhammad. The attacker was an 18-year-old Chechen refugee who lived 80 kilometres from the scene of the attack. He had heard on social media that Paty had shown in class some of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which were published by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2011 and



2012. More than five years after the first, devastating attack on CharlieHebdo's office in January 2015 — and with the perpetrators currently standing trial — Paty's assassination was designed to shock the French public and produce a reaction across the Muslim world by reigniting a culture war that had begun to fade in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. But the symbolism went further than spectacular violence. Paty was a history and geography teacher in a French state school. His job, like mine, was to teach young people about the importance of the past. He was leading a class on free speech. By all accounts, he was careful and sensitive in the way he presented his material, including the cartoons in Charlie Hebdo. He was doing what every good teacher does: pushing his students to think differently about the world around them. Paty, then, was anything but exceptional. Every person who has attended a French school in the past century or more has had a history and geography teacher like him. He was — quite literally — a symbol of the everyday life of France.

Schools and secularism

The powerful reaction to Paty's assassination was not simply a reflection of the fact that everyone could identify with him. It also had to do with his profession. Since the start of the Third Republic in 1870, teachers have been at the forefront of the French state's mission to unify its diverse population. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, state school teachers were responsible for converting young people in rural France away from the heavy hand of Catholic dogma, and they spearheaded efforts to "educate" and "civilise" indigenous peoples in the French colonies. In recent decades, teachers have been charged with trying to "integrate" France's myriad ethnic minority communities. They are seen — and often see themselves — as engines of social unity in a notoriously divided country. Of the many things that teachers are expected to do, one of the most important is to embody the principles of laïcité. Often translated as 'secularism', laïcité is better understood as a project of social cohesion and a key component of French citizenship. It encompasses not simply the formal separation of Church and State, but also the evacuation of religious values from the public space and their replacement with secular values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. Traditionally, teachers have seen laïcité as a progressive idea. But its meaning in contemporary France no longer always matches the lofty principles that underpin it. Indeed, for many people today, laïcité is mainly about Islam. This reflects France's recent history. The decolonisation of the French colonies in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s brought the problem of Islam into sharp focus, as the French tried and failed to manage Muslims in unprecedented numbers. Subsequently, France was the site of violence that spilled over from the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. Around the same time, it also experienced a series of public controversies over the wearing of the hijab in state schools and other public places, often spurred on by a far-right party committed to the stigmatisation of immigrants and Muslims. These factors hardened attitudes towards both Islam and laïcité. While it once was a bulwark against Catholic obscurantism, laïcité also came to be used as a rhetorical tool against French Muslims. France thereafter became a prime target in the new wave of global Islamist violence that took off in the early 2010s.

Compromise or conflict

So how should France respond to the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks in the name of Islam? One way would be to compromise. This would involve acknowledging that laïcité alone cannot fix the country's social and political problems. It would also require the French state to recognise that France has — almost without realising it — become part of the Muslim world. It cannot stand



apart from conflicts over religious practice that have affected countries with much larger Muslim populations, from Morocco to Indonesia. Another way would be to double down on French “values”. This is the path that President Emmanuel Macron has chosen. He and his cabinet have spent a lot of time in recent weeks emphasising the importance of *laïcité* and denouncing all those who are seen to threaten it. In the light of the most recent attack on a church in Nice — committed by a young Tunisian man who seems to have travelled to France for this express purpose — such a defensive posture makes sense. But Mr. Macron’s strategy is a risky one. For a start, it is almost guaranteed to elicit a hostile response from leaders of Muslim-majority countries, many of whom are keen to find an international issue that can distract from their own domestic problems. More than that, however, the continuous invocation of *laïcité* risks eroding its meaning. Since the late 19th century, *laïcité* has been used to integrate different social and religious minorities into the national community, but it has taken on a more exclusionary and anti-Muslim quality in recent years. Paradoxically, this has made it hard for the very people whose job it is to teach these values — people like the late Samuel Paty. In his case, a genuine commitment to freedom of expression — an essential part of *laïcité* — was manipulated by his attacker to make it appear as if he was intent on pursuing an anti-Muslim agenda. So, while it might seem like a good strategy to use the idea of *laïcité* as a shield against an amorphous Muslim threat, the danger is that this will strip it of its most positive elements and render it useless as an instrument of social integration. That, more than any terror attack, would be a tragedy for all French people — Muslim or not.

VIENNA’S WOES

The attack in Vienna that killed four people underscores the transnational threat European countries face from Islamist terrorists. The assault follows the beheading of a schoolteacher in a Paris suburb and a knife attack in Nice that took three lives. In Vienna, the suspected gunman, Kujtim Fejzulaj, 20, a dual citizen of Austria and North Macedonia and of Albanian origin, opened fire near a synagogue before being shot dead by the police. He had a previous terrorism conviction. In April last year, he was sentenced to 22 months after he tried to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State. He was released in December because of his age. The immediate question the Austrian authorities face would be about the failure in preventing the attack. How did a terrorism convict slip off the security radar and launch an attack in the capital city at a time when Europe was on high alert following the terror assaults in France? Austria will also have to plug the security loopholes as several countries in the continent, including France and the U.K., have raised the threat levels. The larger challenge is how to address the issue of radicalisation among youth and counter attempts to disrupt the social cohesion of the continent.

Austria’s conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, known for his fiery anti-immigrant politics, sent the right message when he called for unity in the fight against terrorism. He said the fight is not between Christians and Muslims or Austrians and immigrants, but between “civilisation and barbarity”. Mr. Kurz, who had teamed up with the Islamophobic far-right Freedom Party in 2017 to form the government for the first time, is now in power with the Green Party and has more political leeway to build a stronger national response to terrorism. *Jihadists use violence to create social discord. While they unleash violence on the public in the name of Islam, the rising Islamophobic, nationalist parties in Europe seize on such incidents to bolster their fortunes.* France’s Marine Le Pen, with an eye on the 2022 presidential election, has called for a ban on immigrants from some Muslim countries and declared “a war” to “evict Islamism by force from our country”. In Austria, the Freedom Party would take cues from her National Rally party. *This is a two-front*



attack on the democratic and secular values Europe stands for — and that is what the terrorists want. Leaders of France, Austria and other terror-hit countries should not allow the jihadists to have their way. They should clamp down on terror networks, isolate and punish the jihadists, counter the ideology of political Islamists and build on the values of pluralism, secularism, democracy and equality, and step up deradicalisation efforts with help from communities. This is a fight they cannot afford to lose.

WHY ANOTHER CHARLIE HEBDO CARTOON IS FANNING TURKEY-FRANCE TENSIONS

The recent edition of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, which featured a controversial caricature of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has added fuel to the raging tensions between France and Turkey. Soon after the cartoon was published, Erdogan's office vowed to take "legal and diplomatic actions" against the French magazine. While the Turkish President said he had not yet seen the "disgusting" cartoon, he condemned the magazine for what he called "a grave insult to my Prophet". The rift between the two NATO allies has widened this month, with Erdogan calling for a boycott of French goods and questioning French President Emmanuel Macron's sanity after the latter declared "Islam is a religion that is in crisis today all over the world".

Why was the caricature published in the first place?

The cartoon was published days after Erdogan called for a boycott of French products, in the wake of France announcing a tougher stance on "radical" Islam. The latest diplomatic spat follows the beheading of a 47-year-old schoolteacher named Samuel Paty in Paris last week, days after he had shown the controversial caricatures of Prophet Mohammed to his students during a lesson about freedom of speech. Macron responded to the attack, carried out by an 18-year-old Chechen refugee, by launching a campaign that aimed to build a French version of Islam. During his eulogy at Paty's funeral, Macron said that the country could never give up its liberties or its cartoons, and will continue to fight for freedom. "We will continue, professor. We will defend the freedom that you taught so well and we will promote secularism, we will not renounce caricatures, drawings, even if others retreat," he said. Even before Paty was killed, Macron defended the right to caricature the Prophet Mohammed. *In September, he described Islam as a religion "in crisis" and announced that he would present a bill to strengthen a law that separates church and state in France. Macron's comments sparked widespread outrage in many Islamic countries, with Turkey and Pakistan taking the lead in slamming the French President for encouraging Islamophobia.* The hashtags #BoycottFrenchProducts, #Islam and #NeverTheProphet in Arabic began trending on social media as support poured in from across the Muslim world.

How did Erdogan react to Macron's comments?

The leaders of France and Turkey have sparred on a number of issues in recent years, including Libya, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and drilling rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. After Macron announced that he planned to reform Islam to make it more compatible with France's republican values, Erdogan declared his French counterpart needed "mental treatment". "What is Macron's problem with Islam? What is his problem with Muslims?" he said. "Macron needs some sort of mental treatment. What else is there to say about a head of state who doesn't believe in the freedom of religion and behaves this way against the millions of people of different faiths living in his own country?" France responded to Erdogan's comments by recalling its ambassador to Turkey for consultations. The French government condemned the Turkish President's "excess and



rudeness” and said, “We are not accepting insults”. This week, Erdogan joined growing calls for a boycott on French products. “European politicians should say ‘stop’ to the hate campaign led by French President Macron,” he said.

WHY WOMEN IN POLAND ARE PROTESTING A COURT RULING ON ABORTIONS

Over the last four days, thousands of women have stormed the streets of Poland, protesting a recent court ruling that drastically restricts their right to access safe and legal abortions. Carrying banners and placards — many bearing a red lightning bolt, a symbol of the pro-choice protests in the country — the demonstrators demand the reversal of the ruling by Poland’s highest court. Riot police violently cracked down on protestors after they gathered near the home of the ruling Law and Justice Party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who is widely considered to be the country’s de facto decision maker. Clashes broke out when law enforcement authorities began to use pepper spray to disperse crowds of more than a hundred protestors in Warsaw. So far, at least 15 demonstrators have been arrested, of whom 14 have been released, CNN reported. Human rights activists and groups across the world, including Amnesty International, have widely condemned the Polish court’s ruling, calling it an attack on women’s basic human rights.

What was the Polish court’s recent ruling on abortions?

Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal ruled that an existing law allowing abortions of malformed fetuses was unconstitutional, immediately provoking an outcry from women and pro-choice activists across the country. In the ruling, the tribunal’s president Julia Przylebska said that permitting abortions in the case of foetal deformities legalised “eugenic practices with regard to an unborn child, thus denying it the respect and protection of human dignity,” The New York Times reported. Since the Polish constitution assures a right to life, Przylebska argued that an abortion based on a foetal malfunction was “a directly forbidden form of discrimination.” Last year, *MPs from the ruling nationalist Law and Justice party first launched a legal challenge against the country’s 1993 abortion law, which so far permitted the termination of pregnancy on the grounds of foetal defects.* Significantly, *a majority of the court’s judges were nominated by the ruling party itself.* Poland’s abortion laws were already considered some of the strictest in Europe. *Now, once the court’s decision is enacted, abortions will only be permitted in cases of rape, incest, or if there is a threat to the mother’s life.* Undeterred by the recent crackdown by riot police, demonstrators have said they will continue to stage protests across the country until the ban is revoked.

What does the court’s decision mean for the people of Poland?

Fewer than 2,000 legal abortions are carried out in Poland each year, a majority of which are due to foetal defects, a BBC report stated. Abortions in cases of rape, incest or where there is a threat to the mother’s life account for merely 2 per cent of all legal terminations. So the court’s ruling essentially translates to a near complete ban on abortions in the country. Women’s rights groups have said that an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 Polish women either go abroad or seek illegal abortions every year due to the country’s strict abortion laws. They fear that the number could surge even further if terminations due to malformed fetuses are outlawed. Despite Poland being one of the most staunchly Catholic countries in Europe, a number of opinion polls have shown that a majority of its citizenry has been against a more restrictive abortion law over the years.



Is this the first pro-choice protest the country has witnessed?

No, this is not the first time people in Poland have protested the country's abortion laws. *In 2016, thousands of women went on strike in protest against a proposal for a complete ban on abortions.* They all dressed in black to signify that they were mourning the death of their reproductive rights. *In demonstrations inspired by a similar strike in Iceland in 1975, women across the country opted out of working, attending school and even doing domestic chores and instead participated in pro-choice marches on what was widely called "Black Monday".* If the draft law was to be enacted, women who were found to have had abortions could have faced a jail term of up to five years. Doctors who carried out or assisted in abortions would also be liable for jail time. The draft law was proposed by an anti-abortion citizens' group and was initially supported by the Catholic Church. However, the Church later backed out when bishops said they could not support the proposal to jail women who underwent an abortion.

What has the response been like to the court's ruling?

Critics of the decision have accused the court of pandering to the ruling regime. A New York Times report points out that 11 out of 12 of the judges were appointed by the ruling party, and the president, Przylebska, is a longtime friend of the party's leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski. "The decision of the constitutional tribunal means freezing the issue for years, accepting that life and dignity of women are less important than life of a foetus," opposition lawmaker Barbara Nowacka, who wrote a letter appealing to the tribunal's president, told The New York Times. The Council of Europe immediately condemned the abortion ruling. Its commissioner for human rights Dunja Mijatovic called it "a sad day for #WomensRights". Renowned international organisations like Amnesty International and the Center for Reproductive Rights and Human Rights Watch have also criticised the ruling. *"The proceedings take place in the context of repeated government attacks on women's rights and efforts to roll back reproductive rights, as well as legal and policy changes that have undermined the independence of the judiciary and rule of law in Poland,"* they said in a joint statement. Meanwhile, the country's president Andrzej Duda, who recently tested positive for Covid-19, welcomed the court's decision. In an interview with the Polish Press agency, his spokesperson said, "We are expressing our satisfaction that the tribunal stood on the side of life."

WHAT THE RETURN OF THE SOCIALISTS MEANS FOR BOLIVIA

A year after Bolivia's Left-wing leader Evo Morales was driven out of power by massive protests post the contested 2019 general elections, his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party is set to return to power in the South American nation, with a landslide victory. The MAS presidential candidate *Luis Arce*, handpicked by Morales, effectively won the national vote on Sunday after his main rival, the centrist former President Carlos Mesa, conceded defeat. *Exit polls, which predicted a sharp shift away from the ruling US-backed conservative government, showed MAS winning by around 20 percentage points.* The socialist party, however, has stopped short of announcing victory before the official results were announced.

The fraught 2019 vote

Morales, Bolivia's first President of indigenous origin, had been at the country's helm since 2006, and was credited with bringing economic stability to the Andean nation, enjoying overwhelming popularity among rural voters. However, he was also criticised for increasing authoritarian impulses after he managed to overturn a 2016 referendum that put in place term limits to office, and ran in



2019 for the fourth time. The elections were held in October, and initial results showed a tight race between Morales and the more conservative Mesa. Soon after, the publication of the results by the election body was abruptly stopped for 24 hours. After it resumed, Morales was shown as leading by a greater margin, a lead of more than 10 percent. The results were seen with suspicion, and protesters rallied on the streets for weeks. An audit by the Organisation of American States (OAS), a group consisting of all the major powers in the region, spoke of "clear manipulation". Facing stiff resistance, including from the Bolivian military, Morales resigned after alleging the role of a "civic-political-police" conspiracy to remove him from power. After Morales's departure, Bolivia was run by the conservative Jeanine Añez, who led an unelected interim government that sought to move away from the country's long-running socialist policies. Now, with MAS back in power, the landlocked nation is again expected to take a Leftward turn.

Arce's uphill task

Bolivia, among Latin America's poorest countries, has its export economy largely dependent on natural gas and mineral extraction. During the 2000s commodity boom, it witnessed high growth rates, and massive investments in social spending by Morales during that time ensured popularity. However, like in the case of other mineral-rich nations around the world, Bolivia's woes began exacerbating from 2015 after the boom ended. Experts believe that Arce, a UK-educated economist who was Morales's finance minister from 2006 to 2017, now faces the twin challenge of delivering results without sufficient hydrocarbon revenues, as well as battling the economic fallout of Covid-19.



What the election means for Bolivia

The MAS victory in Bolivia has drawn support from Leftist governments in the Americas, such as Mexico, Argentina, Cuba and Venezuela, who see the result as heralding the return of socialism in the region after the Covid-19 crisis. *The Trump administration, which had celebrated Morales' ouster in 2019, has also struck a more conciliatory tone after the polls, with a State Department*



spokesperson saying that Washington would work with “whomever the Bolivians elect”. The results, seen as a major blow to Bolivia’s right wing, are also expected to pave Morales’s return to the country from his exile in Argentina, although it remains uncertain what role he would play in the new MAS government. In an editorial, the Madrid-based El País newspaper called the peaceful election “excellent news” for Bolivia, and hailed the immediate recognition of MAS’s victory by losing forces as an “important step” for Bolivian institutions.

WHAT IS THE NEW PEACE DEAL BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN?

Russia brokered a new peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two countries that have been in a military conflict for over six weeks over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus. During the course of the conflict, considered one of the most serious in recent years, over 1200 have lost their lives as per the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, while thousands have been displaced. The deal, which is meant to end the conflict between the two nations, was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan. Since the conflict started in September, multiple ceasefire agreements have been signed between the two sides, but none so far have been successful.

So, what is the new peace deal?

As per the new peace deal, both sides will now maintain positions in the areas that they currently hold, which will mean *a significant gain for Azerbaijan as it has reclaimed over 15-20 per cent of its lost territory during the recent conflict*, the AFP reported. Further, under this agreement, all military operations are suspended, Russian peacekeepers will be deployed along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor that connects the region to Armenia. These Russian peacekeepers with a force of roughly 2,000 will be deployed in the area for a period of five years. Refugees and internally displaced persons will return to the region and the adjacent territories and the two sides will also exchange prisoners of wars and bodies. Significantly, a new corridor will be opened from Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan, which will be under Russian control. The BBC reported that a large crowd gathered in the Armenian capital to protest against the peace deal, while Azerbaijan’s Aliyev has said that the agreement was of “historic importance”.

What are the stakes for Russia?

Russia’s role in the conflict has been somewhat opaque since it supplies arms to both countries and is in a military alliance with Armenia called the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation*. In a statement released last month, Dmitry Peskov, the Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, said Russia “has always taken a balanced position” on the matter and has “traditionally good relations” with both countries.

What is the Nagorno-Karabakh region?

Straddling western Asia and Eastern Europe, Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, but most of the region is controlled by Armenian separatists. Nagorno-Karabakh has been part of Azerbaijan territory since the Soviet era. When the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 1980s, Armenia’s regional parliament voted for the region’s transfer to Armenia; the Soviet authorities turned down the demand. Years of clashes followed between Azerbaijan forces and Armenian separatists. The violence lasted into the 1990s, leaving tens and thousands dead and displacing hundreds of thousands. In 1994, Russia brokered a ceasefire, by



which time ethnic Armenians had taken control of the region. While the area remains in Azerbaijan, it is today governed by separatist Armenians who have declared it a republic called the “Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast”. While the Armenian government does not recognise Nagorno-Karabakh as independent, it supports the region politically and militarily.

HOW THE KILLING OF FORMER FARC REBELS SPELLS TROUBLE FOR COLOMBIA’S PEACE PROCESS

Four years after Colombia’s left-wing FARC insurgents agreed to lay down arms and bring the country closer to ending its 50-year-long civil war, hundreds of demobilised rebels Sunday (November 1) took to the streets in capital Bogota, demanding an end to the violence against them. The ex-combatants have been calling for a faithful implementation of the landmark 2016 peace deal, considered pivotal in bringing down overall levels of violence in Colombia, South America’s fourth-largest economy. Since the deal’s signing, 236 former FARC fighters have been killed, and experts worry that the spate of killings could derail the peace process, impacting the region’s stability.

The FARC insurgency

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was the largest guerrilla group operating in the Colombian conflict -- Latin America’s longest-running civil strife that claimed over 2.2 lakh lives and left nearly 60 lakh internally displaced.

The group started in 1964 as the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party, and jostled with right-wing paramilitaries, crime cartels and the Colombian government to maintain its influence throughout the Cold War-era conflict. The FARC was considered a major threat to stability in Colombia, accused of carrying out bombings, assassinations, abductions and sex crimes. The group was also linked with Colombia’s multi-billion dollar illegal drug trade, and is believed to have drawn in millions of dollars from contraband trafficking. The group received external support from leftist governments in Cuba and Venezuela. At its peak in the early 2000s, the FARC was known to have an army of 20,000 combatants, controlling around a third of Colombia. Among the group’s most notorious acts of terror at the time was the abduction of Senator and presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt in 2002, whom the militants held along with 14 other hostages for six-and-a-half years, until their rescue by a military operation. In the next decade, however, the FARC’s strength dwindled after the government launched a series of offensives, and the group agreed to begin peace negotiations in Cuba in 2012.

The 2016 peace agreement

After four years of negotiations, the government of former President Juan Manuel Santos signed a peace agreement with FARC in 2016, following which the group ceased armed hostilities, and 13,000 of its members demobilised by handing over weapons to the UN. Ex-militants were given protection by bringing in an amnesty law, and the group was assured political representation for two terms in Colombia’s parliament, where it currently sits in the Opposition. The Santos government sought popular approval for the deal, putting it up for a national referendum in October 2016, only to lose by a narrow margin of 0.4 per cent. The shock defeat has since been compared with the surprising upsets in the UK Brexit referendum and the US presidential election that year. After losing the referendum, the Santos government signed a revised deal with FARC, and got it approved by the



Colombian Parliament in November the same year. Santos was awarded the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring the civil war to an end.

Why the peace deal could be in trouble

*In 2018, right-wing politician Iván Duque won that year's presidential election after running on an agenda of revising aspects of the 2016 agreement, which he argued was too lenient on the FARC rebels. Critics have since accused the Duque government of undermining the peace process by refusing to deliver promises made under the deal, such as providing agricultural land to small scale farmers in rural areas. Duque's attempts at changing provisions related to amnesty have also been blamed for some of the demobilised militants taking up arms again. He has also been criticised for the country's worsening security situation, with 971 social leaders killed since the signing of the peace deal, as per a CNN report. A further escalation in violence, experts say, could destabilise Colombia's countryside and make the deal's implementation increasingly difficult. On its part, the Duque government has maintained that it remains committed to the peace process. Analysts have suggested that the country's future course could be heavily influenced by the outcome of the US presidential election. A Trump reelection, they say, would embolden Colombia's conservatives to adopt more hardline measures that would chip away at the peace deal's charted path. **A Biden victory, on the other hand, is expected to bolster its implementation.***

WHY CHILEANS HAVE VOTED IN FAVOUR OF REWRITING THEIR CONSTITUTION

After a wave of sustained protests, the people of Chile have voted overwhelmingly in favour of rewriting the South American country's nearly four-decade-old constitution, which dates back to the era of military dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet. Jubilant pro-reform protesters flooded the streets in celebration on Sunday night after a resounding 78 per cent of people voted 'yes' in the referendum that was conducted following mass demonstrations against economic inequality across the country. Chileans also voted to elect an assembly of 155 members to draw up the new constitution. The body will not include any active lawmakers and will have a total of nine months, with the option of a one-time extension of three months, to finalise the new document.

So, why did protests break out across the country?

Weeks of protests against economic inequality led up to Chilean President Sebastián Piñera's decision to hold the referendum in November last year. *The demonstrations first took place in October after a small hike in metro rail fares in the capital city of Santiago.* But the student-led protests that took place then were on a much smaller scale. Many students were filmed jumping over turnstiles without purchasing tickets as an act of protest. But as tensions rose and incidents of arson and violence were reported, President Piñera declared a state of emergency and deployed military troops to repress the protests. It was after the troops began to fill the streets that thousands of ordinary Chileans joined the demonstrations and the string of youth-led protests grew into a full-fledged movement. The military presence reminded older citizens of the repressive rule under General Pinochet between 1973 and 1990. Hundreds of thousands stormed the streets and demanded sweeping change in their society. *Apart from a new constitution, the protesters also called for reforms to the country's privatised education, health and pension sectors — which they argued was the main reason behind the rampant economic inequality in the country.* At least 30 people were killed in the unrest and thousands more were injured.



Why are Chileans demanding constitutional reforms in the first place?

The existing charter was drafted during the rule of dictator and military leader Pinochet without any popular inputs. The constitution was passed in a fraudulent plebiscite held in 1980, and has widely been blamed for the inequities that exist in Chilean society even today. The constitution laid down an electoral system that has for years limited political change by favouring incumbents and limiting the power of the left in the country. *While an economic boom in the 1990s reduced poverty, it also vastly widened the gap between the rich and poor. Pinochet ultimately lost power in a 1988 referendum, but the dictatorship-era constitution lived on.* On Sunday, Chileans finally voted to scrap the constitution — a move that could potentially transform politics in the country, which has thus far been regarded as one of the most stable and wealthy Latin American nations.

How did the Piñera-led government respond to the protests?

Despite the widespread protests against his conservative-leaning administration, Piñera took many weeks to agree to a referendum in 2019. Eventually, the government agreed to constitutional reform before finally giving in to the demand for a fresh constitution. In November, the ruling alliance and opposition together released a 12-point 'Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution', which laid down the steps for rewriting the constitution with greater participation by the citizens. *The referendum was earlier scheduled to take place in April, but was later postponed to October due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Following the referendum this Sunday, President Piñera congratulated the voters on their victory but warned that this was just the beginning of a much longer process.* "Starting today, we must all collaborate so that the new constitution is the great framework for unity, stability and the future," he said.

What did Chileans vote on?

During the referendum held this Sunday, voters were asked if they wanted a new constitution and also what kind of body should be responsible for drafting the revamped charter. According to election officials, nearly 7.5 million Chileans showed up to cast their vote. After the votes were counted, it was found that 78 per cent were in favour of rewriting the constitution, while a meagre 21.76 per cent rejected the change. *Around 79 per cent voted in support of the new constitution being drawn up by a body which will be entirely elected by popular vote.*

What happens next?

Like Piñera pointed out earlier this week, the referendum was the first step of a long-drawn process. *Voters will cast their votes once again on April 11 next year to elect the 155 members of the new constituent assembly.* The body will then have nine months to draft the constitution, with the option of a three-month extension. The new constitution will then be introduced following another referendum in 2022.

THE US 'STATE SPONSOR OF TERRORISM' LIST, AND WHAT SUDAN'S REMOVAL MEANS

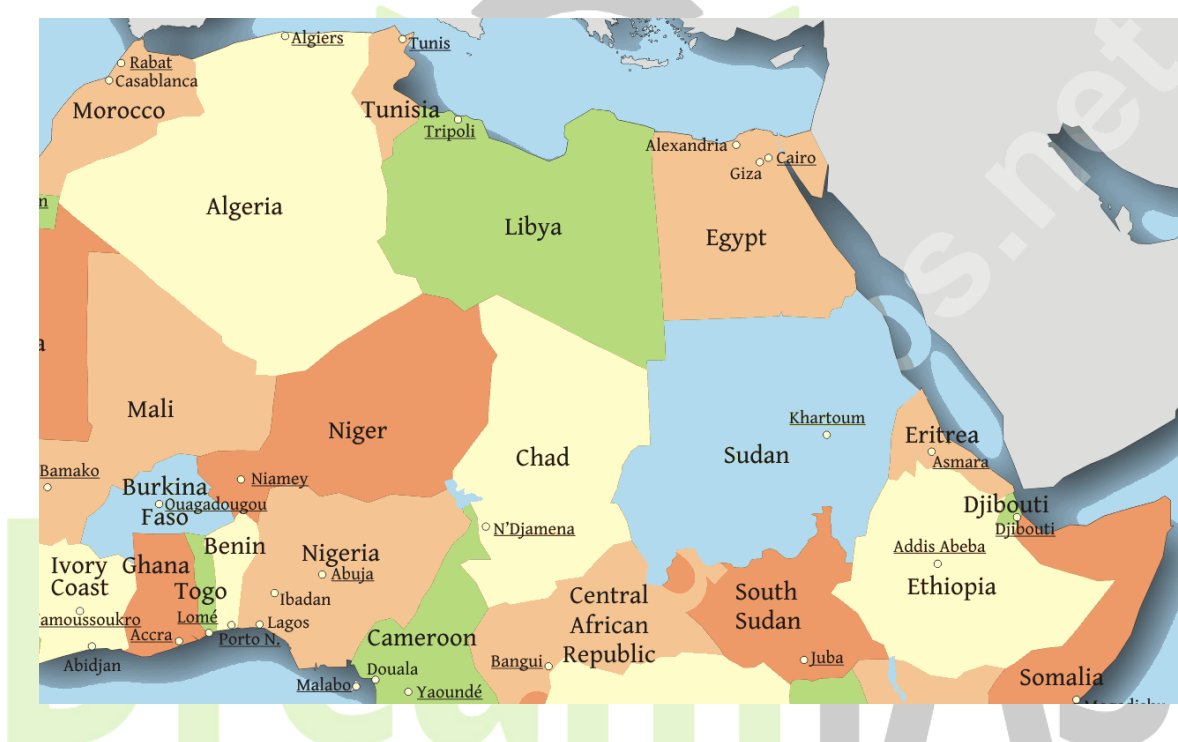
Sudan became the third Arab nation in recent weeks to normalise relations with Israel, days after the US removed it from its State Sponsor of Terrorism list, of which the North African country was a part for over 27 years. President Donald Trump said he would be *removing Sudan from the terrorism list, which effectively kept the impoverished nation off the global financial system since 1993, in exchange for \$335 million in compensation for victims of terror attacks on US embassies in*



East Africa in 1998 and on a US warship in Yemen in 2000. On October 23, the same day on which the US, Sudan and Israel released a joint statement announcing the normalisation of relations between Sudan and Israel, the White House released a separate statement which said that the US was formally rescinding Sudan's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, and that Sudan had transferred the \$335 million into an escrow account on October 22.

The announcement makes Sudan, technically at war with Israel since its 1948 foundation, the third Arab country to forge diplomatic relations with the Jewish state in the last two months. Other U.S. allies, including Germany, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, welcomed the deal as a boost to stability in the West Asia. Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders strongly condemned the deal, echoing their rejection of Israel's normalisation accords with the UAE and Bahrain signed in Washington last month. Iran, which has been a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause, said Sudan had paid a "shameful" price to be removed from the "phony" blacklist. "Pay enough ransom, close your eyes on the crimes against Palestinians, then you'll be taken off the so-called 'terrorism' blacklist. Obviously the list is as phony as the U.S. fight against terrorism. Shameful!" its Foreign Ministry said.

What is the US State Sponsor of Terrorism list?



The US Secretary of State (the minister primarily in charge of foreign relations) has been given powers to designate countries that "have repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism" as "State Sponsors of Terrorism". According to the State Department website, *the US can place four categories of sanctions on countries part of the list– restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance; a ban on defence exports and sales; certain controls over exports of dual use items; and miscellaneous financial and other restrictions.* Sanctions can also be placed on countries and persons that engage in certain trade with designated countries. *After Sudan's delisting, three countries remain with the designation: Syria (listed in 1979), Iran (1984) and North Korea (2017).* Apart from Sudan, *other countries which were once part of the list and later removed include Iraq (first removed in 1982, relisted in 1990, and again removed in 2004), South Yemen (1990, when it*



merged with North Yemen), Libya (2006) and Cuba (2015). According to a Council on Foreign Relations report, Sudan's delisting would require approval from the US Congress and would take several weeks.

Why has Trump removed Sudan from the list now?

Trump, who seeks re-election on November 3, is trailing Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden in polls for the top race. Having faced widespread disaffection for his administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has now killed over 2.2 lakh people in the US, Trump has tried to turn public attention towards his foreign policy agenda. *Hoping to impress evangelical Christian voters in the US, who are seen as favouring pro-Israel policies, Trump in the past four years has doubled down on measures considered favourable to Israel, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, and most recently facilitated the normalising of relations between Israel and two Arab states- the UAE and Bahrain.* Evangelicals form a major part of Trump's conservative base, and keeping them energised is a critical part of his re-election strategy. It was to make sure that Sudan too would recognise Israel, that the Trump administration agreed with Khartoum to remove it from the terrorism list, multiple reports said.

When and how was Sudan put in the list in the first place?

The US added Sudan to the terrorism list in 1993, after it was accused of harbouring groups such as Hezbollah and Palestinian militant outfits which Washington deems as terrorists. At the time, Sudan was ruled by dictator Omar al-Bashir, who had come to power in 1989 after toppling a democratically elected government. Bashir, who enforced hard-line Islamist policies over Sudan for three decades until his ouster last year, was also blamed for the 1998 bombings of US embassies in East Africa, and the 2000 bombing of the US warship Cole in Yemen. After its designation in the US terrorism list, Sudan was cut off from the global economy, and was starved of foreign investment. The country's economy suffered another blow in 2011, when Christians and Animists in southern parts of the country, already up in arms against Khartoum for decades, seceded to form the new country of South Sudan, taking away more than three-quarters of Sudan's oil reserves. The country's financial woes led to high inflation and price rises in essential commodities, leading to protests that led to Bashir being ousted from power in 2019.

What removal from the list means for Sudan?

Since Bashir's removal, an unelected transitional government consisting of both civilian and military leaders has been ruling Sudan. The new leadership has sought to veer the country away from Bashir's hard-line policies. It has removed apostasy laws, banned female genital mutilation, launched enquiries into the Darfur conflict and put Bashir on trial. However, Sudan's continued presence on the terrorism list, despite being over a year since Bashir's removal, added to the transitional government's challenges. Now that it has been delisted, Sudan would rejoin the global economy- and be able to access foreign investments and debt relief from international financial institutions (IFIs). However, experts say that because the delisting has been linked to Sudan recognising Israel, its unelected government could face a domestic backlash, as many are blaming the US of arm-twisting Sudan into compliance.



THE WAR WITHIN

When Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's Prime Minister in April 2018, hopes were high that the former Army intelligence officer would bring a new dawn to the country known for its ethnic fault-lines. Early on, he reached out to the political opposition, lifted curbs on the media and made peace with Eritrea — moves that won him the Peace Nobel in 2019. But things fell apart rather quickly. Last week, Mr. Abiy declared war on the country's Tigray region, which is ruled by the powerful Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in response to its attack on a federal military base in Tigray. The militia-turned-party, which was part of the coalition that brought an end to the military dictatorship in 1991, had played a dominant role in the country's ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. After Mr. Abiy came to power, he purged the TPLF from senior government positions. His push to concentrate more power in the hands of the government alienated the TPLF further. When the federal government postponed the general elections in August to 2021 citing the coronavirus pandemic, Tigray politicians accused him of a power grab and held elections, in September, in the region, in defiance of Addis Ababa. Rising tensions led to an outburst last week, with the attack on the base.

Why has conflict started in Tigray?

Observers say the conflict escalated in September, when Tigray held local elections in insubordination of the Ethiopian federal government. According to a Reuters report, these elections were considered "illegal" by the federal government, further leading to conflict with Tigray authorities. Conflict between Tigray authorities and the federal government can be traced to when Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. According to observers of the Horn of Africa, the Tigray region is wealthier than other parts of the country, and more importantly, has a well-trained army. The authority of the Tigray officials has considerably reduced since Abiy took office, making their waning influence a point of contention. The structure of Ethiopia's federal system allows the country's ten regions significant autonomy. These regions also have their own parliaments, their own security forces, and the right to a referendum for independent rule.

The Tigrayans, who make up roughly 6% of Ethiopia's 110 million people, have traditionally enjoyed outsized influence in the government whereas the Oromos, the largest ethnic group, have complained of marginalisation. Mr. Abiy, an Oromo, has said his mandate is to place Ethiopia's interests over the regions and correct the uneven distribution of power. But his actions often produced unintended consequences. In the Oromo region, his critics complain that he is trying to grab more powers for the federal government, while the Tigrayans accuse him of taking away their rights. Earlier this year, deadly protests broke out after the singer Hachalu Hundessa, an Oromo, was shot dead in Addis Ababa. Now, with his decision to bomb Tigray, Mr. Abiy has declared war on his people at a time when ethnic tensions are running high. He may be trying to send a strong message to the rebel politicians of the Tigray region that patience is wearing thin. But if he thinks a military campaign would solve the conflicts between ethnicities and regions, he could well be mistaken. The regions, largely divided on ethnic lines, have militias that cut their teeth in the struggle against the junta. Instead of bombing his own country, Mr. Abiy should reach out to regional political leaderships, especially the TPLF, find common ground, and run the country peacefully by restoring the balance between ethnicities and regions and decentralising the federal government.



WHAT IS THE HISTORIC LIBYA CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT ABOUT?

Rival parties in Libya Friday announced a historic ceasefire followed by five days of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks in Geneva, giving way to the possibility that the long-drawn conflict might be coming to an end. Stephanie Williams, who is the Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN said, "It is my most fervent hope that today's agreement will be celebrated by future generations of Libyans as representing that first, crucial, brave step towards a comprehensive settlement of the long Libyan crisis."

What is going on in Libya?

Libya has been embroiled in a tussle for power between rival militias ever since Muammar Gaddafi was ousted from power by NATO-backed forces and was killed by rebel militia in October 2011. Gaddafi's death marked the end of an eventful 42-year rule by the former Army officer who took over the reins of power from King Idris in a military coup in 1969. In the wake of Gaddafi's ouster, dozens of militias led by multiple warlords scrambled to occupy the power vacuum. As a result, Libya turned into a war zone with different militant leaders claiming control of the North African nation. Some of the issues of dispute among the warring factions include control of the oil infrastructure, governance, national finances and the military.

Are other countries involved?

The UN-backed internationally recognised government called the Government of National Accord (GNA) is led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, whose Tripoli-based government is supported by allies Qatar and Turkey. Turkey has sent troops to Libya, which includes Syrian rebel fighters who are aligned with Turkey, according to the BBC. Turkey maintains that it has sent these troops to help the UN-backed government in the west. The GNA, whose authority is challenged by the factions controlling the east, took power in 2015 under the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement. *The eastern part of Libya is controlled by rebel forces under the Libyan National Army (LNA) that is led by General Khalifa Haftar who are supported by Russian military contractors.* Between 2014-2019, the LNA has conducted military operations against the Islamic State in the east. The spread of the Islamic State has further complicated the situation and is also one reason the US is one of the foreign states that has intervened.

Acting United Nations envoy Stephanie Williams said the ceasefire would start immediately and all foreign fighters must leave Libya within three months. Forces would withdraw from front lines and a new joint police force would secure those areas. Friday's agreement was reached after the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in June beat back Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) from its 14-month assault on the capital. Since then, frontlines have stabilised near the central coastal city of Sirte and the LNA ended its eight-month blockade of Libyan oil output that was strangling state finances on both sides. However, Turkey, the main backer of the GNA, voiced scepticism that the ceasefire would hold. There was caution inside Libya too. "If there is no force or mechanism to apply this on the ground... this deal will only be ink on paper," said Ahmed Ali, 47, in Benghazi. Meanwhile, further talks are scheduled in Tunisia early next month.



QATAR EMIR SETS FIRST NATIONAL ELECTION FOR NEXT OCTOBER

Qatar's ruler said that a long delayed vote for the country's policy reviewing chamber will be held in October 2021, marking the Gulf emirate's first national election. The currently un-elected Shura Council advises the absolute ruler, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, on draft laws but does not create its own legislation and can be overruled by a simple decree. October's vote would be Qatar's first national election although Sheikh Tamim did not give details on who would be permitted to vote or who would be able to stand. Qataris have previously been able to cast ballots on constitutional reforms and in elections to a nationwide municipal council. "The Shura Council elections will be held in October of next year to strengthen the traditions of the Qatari shura, with wider participation by citizens," the Emir said in a speech to open the 49th session of the council. Elections to the council, required under the country's 2004 Constitution, have been postponed repeatedly and the body's members have instead been directly appointed by the emir.

Cautious reform

Qatar has undergone cautious reform on issues including democracy, worker rights and representation of women since Sheikh Tamim came to power in 2013. "We are taking an important step in strengthening the Qatari consultative traditions and developing the legislative process with the participation of a wider range of citizens," Sheikh Tamim said. "We have our solid system rooted in the structure of our society and... it is not a multi-party system, but rather an emirate system based on established traditions of fair and rational governance."

WILL DEFEND RIGHTS IN SOUTH CHINA SEA: PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is ready to defend the oil and gas exploration it has decided to resume in its internationally recognised waters in the disputed South China Sea and will not cede that right to any nation, the energy chief said. The Department of Energy announced that President Rodrigo Duterte has approved its recommendation to lift a 6-year-old moratorium on energy exploration in three offshore areas west of the Philippines, including in potentially oil- and gas-rich Reed Bank, which China also claims. Companies with government contracts have been notified to resume their petroleum search, Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi said. Mr. Cusi told reporters in an online news conference on Friday that China was not informed of the Philippine government's decision to resume oil exploration in its exclusive economic zone, a 320-km stretch of waters where a coastal state can exclusively exploit maritime resources under the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. Reed Bank and two other exploration areas are within the Philippines' exclusive zone but China is likely to assert its claim, Mr. Cusi said. "They will not just take it without raising a word. I'm sure they're going to write us," he said. Asked how the Philippines will respond if China protests, Mr. Cusi replied, "We have to stand up for our rights, that's what we are going to do."

THE RAMAS OF THAILAND

In Thailand, the King traditionally enjoyed a god-like status. The monarchs from the reigning Chakri dynasty that was founded in 1782 are called the Rama Kings, after the Hindu God Rama, the avatar of Lord Vishnu. The institution of the Thai monarchy, which is roughly 800 years old, has its roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. While the warrior Kings, under different dynasties, adopted Hindu Gods' names as their official titles, the Theravada Buddhist concept of 'Dhammaraja' (kingship under dharma) has been the proclaimed goal of the monarchy. Even after it lost absolute powers in the



1932 Siamese revolution, the monarchy continued to enjoy an outsized influence in the government and society. Thailand's strict *lèse majesté* rules shielded the King from public criticism, irrespective of the political changes. But the winds are now changing. Thailand, which has seen 12 successful coups since 1932, is no stranger to mass uprisings. In the past, protests were largely focused on the government or the powerful military. *What makes the ongoing agitation, started earlier this year against the military-backed government of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, different is that the protesters are increasingly targeting the monarchy.* On October 14, protesters, mainly school and college students, tried to disrupt a royal motorcade in Bangkok that was carrying Queen Suthida and flashed the three-finger salute, a symbol of resistance and solidarity which they borrowed from The Hunger Games books and movies. *It was an unprecedented show of dissent to the monarchy by protesters in a country where public criticism of the institution could land one in jail for up to 15 years. A day after, the government declared a state of emergency, banning public gatherings and censoring the media coverage of the protests.*

Not backing off

But the protesters did not back off. They termed the emergency yet another move by the government to take away their freedoms. A week later, as it was clear that the students were determined to press ahead with their agitation, the government cancelled the emergency and called for calm. *Protests in Thailand began after the pro-democracy Future Forward Party was banned by the country's top court in February. But public resentment against the ruling elite was building up since the 2014 military coup that brought Mr. Prayuth to power.* Since then, the military rewrote the Constitution, awarding itself and the monarchy more powers and privileges, and held an election last year, which made sure that Mr. Prayuth continued as the Prime Minister. *The new King, Maha Vajiralongkorn (the 10th monarch of the Chakri dynasty, also called Rama X), who ascended the throne in 2016 after the death of his father Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), blessed the coup masters, while the Generals spent millions to promote the monarchy.* The King was earlier required to appoint a regent while travelling abroad. The new Constitution did away with this clause. *The junta gave the monarch full control of the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the palace's roughly \$30 billion worth of assets.* King Vajiralongkorn also brought two Army units under his direct control. He has steadily expanded the powers of the palace, while the military has used the monarch's backing to gain legitimacy for its actions. *For the protesters, if the Prime Minister represented a repressive regime, the King, who is mostly in southern Germany, is a symbol of extravagance at a time when the country was wrecked by the pandemic.* In August, Anon Nampa, a 35-year-old human rights lawyer, called for reforms to the monarchy. *The protesters have since submitted 10 demands to the government, asking for a separation of the King's assets and the Crown Property Bureau, reducing the Palace's share in the national budget, a ban on the King from expressing his political views and endorsing future coups. The protesters say they were not against the institution of monarchy. What they want are reforms — a democratic Thailand with the King being a ceremonial head of the state — not abolition.* For now, the government has ignored such demands, and warned against "insulting" the monarchy. But the fact that even a state of emergency did not stop the protests poses a serious challenge to both the government and the King.

CHENNAI-BORN PRIYANCA IS NEW ZEALAND'S NEW MINISTER

Priyanca Radhakrishnan became New Zealand's first-ever Indian-origin Minister after Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern inducted five new Ministers into her executive. Ms. Radhakrishnan was born



in Chennai but her family is from Paravoor in Kerala. She went to school in Singapore before moving to New Zealand to further her education. She has spent her work life advocating on behalf of people whose voices are often unheard — women survivors of domestic violence and migrant workers who have been exploited. She was elected first as a Member of Parliament belonging to the Labour Party in September 2017. In 2019, she was appointed the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister for Ethnic Communities. Her work in that area helped her build the base for her new role of Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities. In addition to this, she has become the Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector and Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment. She has become New Zealand's first-ever Kiwi Indian Minister, the New Zealand Herald newspaper quoted Indian Weekender as saying. Ms. Radhakrishnan, who is from the 2017 intake of new MPs, is a Minister outside of the Cabinet. She lives in Auckland with her husband.

NEW ZEALAND'S ELECTION RESULTS, AND THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF JACINDA ARDERN

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party has won over 49 per cent votes in the general elections. At 26.9 percent of the votes, the National Party is in second place.

What is the significance of these election results?

Ardern's party has won a majority, the biggest victory for the Labour Party in over 50 years. This will also be the first time that a party will be governing alone since New Zealand moved to the MMP (mixed-member proportional representation) electoral system in 1996. With nearly 50 per cent of the vote, the party will get more than the 61 seats required for a parliamentary majority.

Who is Jacinda Ardern?

Ardern, who has been hailed for her 'compassionate' leadership, became the 40th prime minister of New Zealand in 2017 and has been the leader of the Labour Party since then. She was born in Hamilton and grew up in rural areas, before attending Waikato University where she studied communications in politics and public relations. Ardern joined the Labour Party at the age of 18 and entered New Zealand's parliament in 2008. *She is one of the few Prime Ministers to have given birth while in office.*

What are some of Ardern's noteworthy policies?

During her political career, *Ardern has been popular even outside New Zealand for holding progressive views about issues such as migration and for being vocal about the rights of children, women and the right of every New Zealander to find meaningful work.* Ardern's tenure as Prime Minister saw the Christchurch shootings in 2019 where over 49 were killed. She was lauded for her handling of the attack, which was followed by a prompt action to ban guns. Her campaign for the 2020 elections was largely focussed on her handling of the coronavirus pandemic. The country announced the end of community transmission in May, at a time when most developed countries were still dealing with the virus's first wave. Till now, the country, which has a population of about 5 million has seen over 2000 cases of COVID-19 and roughly 25 deaths. *Ardern has also been vocal about climate change. Last November, the parliament passed the Zer-Carbon Act, which commits New Zealand to zero carbon emissions by 2050 or sooner.* "I absolutely believe and continue to stand by the statement that climate change is the biggest challenge of our time," Ardern told the



Parliament in November 2019. Even so, her critics are unhappy with Ardern for not fulfilling some of her election promises, including having policies that have made a meaningful impact on inequality and measures to reduce child poverty.

WHAT IS NEW ZEALAND'S EUTHANASIA OR ASSISTED DYING ACT?

As per preliminary referendum results, a majority of voters in New Zealand have voted in favour of the End of Life Choice Act 2019. As people voted in the general elections, they also had the option to vote in two referendums. One of the referendums was on cannabis legalisation and control, which over 53 per cent of the voters voted against. The second referendum asked the public to vote on whether the End of Life Choice Act 2019 should come into force. New Zealand's prime minister Jacinda Ardern has revealed that she voted "yes" in both the referendums.

So what is the End of Life Choice Act 2019?

The act is meant to give certain terminally ill people the option of requesting medical assistance to end their lives and to establish a lawful process for assisting eligible persons who are able to exercise that option. The opponents of the Act such as the Euthanasia Free-NZ group maintain that it lacks oversight and safeguards and have pointed out issues with the eligibility criteria such as the age limit of 18 years and the "arbitrary" nature of the 6-month prognosis.

How did the Act come about?

The Act was passed in November 2019, but requires that it gets at least 50 per cent of the votes in the 2020 referendum to be effective. One of the most significant cases that shaped the debate around assisted suicide in New Zealand was of a lawyer Lecretia Seales who was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2011. After Seales' options of getting treated were exhausted, she reviewed her end of life alternatives and believed that she wanted physician-assisted suicide. Her widower, Matt Vickers, who maintained a blog, mentions that Seales, "would have liked the choice to receive physician-assisted death, to bring about her demise no sooner than the point that she determined she had no quality of life, and before she entered a long, pointless and wasteful period of suffering prior to her death". In March 2015, Seales and her lawyers filed a statement of claim with the High Court of New Zealand arguing that her general physician should not be prosecuted for assisting her in her death and that under the Bill of Rights Act of 1962, she had the right to not be subjected to "the unnecessary suffering of a long, cruel death." Seales died on June 5, 2015 and on the same day the judgment of Seales versus Attorney General was made public, in which she was not allowed to seek physician-assisted dying. However, the judge made several statements in support of Seales's wishes and the case became a catalyst in bringing politicians in the country to engage with this topic.

What is assisted dying?

As per the Act, assisted dying means when a person's doctor or nurse gives them medication to relieve their suffering by bringing on death or when a person takes the medication themselves. Therefore, the act interprets assisted dying as referring to both *euthanasia and assisted suicide*. While the former refers to the act of deliberately ending a person's life to end their suffering, the latter refers to assisting a person to kill themselves. *In some countries such as in the UK, both euthanasia and assisted suicide are illegal. In the UK, while euthanasia is regarded as manslaughter or murder, assisted suicide is punishable by up to 14 years in prison. However, trying to kill yourself*



is not an illegal act in the country. As per New Zealand's act, the provisions of the law are limited to terminally ill people and are subject to the fulfilment of various criteria.

What are the methods of assisted dying?

There are four as per the Act. These include ingestion, intravenous delivery, ingestion through a tube or injection. At the chosen time of receiving the medication, the person can either say no or delay the process.

Where else is assisted dying legal?

Assisted dying is legal in parts of Australia, Canada, Colombia, Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Switzerland and some states in the US.

PAKISTAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

Pakistan has been there before. Political parties coming together in alliance to take on a military dictator or an authoritarian civilian government. This time, it is in the form and shape of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), which has both the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as leading lights. The old warhorse Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F), is the president of the PDM. In 73 years of existence, Pakistan has been under military rule on four occasions. Time and again, the Army has demonstrated that it wants civilian Prime Ministers to be brought to heel. Usually, the coup has been the preferred khaki style but with Imran Khan as Prime Minister it's been held out as a "hybrid" model of governance. *Two recent rallies in Gujranwala, Punjab, and in Karachi, Sindh, have galvanised the Opposition and brought what were once two opposing poles of Pakistani politics — the PML (N) and the PPP — out in the open to attack both Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Army props.* As many as 11 political parties, many of them regional entities, came together to form the PDM on September 20 in Islamabad. Demanding the Prime Minister's resignation, they decided to put in place an alliance structure, which will "lead and guide nationwide protests against the anti-public and anti-nation government in a disciplined and integrated manner". Arguing that Mr. Khan's government had been accorded "fake stability" by the establishment, the PDM expressed "extreme concern" at the increasing interference of the establishment in Pakistablistering attack.

Blistering attack

Such statements are pretty standard in Pakistani politics. But former Prime Minister and PML(N) leader Nawaz Sharif departed from the standard when he launched a blistering attack on the serving Army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa, whom he had appointed to the job back in November 2016, superseding two generals senior to Gen. Bajwa. Mr. Sharif also took on the serving Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) chief Faiz Hameed, a close associate of General Bajwa, in his video address from London to the first PDM rally in Gujranwala on October 17. "You are responsible for the exit of my smooth-running government," Mr. Sharif thundered at Gen. Bajwa. "You got judges to write the judgments you wanted," Mr. Sharif, who is convicted for corruption, said. The three-time Prime Minister also laid the blame for rising prices and unemployment at Gen. Bajwa's door. About the serving ISI chief, Mr. Sharif claimed, "all this had been done" at Gen. Hameed's instance. *His comments are nothing short of blasphemous in Pakistani politics. You can talk of the "establishment", a euphemism for the Army, but you can't name names.* Mr. Sharif has broken that tradition and his public comments blaming Gen. Bajwa have created ripples in the country's



politics. Mr. Sharif is also likely to have created problems for his alliance partner, the PPP, and other more moderate and risk-averse politicians like his own brother and senior PML (N) politician Shehbaz Sharif. But then he's sitting in London and is unlikely to return. The leader on the ground for him is his daughter Maryam Nawaz, someone to watch out for in Pakistan.

On the defensive

"The Army has been put on the defensive by the PDM rallies. Their spokespersons have to come out to defend them," a Karachi-based analyst, who preferred anonymity, told The Hindu. "It's good that Mr. Sharif is naming names. These things should be out in the open. Everyone knows who is backing Imran Khan's government." If Mr. Sharif ruffled feathers with his comments on Gen. Bajwa, the arrest of Captain Safdar, Maryam Nawaz's husband, from their hotel room, in the early hours of October 19 after a successful PDM rally in Karachi, was nothing short of inexplicable. "Police broke my room door at the hotel I was staying at in Karachi and arrested Capt. Safdar," Ms. Maryam tweeted after the incident. There is CCTV footage of Capt. Safdar being taken away by armed men as well as these personnel standing outside Mariyam Nawaz's room. This story is unlikely to die down in a hurry and will be used by the PDM to hit out at both Mr. Khan and the Army leadership. But what happened before the arrest was equally bizarre. Mushtaq Ahmed Mahar, Inspector-General of Police in Sindh, was reportedly abducted by personnel of the Pakistani Rangers, a central force, on Sunday-Monday night, and forced to sign on the dotted line so that Capt. Safdar could be arrested. Later, IGP Mahar and 14 other senior Sindh police officers decided to take earned leave, only to withdraw their applications after top PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari called up Army chief Gen. Bajwa, who then ordered an "inquiry" into the incident. "The unfortunate incident that occurred on the night of 18/19 October caused great heartache and resentment within all ranks of Sindh Police... IG Sindh has decided to defer his own leave and ordered his officers to set aside their leave applications for 10 days in the larger national interest, pending the conclusion of the inquiry [ordered by Gen. Bajwa]," the Sindh police said on Twitter. All this stuff is unprecedented. If the Pakistan Rangers and Army personnel can kidnap an IGP of a province, then it raises questions on the country's political system. The fact that Mr. Bhutto spoke to the Army chief and not the serving Prime Minister shows his lack of confidence in the leadership of Mr. Khan. The Prime Minister has himself played his dharna politics while in Opposition so he should be cognizant that events such as this bizarre kidnapping and arrest can sometimes have a long-lasting impact on people's perceptions.

Great partnership

Mr. Khan and General Bajwa have had a great partnership going. "For the first time, the Prime Minister and the Army chief are on the same page. There are no differences of opinion even on foreign policy issues like India and Afghanistan. Make no mistake, Mr. Khan will complete his term in office," an Islamabad-based analyst said. Pakistan is due for elections only in 2023. Whether it is Mr. Nawaz Sharif or the PPP leadership, the Army as an institution has never been totally convinced that the "civilians" are sufficiently attuned to furthering khaki interests. So, Mr. Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were built up to "partner" so that the Army doesn't have to be seen taking power directly yet again. Economic strains can upset this Khan-Bajwa partnership. So can ham-handed actions of the kind on display in Karachi. Mr. Khan can probably ride out this storm with Gen Bajwa's backing. Bluster, however, can't be a substitute for governance.



WHY SRI LANKA IS SENDING BACK WASTE TO THE UK

Sri Lanka has started shipping about 240 containers of hazardous waste, which includes body parts from mortuaries, back to Britain, following a two-year court battle.

The case

Last year, the Sri Lankan government asked Britain to take back over 100 containers that the latter had exported to Sri Lanka. The containers were shipped in 2017, and contained clinical waste, used cushions and mattresses, plant parts, plastic waste and other hazardous and uncategorised waste. They were inspected last July, when some officials complained about a horrible smell emanating from them. After this, Sri Lanka's Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) filed a writ application against the illegal activity.

What were the issues raised by CEJ in its writ application?

The petition included issues such as severe damage to the environment and severe threats to the health of the general public of the country. "Also, population will be exposed to several health risks due to the pathogens in the clinic or other waste found in the imported waste. This could also have negative impacts on the bio-diversity," CEJ said in a statement. The application also noted that the waste was imported without adhering to the terms of the BASEL Convention, as per which Sri Lanka has restricted the import of hazardous waste.

But why does Sri Lanka import waste?

In June 2019, the BBC reported that some wealthy western nations ship their waste to developing countries since it is cheaper, helps to meet their recycling targets and also reduces domestic landfill. On the other hand, for developing countries, taking this waste acts as a source of income. But oftentimes, contaminated plastic and rubbish gets mixed with material meant for recycling, which eventually ends up in illegal processing centres. According to the BBC, Sri Lanka is not the only Asian country angered by the dumping of waste disguised as material meant for recycling by a western country. Previously, Cambodia has sent back containers of waste back to the US and Canada. The Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia have also reported similar incidents.

What's happening now?

On October 28, a consignment of 21 containers that were illegally exported to Sri Lanka was received by England. The UK's Environment Agency will now confirm the types of illegal waste that was exported and investigate who shipped it. The responsible individuals could face a custodial sentence of up to two years, an unlimited fine and the recovery of money and assets gained through the course of the illegal activity.

SRI LANKAN PARLIAMENT PASSES 20TH AMENDMENT

The controversial 20th Amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution that envisages expansive powers and greater immunity for the Executive President was passed in Parliament with a two-thirds majority, following a two-day debate. The 20th Amendment was the Rajapaksa administration's first big test in the legislature, since it triggered concern and resistance from not just the political opposition, but also the influential Buddhist clergy that Sri Lanka's southern polity venerates. As many as 156



MPs in the 225-member House voted for it, while 65 legislators voted against the Bill. Significantly, eight opposition MPs voted in favour of the legislation that their parties and leaders not only vehemently opposed, but also challenged at the Supreme Court. *Following as many as 39 petitions filed by opposition parties and civil society groups, the Supreme Court determined that the passage of the legislation required only a two-thirds majority, except for four clauses that needed additional public approval through a referendum*, unless they were amended in line with the determination.

Ceremonial role

The 20th Amendment rolls back Sri Lanka's 19th Amendment, a 2015 legislation passed with wide support from the Rajapaksa camp — then in Opposition — that sought to clip presidential powers, while strengthening Parliament. The new legislation in turn reduces the Prime Minister's role to a ceremonial one. In the two-day debate, opposition MPs broadly argued that the Amendment threatened to take the country on a path of authoritarianism, giving the President unbridled powers, while government MPs emphasised the need for centralised power for better governance. The 20th Amendment's passage comes at a time when the country is facing a new wave of COVID-19, with the number of cases rapidly increasing — after Sri Lanka contained the pandemic in the early months — to 6,028 cases and 14 deaths as of Thursday evening.

WHY A PLANNED BIOPIC OF MUTTIAH MURALITHARAN HAS UPSET SOME TAMILS IN INDIA

Opposition from sections of Tamils has led to versatile Tamil film star Vijay Sethupathi withdrawing from a planned biopic on the Sri Lankan bowling legend, Muttiah Muralitharan. Opponents mainly from the Tamil film industry and political parties in Tamil Nadu claim that Muralitharan had “whitewashed genocide” by not raising his voice against the Sri Lankan state, and warned the actor against playing his character, contending that he would only jeopardise his career and alienate his fan following. It is a shame that these protests have prevented a talented actor from essaying a role based on the story of Muralitharan, who scaled Himalayan peaks in international cricket through talent and determination. Noting the unfair and unrelenting attacks on Sethupathi to the point of accusing him of being a traitor, Muralitharan appealed to the actor to keep out of the biopic. The ultimate decision may have been Muralitharan's own, but it is quite clear that Sethupathi dropped the idea only after the onslaught. The film's motion poster released recently had evoked great expectation among cinema aficionados, especially because of the actor's highly convincing resemblance to the cricketer. Appropriately named '800', in celebration of the number of Test wickets the bewitching off-spinner bagged, the biopic appears to aim at showcasing his rise in the backdrop of the violent ethnic conflict that shook Sri Lanka for three decades.

Exponents of art being cowed down by protests is not new to Tamil Nadu. The real problem in the latest example of popular intolerance prevailing over artistic ventures is that an old chestnut in Tamil Nadu politics — the idea that every Tamil should pass a 'Tamil nationalist' test — has been resurrected to stymie this project too. Madras Cafe, a Hindi film, could not be screened in the State after opposition to its portrayal of the LTTE. In 2008, a Sri Lankan producer was forced to give up his footage while he was in Chennai to process his film at a studio. Some of those who demanded that Sethupathi withdraw from the biopic have emphasised that they were merely making an appeal to him, given his past political views in favour of causes that resonate with the people of Tamil Nadu. Whether it was an appeal or a threat, it is a no-brainer that pressure was brought to bear on an artist to give up his professional decision. As for Muralitharan's political views, it may



be that some of his remarks were seen as supporting the Sri Lankan Army's triumph over the LTTE and questioning the truth behind the grief of the mothers of the disappeared thousands. However, that is no reason to run down his monumental achievements in his chosen sport. And nothing prevents any detractor from questioning the film's motive or content after its release. It is unfortunate that the heckler's veto has prevailed.

Anger stemmed from Muralitharan's association with Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is now Sri Lanka's Prime Minister, and his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who is the President. In 2009, Mahinda Rajapaksa was the President and Gotabaya was the Defence Minister – and both were accused of gross human right violations in the final stages of the war.

What is the brief timeline of Tamil-Sinhala problems?

In 1956, eight years after the independence of Ceylon, the Sinhala Only Act was passed, making Sinhalese the language of governance. Tamil was not recognised as an official language. In 1971, the standardisation policy was introduced, which set higher benchmarks for Tamil students to enter universities. In 1972, Ceylon was renamed as Sri Lanka, and Buddhism is given "foremost place" among religions. In 1975, the 21-year-old Vellupillai Prabhakaran assassinated the mayor of Jaffna and a year later, set up the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There were two anti-Tamil riots in 1958 and 1977, but the bloodiest anti-Tamil riot broke out in July 1983 after a Tiger ambush of an army convoy in Jaffna. Although numbers aren't clear, up to 3,000 Tamils may have been killed. 'Black July' shoved the country into a civil war that lasted for 26 years, and killed 100,000 people or more. In January 2009, the Sri Lankan army captured Killinochi, the Tigers' capital, and in May, the government announced victory over the rebels on the same day as Prabhakaran was killed. Next year, Rajapaksa won re-election in the presidential election. In 2011, the United Nations released a report accusing the Sri Lankan army of war crimes, and estimated that 40,000 civilians may have died in the final months of the civil war.

DreamIAS



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

INDIA, CHINA, AND MYANMAR POLL

Myanmar will vote on November 8 in an election that is being seen as test of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership of the country over the last five years. In the last elections in 2015, the Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy won a landslide victory. *The elections are for the upper and lower houses of the national Parliament, the House of Nationalities and the House of Representatives respectively, as well as to the assemblies of Myanmar's seven states and seven regions — a total of 1,171 seats. The President is elected by the bicameral national Parliament. Chief Ministers of the states and regions are appointed by the President.* The elections will be held against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, the continuing Rohingya crisis, a nationalist Buddhist resurgence, and an assertion by a military that runs the country along with the elected civilian government in a hybrid system.

Rohingya and the vote

As many as 7 to 8 lakh Rohingya fled to Bangladesh when the Army began a crackdown on an alleged terrorist group in 2017 in Rakhine province, home to this Muslim minority group. The Army action was backed by Suu Kyi and her government. The refugees now live in what has described as the "world's largest refugee camp" at Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh wants Myanmar to take them back, but Myanmar, which holds that Rohingya are not "indigenous" and calls them Bengali (the word Rohingya is not officially recognised), is unwilling to do so. In past elections, Rohingya have voted. This time, they will be almost entirely excluded from the election. Many Rohingya candidates were rejected during the filing of nominations. Last month, the Myanmar Election Commission said that for security reasons, elections would not be held in many areas of Rakhine. This means even the 600,000 Rohingya who remain in Myanmar will not be able to vote. Nor will the anti-Suu Kyi Rakhine Buddhists, who allege that political motives are behind the cancellation of the election.

NLD, Army, Buddhist assertion

This is Myanmar's third election under the 2008 military-drafted Constitution, part of its "road map to democracy". The NLD had boycotted the first election in 2010, when Suu Kyi was still under house arrest. The junta put up proxy candidates through the *Union Solidarity and Development Party* and won most of the seats. Following Suu Kyi's release after the election, the junta, under international pressure, eased restrictions on political and civil society activity and permitted independent media. Over the next five years, investments poured in. NLD's participation in the 2012 by-elections gave legitimacy to the junta's reforms. The first credible elections in 2015 were swept by Suu Kyi, then a worldwide icon of democracy. This time, the NLD carries the burden of incumbency. Suu Kyi had come in with the promise to complete the transition to democracy by reforming the Constitution rammed in by the junta, with near-irreversible write-ins cementing the Army's role in governing the country — *the military gets 25% representation in both Houses of Parliament, and in all the state/regional assemblies, through nomination; the USDP continues to act as a military proxy; the military, known as the Tatmadaw, retains portfolios such as Defence and Internal Security; and it can declare an emergency at any time and take over the running of the country.* There was tension in the civilian-military balance earlier this week after the Commander-in-chief of the Army, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, expressed dissatisfaction with the way the Election Commission was conducting the polls, and in an interview to a local media outlet, left



open-ended the question of whether the Army would accept the election results. A government spokesman said the comments violated the Constitution. Suu Kyi's party made efforts to push back the military through 2019 but these were stonewalled by the military representatives in Parliament. *She is herself a victim of the Constitution – by virtue of having married a foreign national, she is barred from becoming President.* She is now known as the State Counsellor, but is accepted by her party as a higher authority than the President. Alongside, her attempts at a peace agreement with over a score armed ethnic groups ranged against the state, have yielded no outcome yet. The last meeting of the Union Peace Conference — 21st Century Panglong (a reference to the Panglong agreement of 1947) — was held in August. The NLD believes a federal arrangement will remain elusive as long as the Army is powerful. But Suu Kyi has not pushed the military as her Pakistani counterparts have done in the past. *She once described generals in the Tatmadaw as “quite sweet”, and defended the Army in person last year at the International Court of Justice at The Hague against allegations of rape, arson and mass killing in Rakhine.* A resurgent Buddhist nationalism, both inspired by and inspiring similar sentiments in Sri Lanka, has also been apparent over the last five years. On November 2, a firebrand monk known for communal and racist speeches surrendered to the police who were seeking to arrest him for over a year for statements he made asking the military to overthrow Suu Kyi's government, and called her objectionable names. In 2015, he had asked people to vote for the military-backed USDP against Suu Kyi. Yet Suu Kyi remains as popular as she was five years ago and is expected to lead her party to victory again. Her defiance of international censure over the Rohingya exodus, and the calls to take back her Nobel Peace Prize, seem to have only bolstered her status as a national icon among the majority Buddhist Bamar.

Where India meets China

It has also pushed Suu Kyi into the waiting arms of China, which has been involved in a slew of infrastructure projects in Myanmar, and has wooed her and the NLD since 2015, separately from its continuing tight relations with the military. Beijing laid out the red carpet for Suu Kyi when she visited in 2016. In January 2020, President Xi Jinping was a high value guest at Naypidaw, with Myanmar Air Force fighter jets escorting Xi's plane as it landed in the capital. In an op-ed in Myanmar's state-run newspaper, Xi wrote that China would support Myanmar in “safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests and national dignity”. Much like how it was Sri Lanka's only ally during the country's post-war dog days, China is now Myanmar's main ally in a world whose ardour for Suu Kyi has long cooled. During the visit, no new infrastructure projects were signed but the two sides reaffirmed support for speeding up the *“China-Myanmar Economic Corridor”,* which includes a high-speed railway between industrial zones within the country with connections to the Chinese border, and an ambitious *\$1.3-billion deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in central Rakhine,* which will provide Beijing a gateway to the Indian Ocean, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Any push against China in Myanmar now comes from the restive regions where the big infra projects threaten to displace people, as in 2011 in Kachin, where a year after Suu Kyi's release, protests forced the cancellation of a Chinese 6,000 MW Myistone hydel dam. New Delhi has kept cordial relations with both Suu Kyi and the Myanmar Army. While Buddhism provides a cultural bond, and the Modi government has made common cause with the Myanmar government on the Rohingya issue, India does not have the deep pockets for Chinese-style infrastructure projects. *India is working on two key infrastructure projects in Myanmar — a trilateral highway between India-Myanmar and Thailand, and the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit project that aims to connect mainland India to the landlocked Northeastern states through Myanmar.* A port at *Sittwe* and an inland waterway are part of this project.



The National League for Democracy's landslide victory in the November 8 general election in Myanmar indicates that a vast majority of its nearly 38 million voters continue to think that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a bulwark against the military, which ruled the nation with an iron fist for about half a century. While full results are yet to be announced, the Election Commission has stated that her party has won at least 346 of the 476 elected seats in Parliament, well past the 322-mark needed to stay in power. The military-linked main opposition Union Solidarity and Development Party has won 25 seats so far.

CHINA'S RISE AND FALL AT THE UN (MANJEEV SINGH PURI - FORMER AMBASSADOR AND DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF INDIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS)

The United Nations turned 75 this year. In normal times, September would have seen a grand Summit in New York but because of the novel coronavirus pandemic, world leaders were forced to do with video messages to the UN General Assembly. The UN season, though, started on an auspicious note for India, with India besting China in the elections for a seat on the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). This was the first such victory in a decade. To add to China's woes, soon after the CSW vote, it lost another election, this time to tiny Samoa for a seat on the UN Statistical Commission. And a couple of days ago, it just about managed to get elected to the UN High Rights Council, coming fourth out of five contestants for four vacancies. Earlier, China's candidate had lost to a Singaporean in the race for DG World Intellectual Property Organization.

China's strengths

In 2011, India defeated China in a one-on-one election at the UN for a place on the Joint Inspection Unit. Thereafter, taking advantage of its position as a member of the P-5 and as a huge aid giver, China made itself invincible in UN elections, capturing, among others, the top positions at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Indeed, India, too, felt this was a UN election behemoth not to be trifled with, and even as late as last year, pulled out its candidate against the Chinese from the race for the Director-General, FAO. But how did China rise to this pre-eminent position at the UN. It all began, as is the case with India and multilateralism, a century ago with World War I. *India was one of the largest contributors of soldiers in the war against Germany and Turkey and became a founding member of the League of Nations even though it was a colony. At the end of WWII, India participated in all the three UN conferences becoming a charter member of the UN even before Independence. Pakistan, on the other hand, joined the UN in September 1947 on application. China saw an opportunity in World War I to rid itself of German occupation from some of its territory and allied with the United Kingdom and France. But they could not send soldiers as the Japanese, who were in competition with the Germans for the same Chinese territories, also allied against the Germans and refused to countenance Chinese troops in action. So, the Chinese sent large numbers of labour to support the western war efforts against Germany and won an invite at the Versailles Peace Conference. Things, however, did not turn out well as the West sided with the Japanese and China refused to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty. The United States, though, was sympathetic to the Chinese cause, and a few years later helped reach a peace deal between China and Germany. World War II saw strong U.S.-China collaboration against the Japanese, including U.S. operations conducted from India. An incidental but pleasant fallout of the stationing of U.S. forces in India was the establishment of ice-cream makers in India who, at the end of the war, bought the plants brought by the U.S. for its forces.*



America's 'forgotten ally'

These old trans-Pacific linkages of the U.S. and China, including the presence of a very large Chinese community on the west coast of the U.S., are not well known, especially in India, but China is really "the forgotten ally" of the U.S. to use an expression coined by Oxford Professor Rana Mitter. This is important to bear in mind as the world, and India, pontificates the outcome of a U.S.-China contestation and its implications for multilateralism. Their bilateral ties saw the U.S. include the Chinese in the 'Four Policemen', a group of the most important countries for ensuring world peace post- WorldWar II, along with the real victors of World War II — the U.S., the USSR and the U.K. This number morphed into the P-5, with France being added by the UK at the San Francisco conference held in 1945 where the UN charter was finalised. The pure multilateralism of the League of Nations was thus infused with a multipolarity, with the U.S. as the sheet anchor. The U.S. also thought that China would act as a bulwark against the USSR. But that was the Republic of China (RoC) led by the Kuomintang who were soon routed on the mainland by the communists and found themselves on the island of Formosa (now Taiwan). This is important as the People's Republic of China (PRC) would have us believe that it was a founder of the UN. RoC retained the UN seat of China till 1971 when it was expelled from the UN and the PRC admitted as a member giving it a de jure pole position at the UN. U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in 1972 and the U.S.'s opening to the PRC certainly paved the way for the unprecedented economic growth of China. However, in its march to global hegemony, the COVID-19 pandemic may have caught China on the wrong foot.

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS CAMPAIGN FOR RIGHTS

On October 13, elections were held for the cohort of member nations who will serve for the next three years (2021-23) in the UN Human Rights Council. *Among the five countries that were vying for membership from the Asia-Pacific region, four — Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Nepal and China — made it, while Saudi Arabia lost out. The UNHRC has 47 members serving at any time with elections held to fill up seats every year, based on allocations to regions across the world to ensure geographical representation.* Along with the aforementioned countries, the others who booked a seat in the council included Russia and Ukraine from Eastern Europe; France and the U.K. from Western Europe and other states; Ivory Coast, Gabon, Malawi and Senegal from Africa; and Bolivia, Cuba and Mexico from the Latin American and Caribbean States. *Countries are disallowed from occupying a seat for more than two consecutive terms.* The election to the Asia Pacific cohort this year was eventful. Saudi Arabia which had controversially earned a representation twice (2014-16, followed by 2017-2019) despite a known reputation for several human rights violations, could not secure a seat this time. In the secret ballot conducted in the 193-member UN General Assembly, Saudi Arabia could manage only 90 votes in comparison to Pakistan (169), Uzbekistan (164), Nepal (150) and China (139). For a nation with immense clout in West Asia, the inability to secure a seat despite the regime's efforts to refurbish its image could be chalked up to the fallout of the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the detention of several women rights' activists, among others. Yet, *despite the exclusion of Saudi Arabia, the record of some other member-states such as China and Russia in the council has also not lived up to the aims and mission of the UNHRC, which has led to critics questioning its relevance. Powerful countries such as the U.S. have refused to participate in the Council, with the Trump administration taking the country out of the Council in 2018, years after it was reinstated under President Barack Obama.*



Mission

The UNHRC, which was reconstituted from its predecessor organisation, the UN Commission on Human Rights, is a United Nations body whose mission is to promote and protect human rights across the world. The council is seen as a central structure in the global human rights architecture, a political body with representatives drawn from the General Assembly. Apart from the council, the UN has also set up a number of treaty-based organisations to monitor compliance with human rights standards and international human rights treaties such as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The UNHRC, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has two key functions — the council passes non-binding resolutions on human rights issues through a periodic review of all 193 UN member states called the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), besides overseeing expert investigation of violations in specific countries (Special Procedures). Human rights breaches that are investigated by the UNHRC across UN member states relate to themes such as freedom of association and assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of belief and religion, women's rights, LGBT rights and the rights of racial and ethnic minorities. However, what makes the Council's composition problematic is that several of its members run afoul of its proclaimed aims (for example, the one-party systems of China and Cuba that have a controversial record on freedom of expression or the anti-gay policies of Russia).

Structure

At one level, the UNHRC's structure — drawing a group of nations from the General Assembly through *rotation and election via a "one state, one vote" principle* — *has allowed the organisation to be fairly representative of the General Assembly without special privileges for the more developed Western countries, as is the case with other multilateral institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank. The UNHRC replaced the Human Rights Commission in 2006 after a vast majority of the UN member States endorsed the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's proposal to create a new institution that would overcome the "credibility deficit" of the previous organisation. The General Assembly Resolution 60/251 helped establish the Council, whose detailed workings were negotiated subsequently. The mechanism of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was incorporated into the functioning to give teeth to the organisation.* The UPR, which has a national report from the state under review plus a compilation of UN information prepared by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, also allows for a summary of information from civil society actors. Countries such as Israel, Syria, Iran, North Korea, Myanmar, Sudan, Cambodia, Belarus, Burundi and Eritrea have been investigated and strongly condemned by the UNHRC for violating various human rights. Sri Lanka, for example, had, in a co-sponsored resolution in 2015, provided commitments to the council to promote reconciliation, accountability and human rights, following the end of the civil war in 2009. The Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led government withdrew the country from those commitments earlier this year. In a unanimously passed resolution that was sponsored by African states, the UNHRC in June 2020, ordered a report on "systematic racism" against people of African descent following the murder of the African-American George Floyd in the U.S. India has not been spared from scrutiny either. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, had earlier this year expressed concern over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the clampdown in Kashmir, besides the "inter-communal attacks" in Delhi in February. Later, Ms. Bachelet had welcomed the release of political leaders in Jammu and Kashmir, but expressed concern over the communications restrictions as part of "Global Human Rights update" at the start of the 45th session of the UNHRC in September 2020. *While the U.S. has stayed away from the council, keeping in line with the isolationist impulse of the Trump administration, other Western*



countries have actively participated in the UNHRC despite their misgivings about countries with a blemished rights record. There has always been an inherent tension between countries from the West that espouse an individualist notion of human rights that lays emphasis on political and civic rights and those from the developing world who have laid greater emphasis on socio-economic and cultural rights (such as Cuba). Between these “extremities”, there are other rising powers such as Brazil and India who have committed to hold states to account for human rights issues. The unique arrangement of representation, review and collaboration (with civil society groups over and above nation-states) has certainly improved the functioning of the UNHRC in comparison with its predecessor Commission. But the challenges remain high. The UNHCR is still a work in progress.

AT 75, THE UN NEEDS A REBIRTH (SREERAM CHAULIA - DEAN, JINDAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS)

October 24 marks the diamond jubilee of the United Nations. But far from joyous celebration, it is an occasion to somberly reflect on why the UN is stagnating at 75 and how it can regain its lost lustre. Although much has changed in the international system since 1945, the world body continues to see a tussle between ‘principle’ and ‘power’. On the one hand, the UN represents hopes of a peaceful and just world order through multilateral cooperation, abidance by international law, and uplift of the downtrodden. On the other, the institution has been designed to privilege the most powerful states of the post-World War II dispensation by granting them commanding heights over international politics via the undemocratic instruments of veto power and permanent seats in the Security Council (UNSC). Arguably, if the great powers of that period were not accommodated with VIP status, we may have seen a repeat of the ill-fated League of Nations. Keeping all the major powers inside the tent and reasonably happy through joint control over the UNSC was intended to be a pragmatic step to avoid another world war. Presumably, the collective command model of big powers built into the UNSC is one of the reasons why there has been no third world war.

A model that didn't work

But this model has also caused havoc. Almost immediately after the UN's creation, it was pushed to the verge of irrelevance by the Cold War, which left the UN little room to implement noble visions of peace, development and human rights. It was only in the uncontested post-Cold War political milieu, when the liberal sole superpower, the U.S., strode like a colossus, that the UN could spring back to life and embark on a plethora of peacekeeping missions, nation-building interventions and promotion of universal human rights. In the U.S.-led ‘new world order’ of the 1990s, it appeared as if the problem of ‘power’ cutting out ‘principle’ had been resolved under the benign hegemony of a Washington that would be the flag-bearer of UN values. However, that golden age of the UN was too deceptive to last. We are now past the unipolar moment and the ghosts of the Cold War are returning in complex multi-sided avatars. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has labelled the present peaking of geopolitical tensions as a “great fracture”. The phrase ‘new Cold War’ is in vogue to depict the clash between China and the U.S. Tensions involving other players like Russia, Turkey, Iran and Israel in West Asia, as well as between China and its neighbours in Asia, are at an all-time high. The recrudescence of the worst habits of competitive vetoing by P-5 countries has prevented the UNSC from fulfilling its collective security mandate. So dangerous are the divisions and their spillover effects that Mr. Guterres has lamented that “we have essentially failed” to cooperate against the immediate global threat of the pandemic.



He has also rekindled the old maxim, “The UN is only as strong as its members’ commitment to its ideals.”

Obstacles to reforms

But apart from rivalries of member states, there is a larger underlying problem. At the core of the paralysis of the UN is the phenomenon of P-5 countries (China, France, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S.) blocking reforms. Outmoded procedures based on the discriminatory original sin of superior prerogatives to P-5 countries have to be discarded. Why should expansion of the UNSC require consensus of the P-5? In the 21st century, why should there be veto power in anyone’s hands? If a simple majority voting method could replace the P-5 consensus method, the obstacles to UNSC reforms would reduce. On the 75th anniversary of the UN, there must be a global push against ossifying ‘rules’ which have privileged ‘rule’ of the few over the many. That is the only way to restore some balance between ‘power’ and ‘principle’ and ensure a renaissance of the UN.

TWO TOGETHER

The India-U.S. Foreign and Defence Ministers meet for the “2+2” mechanism just a week before the U.S. elections is proof that bilateral ties between the two countries are on a firm footing. Ostensibly, the purpose was to conduct an annual review of ties and to wrap up the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geo-spatial Cooperation, the last of the three enabling agreements which will facilitate easier interoperability between the Indian and American defence forces. *Other agreements signed or reviewed included those in the areas of health and COVID-19 cooperation, building strategic petroleum reserves in the U.S., renewable energy, space, cyberspace, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics.* In the Joint statement they issued, the Ministers also called on Pakistan to take “immediate, sustained and irreversible action” against cross-border terror groups on its soil, and to bring to justice the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and 2016 Uri and Pathankot strikes. However, the timing and the tenor of the American pronouncements prior to the visit made it clear that the larger import of the visit for the Trump administration was about dealing with China. In every interaction, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to the challenge from Beijing, of the need to build a counter coalition to the “Chinese Communist Party”, and to further U.S. Indo-Pacific policy in this regard. In India, he made a reference to the “increasing aggression and destabilising activities by China” and mentioned Indian soldiers killed in clashes with the PLA on the LAC in June. He is taking the same message to his next stops. In Colombo and Male on Wednesday — he is also visiting Indonesia — Mr. Pompeo raised the need to counter and provide alternatives to what he called China’s “bad deals, violations of sovereignty and lawlessness on land and sea”.

For New Delhi, the visit by the U.S. officials was a way to demonstrate that the bilateral relationship is “poll-proof” and will grow regardless of the November 3 election result. The BECA agreement signed is an important addition to India’s defence and strategic capabilities, and it is significant that India-U.S. ties have been reaffirmed now given that it could take some months for the U.S. administration to restart bilateral engagements post-elections. While welcoming their U.S. interlocutors and taking ties forward, however, it is significant that the government has chosen not to enter into the comments made by Mr. Pompeo on India’s China challenge, in keeping with New Delhi’s stated policy that the LAC tensions are a “bilateral matter”. The conspicuous silence from External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in response to Mr. Pompeo’s comments on China is



also a sobering reminder that while India appreciates support from the U.S., it retains its strategic autonomy in dealing with threats and troubles with its biggest neighbour.

HIGH-TECH TRANSFERS

On October 27, *India and the U.S. signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)* during the third 2+2 dialogue of defence and foreign ministers of the two countries. *This is the fourth and the last of the foundational agreements that both countries have concluded, starting with GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) in 2002, LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) in 2016, COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) in 2018, and now BECA.*

What are foundational agreements?

The United States enters into what are called 'foundational or enabling agreements' with its defence partners. These agreements govern the nature and scope of U.S. defence partnerships. Partners enhance the capabilities of the U.S. military in distant places through sharing information, platforms and logistics. The competitive advantage of the U.S. military is maintained primarily by the advanced technologies that the country develops continuously. The U.S. sells military equipment to other countries with strict control over their deployment and use. For instance, consider the B777-300ER aircraft that India bought from Boeing recently for the use of VVIPs. The sale of advanced communication and security systems on the aircraft — which are not commercially available — is made seamless by foundational agreements. The U.S. is also eager to advance 'interoperability' with defence forces of the countries that are its defence partners. Interoperability involves real-time coordination of forces. The U.S. has signed these foundational agreements with at least 100 countries, which mostly follow a standard text. Country-specific changes were made in India's case in all four foundational agreements.

What do these agreements do?

The General Security of Military Information Agreement or GSOMIA, and its extension, the Information Security Annex (ISA) signed in 2019, allow military technology cooperation for the sharing of classified information between governments and companies in both countries. The LEMOA enables logistics support, say refuelling of planes or ships, supply of spare parts or maintenance to each other. For instance, U.S. Navy's P8 aircraft landed in Port Blair last month for refuelling, under LEMOA. Even in the absence of this agreement, such cooperation can and has taken place between India and the U.S., but the agreement makes it seamless, and the accounting easier. The COMCASA allows Indian forces to procure advanced, secure communication equipment from the U.S. Such equipment was earlier denied for U.S. origin platforms such as C-17, C-130, and commercial systems were used in their place. Only after COMCASA was signed were the encrypted systems provided to India. The BECA enables exchange of geospatial information. Akin to a GPS that enables navigation, such exchange of geospatial information enhances the accuracy of a missile or the utility of a drone.

What is the strategic importance of these agreements?

Since the Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2005, the India-U.S. defence cooperation has been advancing at a rapid pace. The U.S. has relaxed restrictions on technology trade in India's favour considerably, and India is designated a 'Major Defence Partner'. Foundational agreements deepen defence cooperation,



in trade and operation. India and the U.S. are also part of a broader shared vision for the Indo-Pacific region, where both countries, along with Japan and Australia, are increasing their military cooperation. U.S.-built platforms used by partner countries can talk to one another and share operational information.

Are there any concerns?

Critics worry that tying itself too closely with the U.S. may limit India's choices. The evolution of technology makes it inevitable that all military platforms will be integrated and networked in the future. *The U.S. is very particular about the integrity of its networks, and pressure could mount on India to remain firmly in its camp. The U.S. is particularly irked by India's continuing defence cooperation with Russia. India will be taking the delivery of Russian S-400 missile defence system next year, ignoring American objections.* The U.S. could respond with sanctions. At any rate, it will not be possible to integrate Russian and American platforms, and this could throw up new challenges of military planning for India. The moot question, say experts, is *whether India could ramp up its defence cooperation with the U.S. without ending up as its ally.*

BECA — AND IMPORTANCE OF THREE FOUNDATIONAL PACTS OF INDIA-US MILITARY COOPERATION

India and the United States on Tuesday (October 27) signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which, along with the two agreements signed earlier — the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) — completes a troika of “foundational pacts” for deep military cooperation between the two countries.

What is the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)?

BECA will help India get real-time access to American geospatial intelligence that will enhance the accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones. *Through the sharing of information on maps and satellite images, it will help India access topographical and aeronautical data, and advanced products that will aid in navigation and targeting. This could be key to Air Force-to-Air Force cooperation between India and the US.* Just as your radio cab (or the GPS in your smartphone) helps you zero in on the path to your destination and helps you reach it quickly and efficiently, BECA will provide Indian military systems with a high-quality GPS to navigate missiles with real-time intelligence to precisely target the adversary. Besides the sailing of ships, flying of aircraft, fighting of wars, and location of targets, geospatial intelligence is also critical to the response to natural disasters. The signing of BECA flows from the commitment in the joint statement during President Donald Trump's visit in February this year, when the two sides said they looked forward to an “early conclusion” of BECA.

And what is the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) about?

LEMOA was the first of the three pacts to be signed in August 2016. *LEMOA allows the militaries of the US and India to replenish from each other's bases, and access supplies, spare parts and services from each other's land facilities, air bases, and ports, which can then be reimbursed.* LEMOA is extremely useful for India-US Navy-to-Navy cooperation, since the two countries are cooperating closely in the Indo-Pacific. To put the usefulness of this agreement in simple terms, it is like being able to stop at a friend's garage or workshop to refuel your car or get it repaired when you are far



away from your own home or workshop. The critical element that underpins LEMOA is mutual trust. Without trust, no country will be willing to expose its military and strategic assets such as warships to the facilities of another country. The signing of LEMOA was in itself an affirmation of the mutual trust between the two militaries, and its application will enhance the trust. It took almost a decade to negotiate LEMOA, and the exercise in a sense bridged the trust deficit between India and the US, and paved the way for the other two foundational pacts. While India had indeed provided ad hoc logistics support to the US in the past — such as allowing the refuelling of American aircraft in Bombay during the first Gulf War in 1991, and letting US warships visit Indian ports during the war on terror after 9/11— the signing of LEMOA has institutionalised this process and made it smoother.

What about the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)?

COMCASA was signed in September 2018, after the first 2+2 dialogue during which then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and then Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman met the visiting Secretary of State Michael R Pompeo and then Secretary of Defence James N Mattis. *The pact allows the US to provide India with its encrypted communications equipment and systems so that Indian and US military commanders, and the aircraft and ships of the two countries, can communicate through secure networks during times of both peace and war.* Again, to take a simple example, it's like being able to exchange messages or communicate with a friend on WhatsApp, Signal, or Telegram in real time and in a secure manner. The signing of COMCASA paved the way for the transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India to facilitate “interoperability” between their forces — and potentially with other militaries that use US-origin systems for secure data links.

WITH DUTCH MUSEUMS SET TO RETURN LOOTED ITEMS, A LOOK AT INDIA'S STOLEN TREASURES SCATTERED WORLDWIDE

Earlier this month, some of Netherlands' most famous museums, including Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum, supported a report proposing the repatriation of thousands of works of art to their country of origin, where they were forcibly taken from during colonial times. “If it doesn't belong to you then you must return it,” said lawyer and human rights activist Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, chair of a committee that produced a restitution report for the Dutch government. While repatriation of colonial-era objects in European museums has often been under discussion and recurrent demand for their return raised, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought attention to the issue once again. We look at the various parameters related to the subject, especially in the context of India, that has been asking museums world over to return artefacts taken away during colonisation or illegally post-independence.

What India wants from the Netherlands

With museums from the Netherlands promising to return over one lakh artefacts looted from Sri Lanka and Indonesia, *there is demand in Hyderabad that the Dutch should also give India 17th century miniature paintings from the erstwhile Golconda kingdom. There are also appeals for the return of a royal charter of the Chola kings, lost 300 years ago from Tamil Nadu, and now at the Leiden University in the Netherlands.*



Some objects that have found their way home

In recent times, several significant cultural artefacts have returned to India from across the world. Here are some:

From the UK: Last month, Britain returned three *15th century idols of Lord Ram, Lakshman and Sita to India*. Stolen from a temple built in the Vijayanagar period in Tamil Nadu, they were reportedly voluntarily handed over to the British police by a UK-based collector when he was informed that they had been stolen from India. While this year also saw the handing over of *Natesha Shiva statue* stolen in 1998 from the *Ghateshwar temple in Baroli, Rajasthan*, to the Archeological Survey of India, in 2019, two antiques – *a 17th century bronze idol of Navaneetha Krishna and a 2nd century limestone carved pillar motif* — were also returned to India. The Indian High Commission also received a *12th century bronze statue of Gautam Buddha in 2018*.

The US: In August, this year, US authorities returned a set of antiques to India, including *a limestone relief of Shiva and Parvati and a marble Apsara*. In 2018, two *12th century antique statues — a Lingodhbhavamurti granite sculpture and a sculpture depicting Manjusri, bodhisattva of wisdom* — were handed over to India's Consul-General in New York. In June 2016, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, the US returned over 200 cultural artefacts estimated at \$100 million to India. Among others were religious statues, bronzes and terracotta pieces, including *a statue of Saint Manikkavichavakar from the Chola period stolen from the Sivan Temple in Chennai*. Majority of the pieces were seized during *Operation Hidden Idol*, an investigation initiated by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations in 2007, leading to the arrest of art dealer Subhash Kapoor in the smuggling racket.

Australia: The Australian Government returned three “culturally significant” artefacts to India in January 2020 — *a pair of door guardians from the 15th century*, from Tamil Nadu; and a sculpture of the *serpent king, from Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh*, made in the sixth to eighth centuries. In 2016, National Gallery of Australia returned three antiquities to India, following the significant 2014 return of two valuable and ancient statues — *a Nataraja* reportedly bought from Kapoor in 2007 and *a 1,000-year-old stone sculpture of Ardhanariswara*. In 2014, Australia also reportedly initiated an internal audit of the ownership histories of its ancient Asian objects.

A gallery for returned artefacts

Last year, over 190 antiques confiscated and retrieved by India went on display at a museum gallery in the *Purana Qila complex*. This includes *a standing image of Sridevi from the Chola dynasty period* that was seized by the US from Kapoor, *a marble sculpture of Brahma and Brahmani stolen from a museum at Patan* and recovered from London in 2016, and *a 10th century sculpture of Durga as Mahishasuramardini stolen from Uttarakhand in 2018*.

National treasures India wants Britain to return

There are several significant national artefacts that India has been pressing to be returned from across the world, especially from the UK. Topping the list is the world famous *Kohinoor Diamond*. *On display in the Jewel House at the Tower of London, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan have also laid claim to the Kohinoor*. Likewise, both India and Pakistan want the return of *Tipu's Wooden Tiger*, currently on display at a London museum. Reportedly shipped to England in 1861, India also wants Britain to return the *7.5-foot tall Buddha statue* on display at the Birmingham Museum and



Art Gallery, and *the throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh taken away by the British as "state property" when Punjab was annexed in 1849*. The ASI had also appealed for the return of limestone carvings known as the *Amaravati sculptures*, that once formed the railings and gateways around an ancient Buddhist stupa in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, and *a four-foot high 11th century white marble statue of a goddess from Dhar*.

British stand on India's Demands

During a visit to India in 2013, when asked about restitution of the Koh-i-Noor diamond, then *British Prime Minister David Cameron, had stated he did not support "returnism" since this would empty British museums*. Earlier this year, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India, reportedly stated, "I have a natural desire to see as many things which rightfully belong to India back in India." In June, another plea was initiated when the British Museum tweeted that it stood in "solidarity with the Black community throughout the world". Several noted that it should return the contested objects to former colonies.

BEHIND FRESH ROW OVER KARTARPUR GURDWARA: MOVE TO CONTROL ADMINISTRATION, DONATIONS

The Pakistan government's decision to transfer the management and administrative control of the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur from a Sikh body — Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabhandhak Committee (PSGPC) — to a trust under the Evacuee Trust Property Board, a non-Sikh body, has inviting sharp reactions from India, which termed the move "highly condemnable" and against the spirit of the Kartarpur Corridor. The Shiromani Akali Dal has termed Pakistan's decision as a move to take full control of the gurdwara, which is also the final resting place of Sikh faith's founder Guru Nanak Dev. The PSGPC, however, claims that there is no change in the administration of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. The Indian Express explains the history of the shrine and the latest controversy.

What is Gurdwara Darbar Sahib and what is its importance in Sikh religion?

The Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, also known as Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, is located in Pakistan's Narowal district across river Ravi, about five kilometres from the Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India's Punjab. Guru Nanak Dev, the first Sikh Guru had arrived in Kartarpur between 1520 and 1522, as per historians, and spent the last 18 years of his life there. It was in Kartarpur that he laid the foundations of a Sikh religion. At his final resting place stands the gurdwara. It was one of the most significant historical and spiritual place for Sikhs till 1947. Following the partition, no Sikh was left to take care of the gurdwara, which slowly turned into ruins and at one point of time was also used as a shelter by smugglers. The Gurdwara Darbar Sahib got Pakistan government's attention in early 90s, when a Jatha of Sikh pilgrims from India highlighted its historical and spiritual importance. Pakistan government restored the main building of the gurdwara in 2004, after about decade-long repair works. In the meantime, a demand to construct a visa-free corridor to the gurdwara was raised and soon became a movement among Sikhs across the world. *The Kartarpur Corridor was finally thrown open in 2019 with the two sides agreeing on visa-free travel for Indian pilgrims to the shrine*. The corridor was shut in March this year in view of the coronavirus pandemic.



Who looks after management of gurdwaras in Pakistan?

There were more than 176 gurdwaras of religious and historical importance in Pakistan. Less than 20 of these gurdwaras have been opened so far by Pakistan government in last 73 years. All such gurdwaras are under control of Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) of Pakistan. "The ETPB looks after the building and maintenance of all Sikh gurdwaras in Pakistan whether they have been opened or still lying closed. The ETPB spends money from its own pocket. The Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC) looks after the religious affairs of the gurdwaras. The PSGPC also keeps control of the donations made by devotees. The ETPB has nothing to do with donations made by Sikhs at Darbar Sahib or any other gurdwara," said Satwant Singh, president PSGPC.

Why the fresh controversy?

A controversy has erupted following a recent notification by ETPB as per which a new body — Project Management Unit (PMU) — has been formed for the administrative control of the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. Pakistan claims to have spent Rs 1,000 crore on the creating the Kartarpur Corridor infrastructure. It charges USD 20 from Indian pilgrims using the Corridor. "The PMU is nothing new. Pakistan government acquired more than 800 acres of land for the expanded complex of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib and Kartarpur Corridor. So they need a separate body to look after all this structure spread over more than four kilometres. The ETPB also looks after the other gurdwara buildings in Pakistan. They don't need separate body for all the other gurdwaras as infrastructure there is nothing when compared to the one created at Darbar Sahib. The new body (PMU) will not affect the role of the PSGPC in managing religious affairs at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in anyway. Nothing has changed for us," claims Satwant Singh. On the Shiromani Akali Dal's allegation that the new government body for Darbar Sahib has no Sikh member in it, which was "a grave attack on fundamental rights of Sikh minority in Pakistan," Satwant Singh said that there was no need of any Sikh member in the PMU. "The ETPB never makes any plan regarding gurdwaras without discussing with us. The PSGPC wants control over the religious affairs and we have that. It has always been like that. Nothing has changed." Satwant Singh said 18 gurdwaras in Pakistan are under PSGPC control. "The PSGPC collects and uses the donations that gurdwaras," he says, reiterating that ETPB has nothing to do with money collected at Sikh shrines.

When did Pakistan government allow the SGPC to construct structures at Darbar Sahib?

Pakistan government had allowed Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) — responsible for the management of gurdwaras in Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh and union territory of Chandigarh — to perform 'Kar Sewa' (volunteer service) and construct new structures inside the premises of Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in 2015. At that time, the gurdwara had around 100 acre land. Main building of the Gurudwara was constructed in around 3 acre. Pakistan government has allowed SGPC to construct the buildings for community kitchen and other purposes around main building.

THE GILGIT-BALTISTAN GAME PLAN (MOHAMMED AYOUB - UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY)

On November 1, observed every year in Gilgit-Baltistan as "Independence Day", Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that his government would give the region "provisional provincial status". When that happens, *G-B will become the fifth province of Pakistan, although the 3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur*; Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



region is claimed by India as part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir as it existed in 1947 at its accession to India. Gilgit-Baltistan is the northernmost territory administered by Pakistan, providing the country's only territorial frontier, and thus a land route, with China, where it meets the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor has made the region vital for both countries. Technically speaking Gilgit-Baltistan was a part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) at the time of Partition although Dogra rule sat very lightly on this region. Much of it, particularly Gilgit, because of its strategic importance in the context of the Great Game in Central Asia, had been leased to the British by Hari Singh in 1935. The British returned it in August 1947. Hari Singh sent his representative, Brigadier Ghansar Singh, as Governor, and Brown to take charge of the Gilgit Scouts, the local army. But after taking protective custody of the Governor on November 1, Brown would raise the Pakistani flag at his headquarters. Later the Gilgit Scouts, which switched allegiance to Pakistan, managed to bring Baltistan under their control.

Pakistan did not accept G-B's accession although it took administrative control of the territory. After India went to the UN and a series of resolutions were passed in the Security Council on the situation in Kashmir, Pakistan believed that neither G-B nor PoK should be annexed to Pakistan, as this could undermine the international case for a plebiscite in Kashmir. It also reckons that in the event a plebiscite ever takes place in Kashmir, votes in G-B will be important too. This is why it is only being called "provisional" provincial status.

Why change status now?

There are several reasons why Islamabad has now decided to formally integrate Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan. First, the revocation of Article 370 by India and the bifurcation of the State into two Union Territories have sent a clear message that the Kashmir dispute is not only dead but also buried as far as New Delhi is concerned. Pakistan's imminent move, transforming Gilgit-Baltistan's de facto status into a de jure one, is a clear riposte to the Indian decision. Second, public opinion in Gilgit-Baltistan has long been in favour of full integration into Pakistan as a province as the predominantly Shia and ethnically distinct population of the region has very little in common with PoK. Islamabad feels that by declaring it a province will assuage domestic dissatisfaction on this score. Third, China has been encouraging Islamabad to turn Gilgit-Baltistan into a province. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) runs through Gilgit-Baltistan and China has invested heavily in the region. In view of India's continuing claim to the area, Beijing is interested in delinking Gilgit-Baltistan formally from Kashmir so that its investment does not remain hostage to the possibility of another round of India-Pakistan hostilities over Kashmir. China also wants to repay India in its own coin following New Delhi's decision to separate Ladakh from J&K. Beijing views the Indian move as the first step towards India attempting to enforce its claim on Aksai Chin, currently under Chinese occupation. In addition to CPEC, China considers Gilgit-Baltistan very important because of its strategic location. It is contiguous to Ladakh as well as Xinjiang and could act as a staging post against India if a major conflict erupts in Ladakh. Beijing possibly presumes that Pakistan will agree to a Chinese military presence in Gilgit-Baltistan because Islamabad would like to see India embroiled simultaneously in a two-front war — in Ladakh and Gilgit — with China. There is already substantial Chinese civilian presence in Gilgit-Baltistan related to CPEC projects. China is interested in stationing military personnel as well. Delinking the region from the Kashmir dispute would make it easier for the international community to accept Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan. It would also serve Pakistan's purpose of getting back at India for abrogating Article 370 as well as complicating India's strategic environment by the implicit threat of turning it into a Chinese staging ground. India must calibrate its response carefully because merely by turning up



the rhetorical heat, it may play into Chinese and Pakistani hands and escalate the situation. Rhetoric must always be determined by a meticulous assessment of capability.

What do the people in G-B want?

The people of G-B have been demanding for years that it be made a part of Pakistan, they do not have the same constitutional rights Pakistanis have. There is virtually no connect with India. Some have in the past demanded a merger with PoK, but the people of G-B have no real connect with Kashmir either. They belong to several non-Kashmiri ethnicities, and speak various languages, none of these Kashmiri. A majority of the estimated 1.5 million G-B residents are Shias. There is anger against Pakistan for unleashing extremist sectarian militant groups that target Shias, and for dictating over the use of their natural resources, but the predominant sentiment is that all this will improve once they are part of the Pakistani federation. There is a small movement for independence, but it has very little traction.

THE SHADE OF GREY

The decision by the Paris-based watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force, last week to retain Pakistan on its greylist has clearly disappointed the Imran Khan government. His cabinet had projected confidence that the country would be taken off the greylist — monitored jurisdictions on terror financing and money laundering activities — having been cleared on 21 of the 27 mandated action points. Pakistan will now face international strictures on its markets and on its ability to procure loans until the next FATF plenary in February 2021, by which time it is expected to complete the six pending issues. A bigger problem for Islamabad was that *Turkey was the only other country in the 39-member FATF to push for Pakistan to be let off, by making a suggestion that the last six points be cleared by an “on-site” visit by an FATF team.* The proposal was dropped when *even other traditional backers of Pakistan such as China, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia did not support it.* Clearly, Pakistan has little option but to complete its tasks in the next four months, which include: more action against UNSC-banned terrorists and terror groups, action against charitable organisations (Non-Profits) linked to these banned entities, tracing fugitive terrorists and pursuing convictions against them, revising the list of banned entities under the Anti-Terrorism Act to reflect all those banned by the UNSC, and cracking down on other channels of terror financing through narcotics and smuggling.

For those in New Delhi watching the outcome of the FATF decision, there are some broader dividends to consider from this process. To begin with, the fact that the FATF has retained Pakistan on the greylist for the third time this year, and not automatically downgraded it to the blacklist (with Iran and North Korea) when its deadline for action ended in September 2019, has ensured the pressure has continued to make Pakistan accountable on terror. The Khan government has been forced to make a real legislative push to bring Pakistani anti-terror laws in line with international standards, while, at least for the interim, also ensuring sufficient pressure on groups such as the LeT and the JeM that target India, to refrain from public comments and publicly raising funds. Meanwhile, Pakistan's support to the U.S.-led Afghan process and talks with the Taliban are crucial to the peace process, and the FATF process has made Islamabad more amenable to helping Afghanistan. It remains to be seen if the actions it takes will permanently change Pakistan's course in supporting and sheltering cross-border terror groups. India's eventual goal is not just in stopping attacks by these groups, but for Pakistan to fully dismantle



the infrastructure of terror in the understanding that it is in Pakistan's own interests to do so. It is hoped that the prolonged FATF process will enable this realisation in Islamabad.

DELHI, MALE INK \$400-MN PACT FOR CONNECTIVITY

Following up on India's announcement of a \$500 million package to the Maldives, the Exim Bank of India and the Maldives's Ministry of Finance signed an agreement for \$400 million in Male. The line of credit (LoC) will fund the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP), *a key pledge of President Ibrahim Solih, a statement* from the Indian Embassy in Male said. India has also pledged a grant of \$ 100 million for the initiative. The initial announcement was made at a virtual meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid in August. The grant and LoC come in addition to the previous LoC of \$800 million, among India's largest loans extended in the region.

OLI MOVE ON NEPAL MAP HINTS AT SOFTER STAND

After months of simmering dispute with India over the Kalapani issue, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli indicated a softer line on Friday when he used an old map of Nepal to greet everyone on the festival of Vijaya Dashami. The old map does not show the region of Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura, which is part of India's Pithoragarh district. The triangular piece of land is, however, shown as part of Nepalese sovereign territory in the new map, which was unveiled on May 20, and made part of the insignia of the Nepalese state by an amendment on June 13. Prime Minister Oli's use of the national insignia of Nepal carrying the old map has drawn strong reactions from the political class of Kathmandu, with leaders expressing surprise about the use of the old map during Dussehra, which is the biggest festival in the Himalayan country. Mr. Sharma said Mr. Oli has undermined Parliament by not using the new map. Use of the old map also drew sharp reactions on social media, with Nepalese users connecting the move with Thursday's discussion between Mr. Oli and Samant Kumar Goel, chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), the external intelligence wing of India. Nepalese publication Myrepublica reported that Mr. Goel led a nine-member delegation. The visit drew attention as it came a fortnight before the scheduled visit to Nepal of General Manoj Mukund Naravane, chief of the Indian Army.

THE PURPOSE, PARTICIPANTS OF THE MALABAR NAVY EXERCISE

The 24th edition of Exercise Malabar, which concluded, was reflective of the "commitment of the participating countries to support a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific as well as a rules-based international order," the Navy said in a statement. Simultaneously, it also carried out Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) with Thailand in the Andaman Sea and delivered food aid to South Sudan in western Indian Ocean under Mission Sagar-II. The naval exercise, consisting of India, Australia, Japan and the U.S., was held in two phases this time. Australia joined the war games for the first time since 2007.

What is Malabar Exercise?

It is a multilateral naval exercise that includes simulated war games and combat manoeuvres. Malabar began as a simple *Passage Exercise (PASSEX)* in 1992 between the Navies of India and the U.S. and hit a pause in 1998 after India's nuclear tests in Pokhran, to resume again in 2002. Since then, it has become an annual feature. Both sides fielded submarines for the first time in 2003 and



aircraft carriers in 2005 — USS Nimitz and INS Viraat. Over the years, the exercise grew in scope and complexity. *It got converted into a trilateral exercise with Japan's inclusion in 2015.* Phase-1 of Malabar 2020 will see participation of U.S.-guided missile destroyer USS John S McCain, Australian long-range frigate HMAS Ballarat with integral MH-60 helicopter and Japanese destroyer JS Onami with integral SH-60 helicopter. Indian Navy is fielding destroyer INS Ranvijay, stealth frigate INS Shivalik, off-shore patrol vessel INS Sukanya, fleet support ship INS Shakti and submarine INS Sindhuraj, a Sindhughosh-class Russian Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine. Hawk Advanced Jet Trainer, P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft, Dornier maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopters will also be participating in the exercise. Officials were quiet about the flotilla for Phase-II. China gave a restrained response on the announcement. Asked about Australia's inclusion in Malabar, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said in Beijing that they "noticed" this development and China believes military cooperation between countries should be "conducive to regional peace and stability".

This year the exercise will be held in two phases, the first from Tuesday off the coast near Visakhapatnam, and the second in the Arabian Sea in mid-November. Last year it was held in early September off the coast of Japan. This year's Malabar Exercise has been planned on a "non-contact-at sea" format keeping Covid-19 protocols in mind.

What is the difference this year?

For the first time in over a decade, the exercise will see the participation of all four Quad countries. In a statement last month, the Defence Ministry had said that "as India seeks to increase cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain and in the light of increased defence cooperation with Australia, Malabar 2020 will see the participation of the Australian Navy". *This will be the second time Australia will participate. In 2007, there were two Malabar Exercises. The first was held off Okinawa island of Japan in the Western Pacific — the first time the exercise was held away from Indian shores — and the second in September 2007, off Visakhapatnam, with the Indian, Japanese, US, Australian and Singapore navies. The following year, Australia stopped participating. Japan became a regular participant only in 2015, making it a trilateral annual exercise since then.*

Why is Australia's participation important?

On October 27, following the 2+2 dialogue with the US, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said: "We... agreed that upholding the rules-based international order, respecting the rule of law and freedom of navigation in the international seas and upholding the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states are essential. Our defence cooperation is intended to further these objectives. Both sides welcomed Australia joining the forthcoming Malabar Exercise." *As the standoff in eastern Ladakh continues, the participation of four large navies from the Indo-Pacific region will send a message to China.* Sources have mentioned that *earlier, it was the possibility of riling up China that had prevented India from expanding the Malabar Exercise, and from Australia joining it.*

Does India conduct any other naval exercises with these countries?

Over the last few months, the Indian Navy has conducted a number of Passage Exercises (PASSEX) with navies from Japan, Australia and the US. But those were basic exercises to increase operability between the navies, while Malabar involves simulated war games. In late September, the Indian Navy conducted PASSEX with the Royal Australian Navy. In July, India conducted a PASSEX with



the US carrier strike group led by one of the largest warships in the world, USS Nimitz. The carrier strike group had been passing through the Indian Ocean Region after completing a freedom of navigation exercise in the South China Sea, which China is quite sensitive about. A similar exercise was conducted with Japan Maritime Self Defence Force in June.



DreamIAS



NATIONAL

HOW IRISH FREEDOM MOVEMENT RESONATED IN REBELLION IN PUNJAB

Ireland is commemorating 100 years of the mutiny by a British Army battalion stationed in Jalandhar and Solan in Punjab in support of the Irish freedom movement. Here is a look at the momentous events which took place in June and July 1920 and culminated in the execution of an Irish soldier, Private James Daly, making him a symbol of Irish resistance against the British.

Why did the mutiny take place?

The troops of The Connaught Rangers were protesting against the behaviour of the 'Black and Tans' during the Irish War of Independence (1919-22). The Black and Tan were members of the Irish constabulary which had been recruited from Great Britain and mostly comprised demobilised soldiers who had fought in the First World War. The Irish soldiers felt that they must rise in solidarity with their compatriots back in Ireland and hence in June and July 1920 some of the regiment's men mutinied in *Jullundur (now Jalandhar)* cantonment and later in Solan (Now in Himanchal Pradesh) in Punjab.

How did the British react to the mutiny?

Around 400 soldiers of the Connaught Rangers had mutinied in Jalandhar and Solan but only 88 of them were put through court martial. A General Court Martial was conducted in Dagshai in September 1919 and was presided upon by Lt General Sidney Lawford and three other officers of the ranks of Captain and Major. Several of the the mutineers, including James Daly, were lodged in the Dagshai jail and a variety of sentences were passed by the court martial ranging from life sentence to death by firing squad. While 13 soldiers were sentenced to death but 12 of them got reprieve as their sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Only James Daly did not get a reprieve and was ordered to be shot by a firing squad on November 2, 1920. He remains the last British soldier to have been shot by a firing squad.

HOW KONG SPELITY BECAME THE FACE OF MEGHALAYA'S ANTI-URANIUM MOVEMENT

Meghalaya woke up to the news of loss. Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin — the face of the decades-long anti-uranium mining movement in Meghalaya — had passed away at her home in Domiasiat area of South West Khasi Hills district the night before. She was 95. While not many know of Langrin in rest of India, she was considered an icon in Meghalaya for turning down a multi-crore offer from the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL), a Public Sector enterprise that wanted to mine her land. "Money cannot buy me freedom," Langrin had famously said, rejecting the offer.

Kong Spelity: The face of Meghalaya's anti-uranium movement

In the early 1980s, Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research (AMD) — a government body which identifies and evaluates uranium resources in the country — began exploratory drilling in various uranium-rich villages of Meghalaya. "She lived in a land which has India's largest deposits of uranium," said Tarun Bhartiya, a Shillong-based filmmaker, who has met Langrin several times. "*She initially allowed AMD to start prospecting — basically search for uranium deposits — when they reached her village in the early 1980s.*" Soon, however, Langrin started noticing the hazardous impact the activity caused around her. "[Impact] on the health of 3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur; Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur 69



her family, on her cattle — most of which died,” said Bhartiya, “Since then, she made it clear that they [the mining company] were not welcome and asked them to leave.” In the early 2000s, when the UCIL arrived looking for ways to lease land from the villagers (*most of Meghalaya is under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and any commercial activity — like mining — requires consent of local tribal councils*), Langrin refused point-blank. “Money cannot buy me freedom” she told them and went on to install signboards around her home that read: “Private Property”, “Do Not Trespass” etc. “She was very courageous,” said ND Syiem, Langrin’s son-in-law, “She refused to surrender her land. She was the only daughter in her family.” *Since the Khasis are a matrilineal society, Langrin was the owner of the land.* “Even around her, as UCIL managed to convince [other] villages, Kong Spelity remained resolute and held her ground,” said Bhartiya, “And that is how she became the face of Meghalaya’s anti-uranium movement.”

Meghalaya’s resistance to uranium mining

The country’s largest and richest uranium deposits are located in Domiasiat and Wakhyn areas of Meghalaya. As per the AMD website, “Exploration for atomic minerals in this part of the country began way back in the 1950’s; initially, in Meghalaya and later extended to other states of Northeast India.” *The Domiasiat uranium deposit, also known as “Kyelleng-Pyndengsohiong-Mawtahbah” region, was discovered in 1984 and has approximately 9.22 million tonnes of high-grade uranium ore deposits.* However, mining ambitions of the government have been met with stiff local resistance ever since the AMD arrived in the 1980s. The Khasi Students’ Union (KSU), Meghalaya’s influential student body, has been in the forefront of this opposition, citing environmental and health concerns. “There was exploratory mining of uranium in the region in the 1990s but Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin, KSU, late Hopingstone Lyngdoh (MLA of Nongstoin) and the people of that area were able to stop it after seeing the impact first hand,” said Forwardman Nongrem, South West Khasi Hills District’s KSU president, “The KSU’s stance is simple: ‘no’ to uranium mining and exploratory drilling of uranium. We will not compromise on our position, come what may.” Over the years there have been several attempts by the government to push exploratory mining in the state. *In 2007, a private Kolkata company was given permission by the AMD to carry out exploratory drilling in the Nongjri region. However, in June 2011, the company was compelled to surrender its license.* In 2009, UCIL had been granted 422 hectares of land in Mawthabaha area. Again, stiff opposition led the government to revoke its decision in 2016. “There is no uranium drilling or mining activity in the region now,” said KSU’s Nongrem, “*The last drilling activity in Kyelleng-Pyndengsohiong-Mawtahbah was in the summer of 2018 but was stopped by the KSU.*” Last month, after a crack was noticed in one of the concrete uranium effluent tanks built by the AMD in 1993 in the Nongbah Jynrin area, and locals alleged that there was a leak, the Meghalaya government constituted an expert agency to probe it.

The legend of Kong Spelity

Over the years, Langrin’s name has become synonymous to the anti-uranium mining movement — her face often plastered over banners during anti-uranium protests in the state. “While the movement has a wide coalition of people (students’s groups, women’s groups), she is the undisputed face,” said Bhartiya, “It is also because of who she was: an old lady, a mother... who had the courage to refuse such an offer. It got people thinking, if she can do it, so can others.” According to environmental economist Dr Bremley WB Lyngdoh, Langrin inspired an entire generation. “Without her pushing, there would be full scale mining right now; for her, land was the most precious. She did not want to sell her land and everyone to suffer in her name,” he said.



Agnes Kharshiing, renowned social activist known for her battle against illegal coal mining in Meghalaya, described Langrin as a “legend.” “I admire her strength to protect her land. She lived a full life, and so should her children,” said Kharshiing, “I express my condolences to the bereaved family, and will stick by them to ensure that their land is always protected.”

ALL INSULTS NOT OFFENCE UNDER SC/ST ACT

All insults or intimidations to persons belonging to Dalit or tribal communities will not be an offence under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the Supreme Court said in a judgment. An offence is made out under the statute only if “such insult or intimidation is on account of the victim belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe,” a three-judge Bench led by Justice L. Nageswara Rao observed. The court said *the insult should be specifically intended to humiliate the victim for his caste*. “Offence under the Act is not established merely on the fact that the informant [complainant] is a member of Scheduled Caste unless there is an intention to humiliate a member of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe for the reason that the victim belongs to such caste,” the court said.

For vulnerable sections

The court said the object of the Act is to punish violators who inflict indignities, humiliations and harassment. “It is intended to punish the acts of the upper caste against the vulnerable section of society for the reason that they belong to a particular community,” the judgment noted. The court was hearing an appeal filed by a man, Hitesh Verma, booked under the Act for allegedly abusing a Dalit woman in her house. The court found that allegations against Mr. Verma do not fulfil the basic ingredient under the Act that such humiliation should have happened in public view. Since the incident occurred within four walls in the absence of members of the public, allegations against Mr. Verma under the Act do not stand. He can be tried under ordinary criminal law.

SC LAYS DOWN GUIDELINES FOR MATRIMONIAL CASES

The Supreme Court held that deserted wives and children are entitled to alimony/maintenance from their husbands from the date they apply for it in a court of law. In a significant judgment by a Bench of Justices Indu Malhotra and R. Subhash Reddy, the top court said women deserted by husbands were left in dire straits, often reduced to destitution, for lack of means to sustain themselves and their children. The 67-page judgment by Justice Malhotra laid down uniform and comprehensive guidelines for family courts, magistrates and lower courts to follow while hearing applications filed by women seeking maintenance from their estranged husbands. “The view that *maintenance ought to be granted from the date when the application was made* is based on the rationale that the primary object of maintenance laws is to protect a deserted wife and dependent children from destitution and vagrancy. If maintenance is not paid from the date of application, the party seeking maintenance would be deprived of sustenance, owing to the time taken for disposal of the application, which often runs into several years,” Justice Malhotra wrote. The court said a violation would lead to punishment, such as civil detention and even attachment of the property of the latter. “*The plea of the husband that he does not possess any source of income ipso facto does not absolve him of his moral duty to maintain his wife, if he is able-bodied and has educational qualifications*,” the court declared. Both the applicant wife and the respondent husband have to disclose their assets and liabilities in a maintenance case. Any earlier case filed or pending under any other law should also be revealed in court. The expenses of the children,



including their education, basic needs and other vocational activities, should be factored in by courts while calculating the alimony. Other factors such as “spiralling inflation rates and high costs of living” should be considered, but *the wife should receive an alimony which fit the standard of life she was used to in the matrimonial home*. The judgment was based on a matrimonial plea from Maharashtra on the question of payment of maintenance by a man to his wife and son under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The case had been dragging on for years.

COURTS FOR TRYING LAWMAKERS IN PUBLIC INTEREST

Justice N.V. Ramana, leading a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, said the court has only public interest and faith in judiciary in mind while pushing for the setting up of special courts to expeditiously try sitting and former MPs and MLAs accused of various crimes. The Bench was considering a report filed by a committee of the Madras High Court that raised reservations over the setting up of special courts to exclusively try legislators for various offences.

‘Not offender-centric’

The committee said that special courts cannot be “offender-centric”. It reasoned, “An MP/MLA, who commits an offence under POCSO Act (or other Special Acts like Prevention of Corruption Act, Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act) can only be tried by a Special Court created under the POCSO Act (PC Act, NDPS Act) and there cannot be another Special Court exclusively for trial of an MP/MLA, who commits POCSO offence.” On this, the top court gave Madras High Court counsel Anandh Kannan two weeks to respond. *The committee report, dated October 13, drew special attention from the Bench as it comes in the face of a 2017 Supreme Court order authorising the Centre to set up 12 special courts to exclusively try criminal politicians. It also comes at a time when a three-judge Bench, led by Justice Ramana, is looking at ways to expedite these trials pending for years, in some cases, for decades. More than 4,400 criminal trials are pending against legislators.* Of these, more than 2,500 trials involve sitting legislators. But the Madras High Court’s Criminal Rules Committee on Special Courts for Trial of Criminal Cases against MPs/MLAs, composed of Justices P.N. Prakash, G. Jayachandran and N. Sathish Kumar, said special courts cannot be set up on the basis of judicial or executive orders.

Special courts

The committee also raised strong reservations against setting up special courts in Tamil Nadu. “The existing court structure in the State of Tamil Nadu, which is robust, is more than enough to deal with the cases involving MPs and MLAs,” it said. Countering a submission that the High Court had stayed 92 cases filed against politicians in Tamil Nadu, Mr. Kannan said 85% of these cases dealt with defamation allegations.

A-G DECLINES CONSENT FOR CONTEMPT CASE AGAINST JAGAN

Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal declined consent to initiate contempt proceedings against Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy and his Principal Adviser Ajeya Kallam. Mr. Venugopal, however, said the “timing itself” of the Chief Minister’s letter to the Chief Justice of India, containing allegations against Supreme Court judge N.V. Ramana and the subsequent public release of the document could “certainly said to be suspect”. The Attorney-General was responding to a petition filed by Supreme Court advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay for his prior



consent under the Contempt of Court Act to initiate proceedings against Mr. Reddy and Mr. Kallam. Mr. Venugopal said Mr. Reddy's letter on October 6 and its release by Mr. Kallam at a press conference held on October 10 was "suspect" because *they came "in the background of the order passed by Justice Ramana dated September 16, directing pending prosecutions of elected representatives to be taken up and disposed of expeditiously"*. In this context, the Attorney-General referred to Mr. Upadhyay's statement that Mr. Reddy had 31 criminal cases against him. "In this background, prima facie, the conduct of the said persons is contumacious," Mr. Venugopal said. He said he found the letter to contain "objectionable statements". "I have carefully gone through the contents of your petition. I find that the objectionable statements have been made in a letter dated October 6 written by the Chief Minister to the Chief Justice of India," Mr. Venugopal noted.

'CJI aware of matter'

The top law officer said Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde was already "seized of the matter". Mr. Venugopal said the letter was sent to the CJI directly and, therefore, the latter was "well aware of the nature of the allegations contained in the letter". "Hence, it would not be appropriate for me to deal with the matter," he wrote. *It was Mr. Upadhyay's PILs against the criminalisation of politics and the long-pending trials against legislators that had led the top court to order the setting up of special courts to try MPs and MLAs expeditiously*. The Bench led by Justice Ramana is presently monitoring the process. In his letter for consent to the Attorney-General, Mr. Upadhyay said Mr. Reddy's letter was a "dishonest and mischievous attempt to pressurise the judiciary". "The letter was consciously released in public domain not only to derail above stated PILs but also to intimidate judicial proceedings. Mr. Reddy is not only indulging in bench-hunting but also wants the court to stop hearing these PILs. This is not a silly mischievous deceitful act but deliberate fraudulent calculated attempts to not only undermine apex court but also to terrorise the judiciary," Mr. Upadhyay wrote.

STAR STATUS

The Supreme Court's stay on the revocation of the status of former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath as a 'star campaigner' for the Congress brings to the fore the power of the Election Commission of India and its role in ensuring a clean campaign. Chief Justice S.A. Bobde appeared convinced that the ECI has no such power, and ordered a stay on its order. *The EC revoked his name on the basis of a complaint from the BJP that Mr. Nath derogatorily referred to its candidate, Imarti Devi, as an "item" during a campaign rally at Dabra in Gwalior district*. The Commission's order dated October 30 said it was revoking his status as a leader of a political party (star campaigner). *Section 77 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which relates to a candidate's election expenditure, does leave it to the political party itself to decide who its "leaders" are and allows every party to submit a list of such 'star campaigners' to the election authorities*. However, it should be noted that the 'star campaigner' status comes with a clear privilege: *the expenditure incurred on the campaign done by those from the list of star campaigners is not included in the expenditure of the candidate concerned*. In effect, an order of the ECI revoking the star status is actually a withdrawal of the right to campaign without incurring electoral expenditure on the candidates' account.

It stands to reason that the ECI, in exercise of its general and plenary power of control and direction over elections, ought to have the power to revoke the status of a campaigner, if there is an apparent breach of campaign norms or the Model Code of Conduct. After all, the star status



ensures that some leaders can charter helicopters and travel extensively to cover more territory and constituencies without breaching any individual candidate's spending limit. The ECI has cited the clause in the MCC that bars candidates from resorting to "criticism of all aspects of the private life, not connected with the public activities" of other leaders and party workers. Even though the model code is not statutory, it has been generally recognised that the election watchdog should have some means of enforcing its norms. In past orders, the ECI has cited the Supreme Court's observation that when laws are absent, the ECI can invoke its residuary power to meet an infinite variety of situations that cannot be foreseen by lawmakers. It is indeed debatable whether the ECI has been exercising its powers in an even-handed way in recent years. However, it is equally important that the ECI's power to enforce poll norms and clean campaigns is not unduly abridged.

SC RELIEF FOR ARNAB IN PRIVILEGE CASE

The Supreme Court took suo motu cognisance and issued a contempt notice against the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Secretary for browbeating Republic TV editor-in-chief Arnab Goswami for approaching the court in connection with an alleged breach of privilege motion. The court ordered that Mr. Goswami will not be arrested in the privilege case. A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, asked the Secretary to show cause *why he should not be punished for contempt for "threatening" Mr. Goswami with a "penalty" just because the journalist had approached the top court.* In an October 13 letter, the *Assembly official accused Mr. Goswami of "knowingly" breaching the confidentiality of the privilege proceedings by moving the top court without taking the permission of the Speaker. Mr. Goswami is accused of breach of privilege for using "sharp language" against the Maharashtra Chief Minister.* It's the right of every citizen to move the Supreme Court to protect his fundamental rights, the CJI said. The court said the statements made in the Secretary's letter were "unprecedented" and had a "tendency to bring the administration of justice into disrepute and, in any case, amount to a direct interference in the administration of justice". The Bench, in its order summoning the Assembly Secretary, said "the intention of the author of the letter seems to be to intimidate the petitioner [Goswami] because he had approached this court". The court appointed senior advocate Arvind Datar as amicus curiae in the suo motu contempt proceedings.

WHAT IS THE SUICIDE CASE IN WHICH REPUBLIC TV'S ARNAB GOSWAMI HAS BEEN ARRESTED BY MAHARASHTRA POLICE?

Republic TV owner and editor-in-chief Arnab Goswami was on Wednesday arrested by Maharashtra Police in connection with a 2018 suicide case. In 2018, an architect and his mother died by suicide over alleged non-payment of dues by Goswami's Republic TV, a police official said.

What is the case?

Interior designer Anvay Naik, along with his mother Kumud Naik, were found dead at their bungalow in Alibaug in May 2018. The police said Anvay, had committed suicide, the post mortem report of Kumud indicated that she had been strangulated and did not commit suicide. Police believe Anvay killed her before committing suicide. Following that, the police registered an accidental death report and a case of murder. While Kumud's body was found on the ground floor sofa, Anvay was found hanging on the first floor by the caretaker of the bungalow.



Why was an FIR registered against Arnab Goswami?

The police had found a suicide note written in English in which Anvay said he and his mother decided to take the extreme step on account of payments due to them not being cleared by the owners of three companies – television journalist Arnab Goswami of Republic TV, Feroz Shaikh of IcastX/Skimedia and Niteish Sarda of Smartworks. The three firms owed Naik's company, Concorde Designs Pvt Ltd, Rs 83 lakh, Rs 4 crore and Rs 55 lakh respectively, the note added. An officer said that during the investigation they found that Anvay was in heavy debt and was struggling to repay money to contractors. The Raigad police also found that Naik had an NC registered against a contractor in Mumbai after the latter had threatened him to repay the money he had taken. Goswami had however denied this charge and said that he had made the payments.

What happened to the investigation in the case?

The local Raigad police that has been investigating the case closed the case in April 2019 saying that they did not find evidence against the accused named in the suicide note, including Goswami. However, in May this year, Anvay's daughter approached the Maharashtra Home Minister Anil Deshmukh seeking the case be reopened. Adnya had also alleged that the police had not investigated the angle of Rs 83 lakh that Goswami had not paid her father that drove him to commit suicide. While the Home Department had transferred the case to CID in May this year, officers outside Arnab's residence Wednesday said the very court where the Raigad police had filed a closure report had given permission to Raigad police to reopen the case now. CID officials said they have no case against Goswami.

What happens in this case?

The Maharashtra Police will now be questioning Goswami and ask him to provide evidence to back his claims that he had made the payments due to Anvay. Depending on the investigation they will decide to either close the case or chargesheet him.

Is this linked to the case being pursued by Mumbai Police?

No. This has no links to the cases Goswami faces in connection with Mumbai police. A team from Mumbai Police went to his residence on Wednesday morning to assist the Maharashtra Police.

What cases does he face in Mumbai?

Republic has been named in the TRP scam where the channel along with five others was allegedly involved in making payments for boosting TRPs. Republic has denied the accusation. An FIR has been registered against Goswami for 'incitement to disaffection' over a show in which the channel said that several officers in Mumbai police were against action of commissioner Param Bir Singh. Apart from this, two FIRs were registered against Goswami for allegedly communalising incidents like the gathering of migrants outside Bandra railway station and the lynching of Sadhus in Palghar. Following these two FIRs, chapter proceedings too had been initiated against Goswami and he was asked to sign a bond of good behaviour. Goswami had approached the Supreme Court against these FIRs and was asked to approach the Bombay High Court that is currently hearing the matter. He was also issued a show cause notice by the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly for initiation of breach of privilege motion against him for reportage related to the case of actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death. Goswami challenged this too in the Supreme Court.



POET MUNAWWAR RANA BOOKED FOR REMARKS ON FRANCE ATTACKS

The Uttar Pradesh police have booked Urdu poet Munawwar Rana for allegedly justifying the recent killings in France over caricatures of Prophet Muhammed. In an interview to a Hindi channel last week, Mr. Rana condemned the person who drew the caricatures of the Prophet, but said in the same breath that the persons who committed the murders had done even more deplorable acts. Mr. Rana said if someone had drawn a cartoon of his parents or even of Hindu gods and goddesses, he would have done the same. A case was lodged against Mr. Rana at the Hazratganj police station on the complaint of a sub-inspector. The FIR accuses Mr. Rana of justifying the murders and spreading communal discord, which could threaten social harmony and law and order. He was booked under various charges, including promoting enmity between groups and outraging religious feelings with deliberate intent.

'Stand by statement'

Talking to a news agency on Monday, Mr. Rana said he stood by his statement. "I stand by my statement. Na dal badlu hoon, na byan badlu hoon [Neither do I change sides, nor do I change my statements]," he said. He said his remarks were taken out of context and that he only meant to provide the perspective for acts committed in the name of religious fanaticism.

UNCIVIL PROPOSAL

The astounding proposal by Uttar Pradesh and Haryana to enact a law to curb what they call 'love jihad' reeks of *a vicious mix of patriarchy and communalism*. Propounded by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the detestable idea amounts to legitimising a term that constitutes a blatant slur against inter-faith marriages and relationships in which one of the parties is a Muslim man. The ostensible reason for bringing in such a law seems to be that the "honour" of Hindu women is under threat from zealous Muslim youth seeking to win over girls from other communities for religious conversion in the name of love and marriage. The flaws in the concept are quite obvious: *there is no legal sanction to self-serving and political terms such as 'love jihad' and there can be no legislation based on an extra-legal concept*. In any case, *legislative intervention in marriages involving consenting adults will be clearly unconstitutional*. The domain of matrimony is occupied by separate laws governing weddings that take place under religious traditions, as well as the Special Marriage Act, which enables a secular marriage, including between couples from different faiths.

Mr. Adityanath, who has also threatened those allegedly operating in secret by concealing their identities, and his Haryana counterpart, Manohar Lal, seem to be making the same mistakes: using the term 'love jihad' in a communal sense and speaking about marriages as if they were not a matter of personal choice. They would do well to remember that earlier this year, *the Union Home Ministry made it clear that the term is not defined in law, while replying to a parliamentary question*. Investigation into marriages that purportedly raised such a suspicion also failed to find any substance in the allegations. *The immediate context for these leaders to go out on a limb about curbing inter-faith marriages is a recent Allahabad High Court judgment that frowned upon religious conversion solely for the purpose of marriage; and the horrible murder of a 20-year-old woman in Faridabad by a stalker who happened to be a Muslim*. By no stretch of imagination can the murder be used to denounce consensual inter-faith relationships. Regarding the court verdict, the High Court had declined to intervene on a writ petition seeking police protection for a recently



married couple, noting that the bride had converted from Islam to Hinduism solely for the purpose of marriage. It had found such an expedient conversion unacceptable, *citing a similar 2014 verdict in which the court had questioned the bonafides of conversions without change of heart or any conviction in the tenets of the new religion. Although the court strayed from the issue at hand, its objective was to underscore that conversion should not become a device.* It is indeed salutary as a principle that inter-faith couples retain their religious beliefs separately and opt for marriage under the Special Marriage Act. However, *this principle cannot be used to derogate from personal choice or become a ruse to interfere in the individual freedom to forge matrimonial alliances.*

YASHVARDHAN LIKELY TO BE NEXT CIC

Former diplomat and Central Information Commissioner Yashvardhan Kumar Sinha is tipped to be appointed the next Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), two months after the position fell vacant, sources said. The decision was taken after an October 24 meeting of *the high-powered selection panel headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, Congress Leader in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, who is a member of the panel, is learnt to have submitted a dissent note.* The Opposition leader objected to the manner in which the short-listing process was carried out, alleging a failure to follow the Supreme Court's transparency guidelines, issued in a February 2019 case brought by Right to Information (RTI) activist Anjali Bhardwaj. *Mr. Chowdhury also objected to the fact that journalist Uday Mahurkar had been short-listed for a commissioner position, though he had not been on the list of applicants.* Mr. Sinha is a retired Indian Foreign Service officer and had served as India's High Commissioner to the U.K. and Sri Lanka. He was appointed a member of the Central Information Commission in January 2019. *The commission consists of a chief and up to 10 commissioners.* It has been headless twice this year, due to a two-month delay in appointing the last chief, Bimal Julka, and another two-month period since he retired in August-end. *It has not functioned at full strength for almost four years, and currently has only five commissioners, leading to a backlog of 37,000 pending cases.* When the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) issued advertisements for vacancies in July, it received 139 applications for the CIC position and 355 applications for the Information Commissioner posts. *The three-member selection committee, including the Prime Minister, Mr. Chowdhury and Home Minister Amit Shah, met twice, on October 7 and 24.* Minister of State Jitendra Singh was also present, according to sources. They considered Mr. Sinha and his fellow commissioner and former Secretary to the Finance Ministry, Neeraj Kumar Gupta, for the CIC position. *They considered seven candidates for the remaining vacancies, including Mr. Mahurkar, who authored a book on Mr. Modi's governance model in 2017.* According to sources, he was not on the list of 355 applicants, and was short-listed to satisfy the Supreme Court's directive to consider a broad field of expertise. Sources said the other short-listed candidates are all from a bureaucratic background, including former Defence Production Secretary Subhash Chandra, former Labour Secretary Heeralal Samariya, former MSME (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) Secretary Arun Kumar Panda, retired All India Radio News Director-General Ira Joshi, Deputy Comptroller and Auditor-General (DCAG) Meenakshi Gupta and former DCAG Saroj Punhani. It is not known how many vacancies are being filled. *In a February 2019 order, the top court ruled that long delays in clearing appeals frustrated citizens' rights, and directed that appointments be made in a "transparent and timely" manner. The government was directed to put up "all necessary information" on its website, including particulars of the applicants and the composition of the search committee which shortlists candidates. However, the DoPT has not made this information public.*



WHY BJP IS CASHING IN ON THE MANUSMRITI CONTROVERSY IN TAMIL NADU

The BJP, which was short of issues before the Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections in 2021, is getting some help with the Manusmriti flaring up in the state. *In his speech delivered at a small online event titled 'Periyar and Indian Politics', Dalit leader and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) chief Thirumavalavan quoting from the Manusmriti said: "What does Sanatana Hindu Dharma say about women? Women are basically created by God as prostitutes. All women are prostitutes, as per Hindu dharma... Manu dharma."* The objection is to the use of the word "prostitute," which many argue is an interpretation of the speaker from an ancient text, or possibly from one of the many published translations of Manusmriti. Soon, BJP leader Khushbu Sundar sought an apology from the leader. After A Ashwathaman, the state secretary of BJP legal cell filed a complaint, the Chennai city police booked Thirumavalavan under Sections 153, 153 (A)(1)(a), 295 A, 298, 505 (1)(b) and 505 (2) of the IPC.

How have Thirumavalavan and the main opposition led by DMK reacted?

Thirumavalavan clarified that his words were being misinterpreted and distorted to portray him as a leader against the interest of women. The VCK chief said his party was fighting for women empowerment and the misinformation campaign was to create a flutter within the DMK-led alliance ahead of the polls. Also, VCK had called for a ban of Manusmriti in India and organised protests, he reminded. Ally DMK, however, was more measured in its reaction. Party chief M K Stalin did not touch on Manusmriti but demanded the withdrawal of "false cases" charged against Thirumavalavan. He said the police should have booked religious fanatics and bigots who misinterpreted and distorted, not Thirumavalavan. Other opposition allies, MDMK leader Vaiko and the CPI(M) too urged Chennai police to withdraw the case against Thirumavalavan and asserted that the leader was quoting from the ancient text and that it has several aspects that demean women and weaker sections in the society.

Why is BJP interested in the topic?

Unlike in Kerala where the BJP gets to attack both the ruling CPI(M) and opposition Congress, BJP Tamil Nadu unit has a limited canvas to take up issues as they rule at the Centre while ally AIADMK has been in power in the state for almost a decade. In such a scenario, the Manusmriti controversy has been a successful political move in mainstream Tamil politics. A senior BJP leader said they see a chance of consolidating Hindu votes in Tamil Nadu. Thirumavalavan's problematic speech has presented a golden opportunity. Moreover, the controversy has emerged ahead of a statewide campaign by the BJP to consolidate Hindu votes through a campaign titled "Vetri Vel," scheduled to start from November 6. Modelled on Rath Yatras, with a formal permission from the state government, the campaign would be covering the six major temples of Lord Muruga in the state including Palani, Swamimalai and Pazhamudircholai. The Vetri Vel yatra, BJP leadership expects, will help to consolidate Hindu votes.

Who gains from the Manusmriti controversy?

Khushbu Sundar, the actor-turned-politician who recently joined BJP from the Congress, has used the row to make a quick and very visible entry into the saffron. She was taken into custody by police on Tuesday while on her way to Chidambaram to organise a protest against Thirumavalavan. *For the Dravidian party DMK and its allies including the Dalits, Left and Tamil nationalist parties, who are largely known for their atheist, anti-Brahminic, anti-Hindi positions in*



electoral politics, the Manusmriti controversy is not an easy to handle before the state elections. While the BJP has been consistently trying to blow it up to the proportions of the Sabarimala issue in Kerala, the DMK has been cautious in its reactions. *The row has also helped the BJP divert attention from a more crucial issue, the alleged delay on part of the state Governor in giving assent to a Bill ensuring 7.5 per cent reservation in medical admissions for government school students who cleared NEET.* The Bill was unanimously passed by all political parties in the Assembly but is held up by the Governor. The opposition as well as the state government had been following up on the status of the Bill. "Thirumavalavan could have apologised for using the word prostitute. We didn't make it a controversy, it was their false pride and anti-religious sentiments that made this a controversy. We will continue our protests to expose their anti-Hindu stand," a BJP said, suggesting the opposition had played into their hands with this new controversy.

STATES CANNOT MAKE ISOLATED PLANS FOR VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

The Health Ministry said it has asked the State governments to refrain from making isolated plans for vaccine distribution. At a press conference on Tuesday, Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said the States had been asked to work with the Central government, which has set up an expert committee on vaccine administration, and to adhere to the directions from the Centre. He said they had been advised to create a database according to the blueprint issued by the Central government and also take stock of the storage and transport facility for the distribution. "States/UTs have been also asked to set up committees under Chief Secretaries for administration to ensure time-bound implementation of the Central government direction," he said. The Ministry noted that the expert committee, besides using the infrastructure of the immunisation programme, is also looking at the infrastructure and manpower support that the private players can offer.

WHY MAHARASHTRA MINISTERS WORE BLACK BANDS ON SUNDAY

The Maharashtra government led by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has taken a first of its kind step which has "energised" Marathi speaking people living in border areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka. It has asked all its ministers to wear black bands on November 1 to support the Marathi-speaking people living in border areas of Karnataka and Maharashtra. The state government's open support by way of ministers wearing black bands has drawn praise from Marathi-speaking people in the border areas and flak from Action Committee of Kannadiga Organisation. Activists of Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti, which has been spearheading the agitation of Marathi-speaking people for decades, say while the Maharashtra governments earlier gave muted support by merely passing resolution in state assembly expressing support, this time it will be actually participating in the protests.

Why November 1?

On November 1, 1960, Karnataka state came into being. While Kannadigas celebrate the state's formation day as Rajyotsav, Marathi-speaking people stage protests seeking "freedom from Karnataka." Since November 1, 1956, Marathi-speaking people living in Maharashtra-Karnataka border areas have been observing the day as Black Day. "It was in January 1956, after the report of the Reorganisation of States Commission, that it was decided to merge Belgaum and 10 talukas of Bombay Presidency into the then Mysore state. Later, these talukas became part of Karnataka," recalled Prof Anand Menase. Therefore every November 1, rallies are carried out and protests are



organised in these 10 talukas by Marathi-speaking people. People wear black bands on their arms and place black flags on their vehicles. *To counter the Marathi-speaking people's protests, Karnataka government machinery organises "rallies with gusto" to celebrate the state's formation day on November 1. The Karnataka government has also changed the name of Belgaum to Belgavi, though the Maharashtra government still prefers to call it Belgaum.*

Grievances against Karnataka

Besides demanding a merger with Maharashtra, people living in Marathi-speaking have been protesting against the "injustice" and "atrocities" meted out to them. They alleged that Karnataka government was imposing Kannada on them. The Marathi-speaking people allege that it has been made mandatory for shopkeepers, business establishments and offices to put up their in signboards in Kannad language. In schools, it has been made mandatory to learn Kannada from Class 1 to 10. Industrial units have been directed to give priority in jobs to Kannadigas. In governments too, Kannadigas are given priority. Court functioning is conducted in Kannada language, all government resolutions and circulars are issued in Kannada language. "Until the last year even voters lists were in Kannad language. After our protests, the list was prepared in both Marathi and Kannada," said Nemse.

Why are they seeking merger with Maharashtra?

The Marathi-speaking people here argue that the Reorganisation of States Commission had erred in including some border talukas into Karnataka. As per the commission's recommendation, talukas with more than 50 per cent Kannadiga population were merged with Mysore state. This was not acceptable to the Marathi-speaking people who argue that there are as of today 25 lakh Marathi-speaking living in border areas of Karnataka who are subjected to injustice and had outnumbered Kannadigas even in 1956.

Case Pending in Supreme Court

The Action Committee of Kannidigas has protested against the Maharashtra Government's decision to observe November 1 as Black Day. The committee has said that when the Maharashtra government has moved the Supreme Court and the boundary dispute was pending in court, the move was a contempt of the court. The committee has described the move as unnecessary and provocative. *The Maharashtra government had moved the Supreme Court in 2004 for a settlement of the border dispute under Article 131(b) of the Constitution.* The case is pending in the apex court. In fact, Maharashtra has been seeking readjustment of the border since the States Reorganisation Act came into being in 1957. Maharashtra has been demanding 814 villages from Karnataka on the basis of the theory of village being the unit of calculation, contiguity and enumerating linguistic population in each village. Karnataka has been maintaining that it will not transfer even an inch of land and said that the settlement under States Reorganisation Act was final and not open to any negotiation.

WHAT IS JHARKHAND'S PRE-MATRIC SCHOLARSHIP SCAM?

An investigation by The Indian Express has revealed that bank staff, middlemen, school and government employees have allegedly colluded to siphon off money meant for poor students under a Centrally funded scholarship scheme in Jharkhand.



What is this pre-matric scholarship scam?

The Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme is meant to help students of minority communities: Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains and Buddhists from families with annual income below Rs 1 lakh. To be eligible, students need to score at least 50 per cent in their class exams. The scholarship is given in two tiers every year: students in class 1 to 5 receive Rs 1,000 per year and students of class 6 to 10 receive Rs 10,700 if a hosteller or Rs 5,700 if a day scholar. However, middlemen, school-owners, banking correspondents and government officials in connivance with each other siphon most of the scholarship money. Although the amount is small, the scale of it is what matters.

What is the process of applying for the scholarship and when is the money credited into the account?

Eligible students need to register at the National Scholarship Portal (NSP) and submit educational documents, bank account details and Aadhaar number among other documents. The scheme for minorities is open every year from August to November i.e., it has to be applied every year—this year the window is open till November 30. The scheme is online only and one can apply for a fresh or renewal scholarship on the NSP or through a mobile application of NSP. The disbursement of the scholarship happens once a year, usually in April or May. One can track the payments through Public Finance Management System software online through their bank account number or application ID. Since most of the students are unaware of the process, the school fills up their application—and in some cases middlemen.

What is the National Scholarship Portal?

NSP is a “one-stop” solution through which various services, starting from student application, application receipt, verification, processing, and disbursement of various scholarships to students are facilitated. The website defines: “National Scholarship Portal is taken as Mission Mode Project (MMP) under Digital India. This initiative aims at providing a Simplified, Mission-oriented, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent ‘SMART’ System for faster and effective disbursement of Scholarship to eligible applicants directly into their account through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) without any leakages.”

Has the Direct Benefit Transfer been derailed?

In this case, yes. Middlemen, in connivance with bank staff, open accounts of students and the Aadhaar-enabled transaction is done through their fingerprints. But the students don't even come to know about the actual amount they received in their accounts. They are just handed over a fraction of the sum in cash. Development Economist Jean Dreze says: “This scam is yet another illustration of the vulnerabilities of the Aadhaar-enabled payment system. Poor people are regularly robbed of their wages, pensions and scholarships by corrupt business correspondents who take their fingerprint on one pretext or another. We have been trying for years to alert the Reserve Bank of India, the National Payments Corporation of India and others to these vulnerabilities but they seem to prefer not to know.”

Aren't there any steps for verification?

Yes, there are several steps to verify eligible beneficiaries. In order to enable a student to apply for the scholarship, the institute/school will have to appoint a Nodal Officer and that Nodal Officer should register herself/himself on the NSP portal. The application must be verified at school/institute level and then at domicile district or domicile state level. The Ministry of Minority



Affairs will release the scholarship amount only if the application is verified and approved by all verification authorities. In case, the application is rejected by any of the concerned authorities due to any reason, the applying students will not get the scholarship.

Is the money siphoned from students only?

No. There are fake students, older people who too receive the amount. The narrative is that the money is coming from Saudi Arabia. The deal is to give half the money to the middlemen.

How much money is disbursed by the Minority Affairs Ministry to Jharkhand?

In 2019-20, the Ministry of Minority Affairs said that it disbursed Rs 61 crore to Jharkhand under the pre-matric scholarship scheme. Around 203,628 'students' applied and 84,133 'students' got the scholarship, as per the Ministry's data. In 2018-19: Jharkhand received Rs 34.61 crore and 166,423 students applied, only 50,466 students got the scholarship. In India, for the academic year 2019-20, Rs 1423.89 crore was disbursed for Pre-Matric Scholarship.

JHARKHAND WITHDRAWS CONSENT TO CBI

The Hemant Soren government withdrew the general consent accorded to Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to carry out investigation in the State. The revocation of power means CBI cannot conduct any investigation in the State without prior approval. "In exercise of powers conferred by Section 6 of the Special Police Establishment Act 1946 (25 of 1946), the Government of Jharkhand hereby withdraws the consent accorded to the members of Delhi Special Police Establishment as also by any other instruments issued by the Government of Jharkhand, from time to time, to exercise the powers and jurisdiction under the said Act in Jharkhand," a Home, Prison and Disaster Management Department order says. *The powers vested on CBI were accorded by the then Bihar government in February 1996.*

WHO IS A 'STREET VENDOR' IN INDIA, AND WHAT IS THE STREET VENDORS ACT?

On October 27, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, through video conferencing, distributed loans to nearly 300,000 street vendors under the *Pradhan Mantri Street Vendors' Atmanirbhar Nidhi Yojana, and also interacted with its beneficiaries.* The **PM SVANidhi scheme**, funded by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, was launched in June, with an aim to provide credit for working capital to street vendors who have been affected due to the Covid-19 crisis. The scheme is already a hit; so far 25 lakh street vendors have come forward seeking the loan. The next stage being contemplated is to make *a first-of-its-kind database of the beneficiaries* of this scheme to see who they are, and where they belong vis-à-vis the government's social security net woven through various welfare schemes on education, housing, food, livelihood et al. *PM SVANidhi ensures a working capital loan up to Rs 10,000 for vendors, and rewards digital transactions. All street vendors who have been in the business on or before March 24, 2020, are eligible to avail the benefits. For this scheme launched in the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the Centre has earmarked a stimulus package of ₹5,000 crore for nearly 50 lakh vendors.*

How will the study be done?

Banks, as part of its common processes, are anyway collecting data about street vendors who are beneficiaries of the project. While the nuts and bolts of the methodology is still being worked out,



officials said that *such data already captured by banks and municipal bodies* will be leveraged to create a profiling of the vendors. Then, committees will be formed at the level of district administration to reach out to street vendors in their respective areas. Thereafter, government departments, like Health, Education and Skills Development, running various welfare schemes, will be asked to nominate their nodal officers in each city to complete the exercise. Based on the profiling, a street vendor and anyone in his or her family will be gauged in terms of eligibility for various government schemes. Based on eligibility, they will be given access to such welfare schemes. Informally in bureaucratic parlance it is called *“saturating” the beneficiaries with all relevant welfare schemes.*

Will this actually work towards poverty alleviation?

Becoming formal beneficiaries of various government schemes works as a big step towards entering the policy intervention network. Officials say *it also helps in financial mainstreaming in the long run.* For example, several banks, bereft of the prior experience of extending loans as little as ₹10,000 to someone like a street vendor, are following processes like checking CIBIL score of the street vendor and seeking PAN card and IT-return etc. While these cases are dealt with as hurdles on the ground, it is a fact that street vendors hardly have credit-worthiness in the eyes of India’s formal banking system. Therefore, *the PMSVANidhi is incentivising digital transactions by street vendors. They will soon be given QR codes to receive payments through the government’s BHIM UPI app. They are given cash-back for digital transactions too. The idea is that with a trail of digital transactions against their names, they will create a formal transaction history in banks and will slowly build their creditworthiness for the future.*

Street vendors in India

There are an estimated 50-60 lakh street vendors in India, with the largest concentrations in the cities of *Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad.* Most of them are migrants who typically work for 10–12 hours every day on average. Anyone who doesn’t have a permanent shop is considered a street vendor. *According to government estimates, street-vending accounts for 14 per cent of the total (non-agricultural) urban informal employment in the country.* The sector is riddled with problems. *Licence caps are unrealistic in most cities — Mumbai for example, has a ceiling of around 15,000 licences as against an estimated 2.5 lakh vendors.* This means most vendors hawk their goods illegally, which *makes them vulnerable to exploitation and extortion by local police and municipal authorities.* Often, local bodies conduct eviction drives to clear the pavements of encroachers, and confiscate their goods. Fines for recovery are heavy. *Over the years, street vendors have organised themselves into trade unions and associations, and numerous NGOs have started working for them.* The National Hawker Federation (NHF) is a federation of 1,400 street vendor organisations and trade unions that has a presence in 28 states. The National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), which pushed to get the landmark Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014 through Parliament, is working to provide hygiene and social distancing training to cooked food vendors in the wake of the pandemic.

The Street Vendors Act

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 was enacted to regulate street vendors in public areas and protect their rights. It was introduced in Lok Sabha on September 6, 2012 by then Union Minister of Housing and Urban Poverty



Alleviation, Kumari Selja. The Act defines a “street vendor” as a person engaged in vending of articles... of everyday use or offering services to the general public, in...any public place or private area, from a temporary built up structure or by moving from place to place”. The Act envisages the formation of Town Vending Committees in various districts to ensure that all street vendors identified by the government are accommodated in the vending zones subject to norms. The implementation of the Act has been patchy. According to NASVI, barring in a few districts in Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, town vending committees haven’t been formed, and street vendors continue to have to fend for themselves.

THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT FUND THAT IS CAUSING BAD BLOOD BETWEEN PUNJAB AND THE CENTRE

The Union government’s decision to withhold rural development fee from Punjab, and letters asking the Punjab Government to explain its utilisation of the Rural Development Fund (RDF) that it gets largely from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) has enraged the state government. Punjab Minister for Food Supplies claims the Centre is hitting back at the state for its opposition to the new farm laws. But what exactly is this fund? Read on:

What is Rural Development Fund or RDF?

RDF is the 3 per cent cess levied on the purchase or sale of agricultural produce under the Rural Development Fund Act, 1987 which is executed by Punjab Rural Development Board (PRDB) with the Chief Minister as its chairman.

What is Rural Development Board (RDB)?

The RDB was incorporated in April 1987 under Rural Development Act, 1987 and is mandated with the promotion of better agriculture, and granting relief for the loss and damage to agricultural produce. It also provides the facility of streets lights, dharamshalas, panchayat ghars, canals and drains, government health infrastructure, drinking water, sanitation, and government educational institutions in rural areas.

From where does Punjab get this fund and what is it used for?

It comes mainly from central government’s purchase agency, Food Corporation of India, which buys around 13 million tonnes of wheat and 16 million tonnes of paddy every year. Usually Punjab gets Rs 1,750 crore every year — Rs 1,000 crore as 3 per cent RDF for procuring paddy and the rest for wheat. This year, some estimates had put the total at Rs 1,850 crore. This fund is supposed to be used for the creation and maintenance of rural infrastructure in and outside mandis. But there have been charges in the past that it was diverted by the state for other purposes.

Why has the central government suspended this fund?

The central government, in a letter from the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, has observed that the fund is being diverted, and has asked the state government to explain how it is utilising this money. It has also not made any provision for this fund in the cost sheet that it has sent to the state.



Why is the Punjab government fuming?

The Punjab government was to give the earnings from RDF to pay interest on a loan of Rs 4,500 crore it has taken from various banks to pay for debt waiver to farmers. If this fund is not received by the state, it will have to dip into its depleting coffers to pay for this interest. The state government is now claiming that it is being penalised for the protests against the farm laws that are raging in the state.

BEHIND SUSPENSION OF GOODS TRAINS IN PUNJAB, FARM PROTESTS — AND POLITICS

Amid the continued suspension of goods trains to Punjab, the ruling Congress party in state and the opposition BJP has remained engaged in a verbal spat over the issue, even as Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh pointed out that no movement of freight trains can have a dangerous consequence on national security, including depriving the armed forces in Ladakh and Kashmir of critical supplies ahead of winter. The CM has also been citing how the thermal plants are running out of coal stock and the farmers being deprived of fertilizers ahead of the rabi sowing season. The protesting farmers, meanwhile, claim that they have cleared most of the tracks. We explain the controversy.

When did Railways stop running freight trains to Punjab and why?

The Railways have not run any freight trains to Punjab since October 24. Railway divisions at Ferozepur and Ambala, which operate trains in Punjab, have not received any directions on resumption of service. The farmers agitating against the three central farm laws had earlier organised rail roko protests at more than 33 locations in Punjab. On October 21, they announced to clear all tracks for freight trains. Railways operated 173 goods trains on October 22 and 23 in Punjab. However, according to Rajesh Aggarwal, divisional railway manager (DRM), Ferozepur division, farmers had stopped an empty rake of passenger train, which was being run for maintenance purpose at Romana Albela. He claimed that some goods trains were stopped at several locations on October 22. Subsequently, the Railways issued directions to stop movement of goods trains to Punjab from October 24 onwards. The DRM had said that Railways cannot run trains in uncertainty and want farmers to clear all tracks for smooth operations. On October 30, Sukhwinder Singh, additional DRM, Ferozepur division said, "We have got no orders for running the trains. Status quo is being maintained."

How is industry affected due to suspension of goods trains?

Different industrial organizations, in a written representation to the Punjab government, have stated that industry has suffered more than Rs 1500 crore in losses since October 1 as import and export of goods have been affected.

How are farmers affected due to the suspension of train movement?

The suspension of freight trains has led to an acute shortage of fertilisers, with the state authorities saying Rabi crop sowing is likely to be affected. Farmers require urea, and DAP (diammonium phosphate) for sowing wheat and other vegetable crops such as potato. Punjab gets urea supplies through trains from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and other states. Wheat is expected to be cultivated in about 35 lakh hectare area in the state during the rabi season. Of this wheat has already been sown in 30 per cent area.



Why did farmers' start a rail roko protest in Punjab?

The rail roko protest was planned by 30 farmer unions of Punjab as part of protests against the central farm laws. Kisan Mazdoor Sangrash Committee (KMSC) and Bharti Kisan Union (Ugrahan) had first started rail blockade from September 24 at 11 locations – Ferozepur, Amritsar, Sangrur, Mansa, Patiala, Barnala, Fazilka, Muktsar, Moga, Faridkot and Patiala – due to which all the passenger trains were cancelled while goods trains continued to run during night hours from select locations. From September 27-30, this blockade was reduced to only two locations – at Basti Tenka Wali in Ferozepur and Devidaspura in Amritsar by KMSC. However from October 1 onwards, all the 30 farmer unions started indefinite rail blockade at 33 locations after which all train services were put on hold. As part of protest, farmers sat on railway tracks and platforms.

When did farmers lift the dharna from railway tracks for freight trains?

It was done in phases. BKU (Ugrahan) lifted dharnas from Dablan in Patiala, Budhlada in Mansa and Chhajali in Sangrur from October 13 onwards. However dharnas at the other 30 locations continued. October 21 onwards, unions lifted dharnas from the remaining 30 locations. However, the dharnas were lifted only for the movement of freight trains as farmers said that they will not allow movement of passenger trains. Hence, farmers continued to sit on the platforms at more than 20 stations in small gatherings, Jagmohan Singh, working committee member of All India Kisan Sangrash Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) said. Moreover, farmers, under the banner of KMSC, after lifting dharnas from all rail tracks, started a fresh dharna at Jandiala Guru local railway line in Amritsar from October 22 onwards. In addition to this, they also sat on the internal coal supply lines of private thermal plants at Talwandi Sabo and Rajpura thermal plants so as not to allow any coal supplies to private power plants.

What is the current scenario?

Farmer unions across the nation will be holding chakka jam protest on national as well as state highways on November 5 for four hours to lodge their protest against farm laws and also to protest against suspension of goods trains by Centre in Punjab, said VM Singh, national convener, AIKSCC.

WHAT ARE THE THREE FARM BILLS INTRODUCED BY RAJASTHAN, WHAT THEY SEEK TO ACHIEVE

The Rajasthan Assembly tabled three Bills to negate the impact of Centre's new farm laws cleared by the Parliament in September. Parliamentary Affairs minister Shanti Kumar Dhariwal introduced The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) (Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services (Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020, and The Essential Commodities (Special Provisions and Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020. *The three Bills introduced in Rajasthan are similar to the amendment Bills passed by Punjab*, another Congress ruled state, on October 20. The Bills are expected to be taken up for discussion, and passed, when the Assembly re-convenes on Monday.



What are the key features of the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) (Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020?

The Bill, which relates to the Centre's Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, *seeks to penalise traders, if they harass farmers, with a punishment of 3-7 years or a minimum fine of ₹5 lakh, or both.* As per the Bill, *harassment will be treated as committed when the trader does not accept the delivery of the farm produce agreed upon or, having accepted the delivery, does not make the payment to the farmer in accordance with the terms of the agreement or within three days from the date of receipt of delivery of goods, whichever is earlier.* The Central law prohibited imposition of any "market fee or cess or levy" on any farmer or trader or electronic trading in a farmers' produce trade area. *The Rajasthan Bill allows the state to impose a fee/cess, etc on agricultural produce brought or bought or sold "by a corporate or trader" and then credit it back to farmers, through various means, for their welfare.* It also states that *a dispute may be resolved through the State APMC Act* rather than through a sub-divisional Magistrate, as given in the Central Act.

What are the key features of the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services (Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020?

This Bill, which deals with the Centre's Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, has a key clause stating that *"no Farming Agreement for the sale or purchase of a crop shall be valid unless the price paid for such agricultural produce is equal to, or greater than, the prevailing MSPs, announced by the Central Government for that crop"*. The Central Act states that following a farming agreement, the said agriculture produce is exempt from any state act. The Rajasthan government, however, seeks to impose a fee or cess to the produce under APMC Act and utilise it for the welfare of farmers. Crucially, the burden of the fee or cess "shall not be transferred on the farmer," states the Bill.

What are the key features of the Essential Commodities (Special Provisions and Rajasthan Amendment) Bill, 2020?

The Bill, which mainly deals with Centre's Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, empowers the state "to order for regulating or prohibiting the production, supply, distribution, imposing stock limits under extraordinary circumstances, which may include famine, price rise, natural calamity or any other situation". *It essentially seeks to protect consumers from hoarding and black-marketing of agricultural produce, including vegetables, fruits, etc.*

Will the Bills become an Act?

The introduction of the Bills come in the backdrop of fierce protests by farmers, especially in Punjab and Haryana, after the Central government passed the legislations hurriedly in the Parliament. The President gave his assent to Centre's three farm Bills in September, even as Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), one of the oldest allies of the BJP and a founding member of the NDA, parted ways with the BJP. As the issue became increasingly political, Congress president Sonia Gandhi directed party-ruled states to explore the possibility of passing Bills to "bypass" and "negate" provisions of the contentious farm laws, with the party high command circulating a draft a Bill to the states. *Article 254(2) of the Constitution allows a state to make changes to central legislation on a subject on the concurrent list only if it gets Presidential assent.* While the party does



not expect President Ram Nath Kovind to clear any move to circumvent the new farm laws, its leadership believes it would be “a strong political statement”.

HOW APMC MARKETS WENT FROM BEING A SOLUTION TO A PROBLEM (GOVERNMENT ARGUMENT)

In the context of the ongoing farmer protests in some parts of the country, Ramesh Chand, a member of Niti Aayog, explains the reason why the government had to introduce changes. “The debate on the Farmers’ Produce Trading and Commerce Act 2020 (FPTC Act) has seen some misinformation and qualms among stakeholders, especially farmers in some states,” he states. *From the 1960s, there have been concerted efforts to bring all wholesale markets for agricultural produce in various states under the Agriculture Produce Market Regulation (APMC) acts. All states, except Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur, enacted such laws. The APMC Acts mandated that the sale/purchase of agricultural commodities is carried out in a specified market area, and producer-sellers or traders pay the requisite market fee, user charges, levies and commissions for the commission agents (arhatias). These charges were levied irrespective of whether the sale took place inside APMC premises or outside it and the charges varied widely across states and commodities. In the initial years, APMC acts helped remove malpractices and freed the farmers from the exploitative power of middlemen and mercantile capital. The golden period for APMC markets lasted till around 1991. With time, there was a palpable loss in growth in market facilities and by 2006, it had declined to less than one-fourth of the growth in crop output after which there was no further growth. This increased the woes of Indian farmers as market facilities did not keep pace with the increase in output and regulation did not allow farmers to sell outside APMC markets. The farmers were left with no choice but to seek the help of middlemen. Due to poor market infrastructure, more produce is sold outside markets than in APMC mandis. The net result was a system of interlocked transactions that robs farmers of their choice to decide to whom and where to sell, subjecting them to exploitation by middlemen. Over time, APMC markets have been turned from infrastructure services to a source of revenue generation. In several states, commission charges were increased without any improvement in the services. And to avoid any protests from farmers against these high charges, most of these were required to be paid by buyers like the FCI. In Haryana and Punjab, mandi fees and rural development charges for wheat and non-basmati rice purchased by FCI are four to six times the charges for basmati rice purchased by private players. This not only results in a heavy burden on the Centre but also increases the logistics cost for domestic produce and reduces trade competitiveness.* “These drawbacks were recognised by experts and stakeholders and pressure started mounting for changes in market regulations. Successive governments at the Centre made repeated attempts to persuade the states to make appropriate changes in their APMC acts. But for 18 long years, the progress in reforms remained slow. The only choice for the Union government was either to ignore its responsibility towards farmers or use the constitutional route to address long-pending issues of market reforms,” states Chand. The FPTC Act gives farmers the freedom to sell and buy farm produce at any place in the country — in APMC markets or outside the mandated area — to any trader, like sale of milk. The Act also allows transactions on electronic platforms to promote e-commerce in agriculture trade.



HELPING DYSLEXIC CHILDREN BLOOM (CHETANA SACHIDANANDAN - SCIENTIST AT CSIR-INSTITUTE OF GENOMICS AND INTEGRATIVE BIOLOGY, NEW DELHI AND MOTHER OF A DYSLEXIC CHILD)

Mumtaz does not like reading. At nine she can manage basic stories, but reading leaves her tired and irritable. Movies and television dramas fascinate her, but even the lure of a well-written story cannot coax her into reading. She does not do storytelling either. The story would unfold with the beginning, middle and end all jumbled up. Then there are the funny words: hopsital (for hospital), strachedy (for strategy). But she was a happy, chirpy kid, always the life of a party, loved by all. Things began to change as she entered school. Her mother was the first to notice. For an otherwise multilingual chatterbox, she appeared to lack an intuitive understanding of phonics or basic arithmetic. Her vocabulary was lagging, her comprehension lacking. Her father could somehow relate to her better. A successful financial analyst, he still avoids books. He vividly remembers struggling through school, labelled 'lazy' by his teachers. His daughter perhaps took after him, but she will figure it out, just like he did. But six months of internal struggle and the undeniable social withdrawal of their bright and happy child drove them to finally approach a child psychologist. The psychologist conducted a cognitive assessment and finally delivered the verdict.

Struggling to keep it all together

Mumtaz has a specific learning disorder or SLD, in her case, dyslexia. This is a condition that makes it difficult to read and write, often accompanied by difficulties in math. Reading requires (1) decoding or converting symbols into sounds and (2) comprehension or understanding the meaning of words. Dyslexics may have difficulty in either or both. Dyslexics have poor phonological awareness, the ability to recognise similarities and differences in sounds, for example in rhyming words. They may have trouble sequencing; for instance remembering sequences such as days of the week, syllables in a word (hence hopsital), steps in a long division, or the order of events in a story. They may also have a weak working memory such as difficulty in listening to the teacher while taking notes or following their mother's multi-step instructions. Working memory is like the RAM of a computer, where you temporarily store bits of information to be retrieved for daily activities. Children with dyslexia may look like they are not paying attention, but in reality they are struggling to keep it all together. *Dyslexia is a very diverse condition: Mumtaz is one example while young Ishaan in the movie Taare Zameen Par is another, with different combinations of deficits.* For most of our existence we Homo sapiens have communicated verbally. When books were first written, only the scholars needed to read them. As modern societies began embracing universal school-based standardised education, instead of the usual apprenticeship for vocational training, we stumbled upon dyslexia.

Differences in the brain

Dyslexia often runs in the family. Comparisons of genomes of dyslexic people with proficient readers have found changes in many genes that could be associated with dyslexia. These studies are opening new windows into our understanding of how the brain learns. The brain is, however, too complex for us to yet be able to figure out whether these genes have any direct role in reading deficits. In humans, the area known as visual word form area (VWFA — that recognises written words) in the brain is connected to the language region even before children have learned to read. This must be one of those evolutionary inventions that set us up to be linguists and decoders meant for greater things. Comparisons of functional MRI (fMRI) scans of brains of skilled and



dyslexic readers clearly show differences in regions related to reading and language processing. But they also show many other differences. Differences in our brain are what make us sociable, moody, imaginative or creative. Thus, these differences in the brains of dyslexics manifest in the way they look at the world, think about and solve problems. *Dyslexic individuals are more likely to miss the details while being able to see the larger picture. They may have better pattern recognition and visual-spatial abilities even as they struggle with reading and sequencing. They may be better at dealing with social interactions and managing people. Perhaps these are the traits that helped Albert Einstein and Agatha Christie and Steve Jobs, all dyslexics, to make their mark in the world. But this blooming generally happens after they leave the trauma of school and discover their strengths for themselves.* Could we forgo this trauma and bolster their strengths in the school itself? Armed with the diagnosis, Mumtaz's parents entered her into a remedial programme where special education teachers worked with her individually to strengthen her phonological awareness, sequencing and math skills. The school started providing accommodations in the class and gave her extra time and help in understanding the questions during tests. Slowly she began to regain her footing in the school. She is still way behind her classmates in academics, but with encouragement from teachers and parents she has discovered a talent for music and sports. She received this support and help thanks to her getting identified as a dyslexic. Every teacher will agree that there are always a few children in their class who have difficulties with language and math. But these deficits do not get formally identified due to a lack of awareness among teachers and parents. To add to this, privately administered cognitive assessments and remedial classes are very expensive and not within the reach of all.

Remedial measures

Some of these issues can be remedied by making cognitive assessments compulsory in junior school. The National Education Policy 2020 mandates inclusive education for all children with disabilities. It states that teachers should be provided with help to identify children with learning disabilities early, so that these children can be supported from the beginning. It lists out specific actions such as using appropriate technology, allowing students to work at their own pace and making curricula flexible to make education accessible to all. There is now a framework in place to implement such changes in our educational institutions. *When inclusive teaching strategies become mainstream, then each student in the class will flourish. A child who believes in herself and feels confident to face her own personal challenges is a child set on a path to success and happiness.*

WHAT IS GRAP, DELHI-NCR'S ACTION PLAN AS AIR POLLUTION INCREASES?

Starting October 15, some stricter measures to fight air pollution will come into force in Delhi and its neighbouring National Capital Region (NCR) towns, as part of the *Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)*. The action plan has been in effect for three years in Delhi and NCR. Starting October 15, diesel generator sets can no longer be used in Delhi and the NCR towns of Noida, Ghaziabad, Greater Noida, Faridabad, and Gurgaon. The only exception is DG sets used for emergency and essential services. Pollution control authorities will begin night patrolling to check for dust and industrial emissions, as well as the burning of waste. Mechanised sweeping and frequent sprinkling of water on roads (to make the dust settle) have been directed. These steps will be incremental. Levels of pollution are expected to rise as winter approaches — and as they do, more measures will come into force, depending on the air quality. These measures are part of GRAP, which was formulated in 2016 and notified in 2017. Experts have credited the actions under the plan for the improvement in Delhi's air over the past few years.



What is GRAP?

Approved by the Supreme Court in 2016, the plan was formulated after several meetings that the Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) held with state government representatives and experts. The result was a plan that institutionalised measures to be taken when air quality deteriorates. GRAP works only as an emergency measure. As such, the plan does not include action by various state governments to be taken throughout the year to tackle industrial, vehicular and combustion emissions. The plan is incremental in nature — therefore, when the air quality moves from ‘Poor’ to ‘Very Poor’, the measures listed under both sections have to be followed. If air quality reaches the ‘Severe+’ stage, the response under GRAP includes extreme measures such as shutting down schools and implementing the odd-even road-space rationing scheme. GRAP has been successful in doing two things that had not been done before — creating a step-by-step plan for the entire Delhi-NCR region, and getting on board several agencies: all pollution control boards, industrial area authorities, municipal corporations, regional officials of the India Meteorological Department, and others. The plan requires action and coordination among 13 different agencies in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan (NCR areas). *At the head of the table is the EPCA, mandated by the Supreme Court. GRAP was notified in 2017 by the Centre and draws its authority from this notification. Before the imposition of any measures, EPCA holds a meeting with representatives from all NCR states, and a call is taken on which actions have to be made applicable in which town.* A blanket ban on the DG sets for Delhi-NCR towns from October 15 onward was announced last year as well. However, issues were raised by the Haryana power secretary at the time about deficiencies in the electrical infrastructure in commercial and residential areas developed by builders in Gurgaon. Authorities from both Haryana and UP had informed EPCA at the time that they would put in required measures by winter 2020 for the supply of electricity from the grid. How the ban plays out this year remains to be seen.

CLEARING THE AIR

President Donald Trump’s scathing description of India’s air as “filthy” may have come as an embarrassment for the government, but it has not provoked a fierce nationalistic backlash in response to a foreign leader’s insult. Looking at the worsening pollution in northern parts of the country, triggered by stubble burning and later the Dussehra festivities, even Mr. Trump’s critics found no cudgels to pick up, while others readily agreed with him. The U.S. President’s remarks are, of course, gratuitous, considering that he has spent his term dismantling many environmental regulations, including those relating to pollution and emissions from coal plants and automobiles; his criticism of India and China is also incongruent as they have pledged to implement the Paris Agreement while Mr. Trump has pulled the U.S. out of the pact. Unfortunately, mere resolve cannot raise India’s stature. *Sensors of the Central and State Pollution Control Boards and other private stations across the north currently show PM2.5, or fine particulate matter levels, in the very unhealthy or even hazardous bands. There is mounting concern about the health impacts, but the Centre has so far attempted to brazen it out by denying any confirmed link between bad air quality and a shorter lifespan.* Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar last year said no Indian study on such a correlation was available. That view has been challenged, and WHO expressed worry about the situation. There is the added dimension of COVID-19 infection today, with the *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health contending that a one microgramme rise in PM2.5 is associated with an 8% increase in the death rate due to the novel coronavirus, based on long-term exposure data in the U.S.*



India is seeking to address its chronic air quality crisis partly by raising emission standards and fuels. The country adopted the BS-VI fuel standard earlier this year, potentially lowering vehicular pollution, although the national air quality standard for annual average PM2.5 is 40 mcg per cubic metre, which is four times the WHO limit. It took the COVID-19 lockdown to let people experience clean air once again, with the conspicuous absence of vehicles. The unlock phase has reversed the ephemeral experience, as the burning of vehicular fuels has reverted to pre-lockdown levels, with no significant transition to green mobility, such as bicycle use, in urban centres. Continued burning of crop stubble in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh shows that the central sector scheme providing remedies in the form of farm mechanisation and management alternatives needs fresh impetus. No more time can be lost in addressing the crisis of foul air, as the country prepares to hasten with development in a post-COVID-19 era.

WHY DOES AIR POLLUTION RISE IN OCTOBER EVERY YEAR?

Every year in October, Delhi's air quality starts to dip and a war of words between different governments erupts. On October 15, when the AQI touched very poor for the very first time this season, Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar said the contribution of stubble burning was only 4 per cent that day, a statement that prompted Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to ask if stubble burning was not the cause, then why did air pollution rise in the city over the past few days. Air pollution in Delhi and the whole of the Indo Gangetic Plains is a complex phenomenon that is dependent on a variety of factors. The first and foremost is the input of pollutants, followed by weather and local conditions.

Why does air pollution rise in October each year?

October usually marks the withdrawal of monsoons in Northwest India. During monsoons, the prevalent direction of wind is easterly. These winds, which travel from over the Bay of Bengal, carry moisture and bring rains to this part of the country. Once monsoon withdraws, the predominant direction of winds changes to north westerly. During summers, too, the direction of wind is north westerly and storms carrying dust from Rajasthan and sometimes Pakistan and Afghanistan.

According to a peer reviewed study conducted by scientists at the National Physical Laboratory, 72 per cent of Delhi's wind in winters comes from the northwest, while the remaining 28 per cent comes from the Indo-Gangetic plains. In 2017, a storm that originated in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait led to a drastic dip in Delhi's air quality in a couple of days. Along with the change in wind direction, the dip in temperatures is also behind the increased pollution levels. *As temperature dips, the inversion height — which is the layer beyond which pollutants cannot disperse into the upper layer of the atmosphere — is lowered. The concentration of pollutants in the air increases when this happens. Also, high-speed winds are very effective at dispersing pollutants, but winters bring a dip in wind speed over all as compared to in summers.* The combination of these meteorological factors makes the region prone to pollution. When factors such as farm fires and dust storms are added to the already high base pollution levels in the city, air quality dips further.

What is the role of farm fires?

Farm fires have been an easy way to get rid of paddy stubble quickly and at low cost for several years. With the use of combine harvesters, the practice became more common as the harvester leaves behind tall stalks, which have to be removed before replanting. *But the practice gained widespread acceptance starting 2009, when the governments of Punjab and Haryana passed laws*



delaying the sowing of paddy. The aim of passing this law was to conserve groundwater as the new sowing cycle would coincide with monsoons and less water would be extracted. This, however, left very little time for farmers to harvest paddy, clear fields and sow wheat for the next cycle. The paddy straw and stalks have high silica content and are not used to feed livestock. The easiest, but the least productive, way to get rid of it is to set it on fire. Over the past 11 years, *the practice has thrived despite efforts made by the Centre and state governments primarily because the alternatives, like the happy seeder machine which helps mulch the residue, are seen as unavailable, and money and time consuming by smaller farmers.* A 2015 source-apportionment study on Delhi's air pollution conducted by IIT-Kanpur also states that 17-26% of all particulate matter in Delhi in winters is because of biomass burning. Over the years, the System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) has developed a system to calculate the contribution of stubble burning to Delhi's pollution. Last year, during peak stubble burning incidents, its contribution rose to 40%. Over the past few days, it has been 2%-4%, indicating that a variety of factors, not just stubble burning, are responsible for the dip in quality. As November draws closer, the percentage contribution is set to go up. The stubble burning season is around 45 days long. Air in Delhi, however, remains polluted till February.

What are the other big sources of pollution in Delhi?

Dust and vehicular pollution are the two biggest causes of dipping air quality in Delhi in winters. Dry cold weather means dust is prevalent in the entire region, which does not see many rainy days between October and June. Dust pollution contributes to 56% of PM 10 and the PM2.5 load at 59 t/d, the top contributors being road 38 % of PM 2.5 concentration, the IIT Kanpur study said. Vehicular pollution is the second biggest cause of pollution in winters. *According to the IIT Kanpur study, 20 % of PM 2.5 in winters comes from vehicular pollution.* Over the years, governments have taken several steps to address pollution from vehicles. The introduction of BS VI (cleaner) fuel, push for electric vehicles, Odd-Even as an emergency measure, and construction of the Eastern and Western Peripheral Expressways are all part of the effort to reduce vehicular pollution, which experts say is more harmful as it is released at breathing level. During the lockdown, this year, Delhi saw among the cleanest air since comprehensive records have been kept since 2015. It also saw above average temperatures in September, which meant the air remained cleaner for longer. With vehicles back on the road, temperature dipping and stubble burning starting, Delhi's air is set to get worse.

SCIENCE OF MONSOONS

The southwest monsoon 2020 has officially drawn to an end with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) declaring a withdrawal of the associated winds and rainfall pattern from India on Wednesday. The over 8% surplus this year has surpassed the IMD's estimates. For the first time since 2010, India got more than 100% of its long period average (LPA) of 88 cm in consecutive years. Last year the country saw record rainfall of 110% of the LPA, the highest in a quarter century. India has never got over 105% of the LPA in consecutive years in at least 30 years, according to records available since 1988 on the IMD website. Meteorologists often speak of two or three decade 'epochs' of rainfall variation. Since 2000, India was in a low patch with several drought years and had barely a handful of above normal or excess rainfall. In that light, the two years of a munificent monsoon could signal a possible return to a rainy epoch. While it could mean more rain, it also implies floods, overflowing dams, landslides and loss of lives. Moreover, *surplus rains are not evenly distributed in time and space.* Therefore, much like there are attempts to improve flood



forecast warnings — especially the short-term ones — there ought to be commensurate efforts by authorities and infrastructure agencies to prepare for the environmental and ecological impact of excess rain. *This year the IMD undertook a long-due revision of the onset and withdrawal dates of the monsoon in India. By this reckoning, the monsoon's normal withdrawal date was October 15.* Historically, this has always been a statistical average and the actual withdrawal is usually within a few days of this. However, this year the withdrawal has been extremely delayed. Factoring in these changes must become a key part of a State and city's disaster management preparedness.

The southwest monsoon's withdrawal also heralds the advent of north-easterly winds that bring in the northeast monsoon to parts of peninsular Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. While significant to the agriculture there, the northeast monsoon contributes 10%-12% of India's annual rainfall, against the southwest monsoon's 75%-80%. That, and its limited geographic spread has meant that the northeast monsoon is not showered with as much research attention. However, *studies show that northeast monsoon rainfall displays significant variation and climate models are fairly inaccurate in their forecasts of its unfolding over the subcontinent.* There have been significant investments in super computing infrastructure to simulate weather as well as to tune forecasts to go beyond just giving rainfall estimates and factor in the potential damage of floods and cyclones. Building on these, scientists must also put in more effort and design research programmes that better analyse the vagaries of the northeast monsoon. Along with more understanding of how climate is changing locally, India needs better science to prepare more effective disaster management plans and improve resilience in a warming world.

WHY THE 2,800 LAKES IN HYDERABAD COULD NOT PREVENT A FLOOD THIS TIME

The man-made Hussainsagar lake was Hyderabad's main drinking water source till the early part of the last century. But even as *the city, established by Muhammed Quli Qutb Shah of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1591, expanded beyond the fortified walls of the Golconda, the heart-shape lake built across a tributary of the river Musi, was only one of the several hundreds of lakes that dotted the region.* In less than a century, the city has expanded from 55 sq.km to 625 sq.km under the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC). The jurisdiction of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority (HMDA) spreads over 7,257 sq.km covering parts of a few neighbouring districts as well, and had 2,800 lakes as per as 2017 estimate. *The water bodies were created for drinking water and irrigation purposes at a time when water management was considered crucial in this otherwise arid region for centuries.* This network of man-made water bodies, interconnected by several natural waterways, ultimately led to the River Musi in most cases. Along with these small lakes, *in the aftermath of the 1908 floods in Hyderabad, the Nizam government commissioned two big reservoirs, Osman Sagar and Himayat Sagar, on the periphery of the city to regulate the water flow from Musi and its tributary Esa.* But the rivers have since vanished. Discharge of sewage and industrial effluents, encroachments by government and private individuals, and decades of neglect had everyone thinking the river would never flow again. Most of the former waterways are open sewers now. But, on October 13, the river was in spate once again after a record downpour. *Low-lying localities and colonies that were built on the lake beds and nullahs were submerged in no time. Many days later, hundreds of these colonies were still under water.*

Between the Krishna and the Godavari

Based on hydrology, present-day Hyderabad can be divided into Krishna and Godavari basins. Traditionally, all the rainwater falling in the catchment areas of Musi would discharge into *Musi*



which is one of the 22 tributaries of the Krishna river. And newer localities to the west of Hyderabad, including Gachibowli and the IT corridor, are all in the catchment areas of the Godavari. In both Krishna and Godavari basins, the city has a network of lakes and drains which carry the excess water from one to another and then finally into the Musi and Majeera rivers. Senior Hydrogeologist BV Subba Rao says lakes were built in the past based on the natural topography and rainfall trends. "These were not created for flood control mitigation but as draught mitigation structures. Every 2 sq.km had a lake to ensure water for drinking and irrigation purposes to every habitation. Flood regulation was only one of the purposes," he explains.

The forgotten lakes

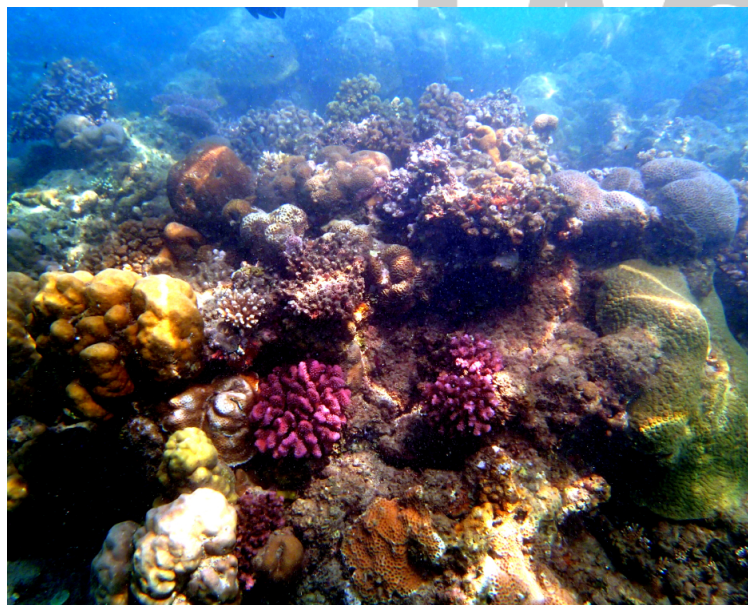
Over the years, owing to the expansion of the city, the lakes were not in demand for their primary purposes of irrigation and drinking water. *But they continued to be relevant for flood regulation. Despite this, in the last few decades, several colonies, as well as large real estate ventures, have come up in the full-tank levels — the buffer area — of lakes, large water bodies that existed for centuries have shrunk in size, encroachments have eaten into natural waterways, and stormwater drains get easily clogged.*

HOW CORALS OFF MUMBAI'S COAST WILL BE MOVED

On October 29, the Mumbai civic body received the green signal from the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Nagpur, for translocating the corals off the coast of Mumbai for the Rs 12,700-crore Mumbai Coastal Road Project. The BMC aims to complete the translocation of 18 coral colonies over two days next month.

What are corals?

Corals exhibit characteristics of plants, but are marine animals that are related to jellyfish and anemones. Coral polyps are tiny, soft-bodied organisms. At their base is a hard, protective limestone skeleton called a calicle, which forms the structure of coral reefs. Reefs begin when a polyp attaches itself to a rock on the seafloor, then divides, or buds, into thousands of clones. The polyp calicles connect to one another, creating a colony that acts as a single organism. As colonies grow over hundreds and thousands of years, they join with other colonies, and become reefs. *There are soft corals as well, which are non-reef-building, and resemble bushes, grasses, trees.* The Mumbai coast hosts a tiny population of corals. The corals found across rocky patches along the Mumbai coastline are mostly fast-growing and non-reef building corals.





How are corals translocated?

The colonies at Haji Ali will be translocated to Marine Lines, and those at Worli to some distance away from the construction site. *The translocation of corals is at a nascent stage along the Indian coastline. Pilot projects at the Lakshadweep islands, and off the coast of Kutch and Tamil Nadu have been undertaken to study the survival rate, method and site of translocation, and creation of high heat-resistant coral colonies, etc.* In a three-year-long project in Sindhudurg, corals were cultivated — fragments of corals were taken and attached to concrete frames with the help of nylon threads — and then left on ocean beds at a depth suitable for their growth. In a project at the Andaman islands, ReefWatch Marine Conservation has transplanted coral fragments on to nine artificial structures, totalling a 20-square-metre area. The project has been on since 2017.

How fast do corals grow?

According to the American Scientific agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the rate at which corals grow depends on the species. Some of the branching species can increase in height or length by as much as 10 cm a year (about the same rate at which human hair grows). Other corals, like the dome and plate species, are bulkier, and may only grow only 0.3 cm to 2 cm per year. A soft coral colony has the potential to grow at the rate of 2 cm to 4 cm per year.

What is the survival rate of translocated corals?

Some experts are of the view that for a high survival rate, it is important to translocate corals in a place with similar environmental characteristics such as depth, current flow, amount of light, and pressure. Harshal Karve, a marine biologist with Mangrove Foundation who identified 11 species of corals along the Mumbai coast, had suggested to the NIO and BMC to undertake the translocation post-monsoon, when the colonies would likely be healthy.

Why are coral reefs important?

Coral reefs are like underwater cities that support marine life. According to the UN Environment programme, they provide at least half a billion people around the world with food security and livelihoods. Coral reefs also act as 'wave breaks' between the sea and the coastline and minimise the impact of sea erosion. In India, they are protected in the same way as the tiger or elephant, under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972.

What poses a threat to coral reefs?

Climate change remains one of the biggest threats to corals. Around the world, this threat has been visible in the *"bleaching" of corals* — is a process during which corals, under stress from warm weather, expel the algae that give corals their brilliant colours and live in their tissues and produce their food. The Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, a UNESCO World Heritage site and home to one of the largest collections of coral reefs on the planet, has suffered six mass bleaching events due to warmer than normal ocean temperatures: in 1998, 2002, 2006, 2016, 2017, and now 2020. Experts have documented bleaching of the corals along Mumbai's coastline as well.



WHAT IS BLUE FLAG CERTIFICATION, AWARDED TO 8 INDIAN BEACHES?

Eight beaches in India have been awarded the coveted 'Blue Flag' certification by an eminent international jury, which comprises members of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The beaches selected for the certification are: Kappad (Kerala), Shivrajpur (Gujarat), Ghoghla (Diu), Kasarkod and Padubidri (Karnataka), Rushikonda (Andhra Pradesh), Golden (Odisha) and Radhanagar (Andaman & Nicobar Islands). Union Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change Prakash Javadekar on Sunday (October 11) said: "It is an outstanding feat considering that no 'Blue Flag' nation has ever been awarded for 8 beaches in a single attempt...this is also a global recognition of India's conservation and sustainable development efforts". Earlier this year, the Centre issued an Extraordinary Gazette Notification declaring a list of activities and facilities that would be permissible in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) areas of certain beaches, which have been identified for obtaining the 'Blue Flag' certification.

What is the 'Blue Flag' certification?

*The 'Blue Flag' is a certification that can be obtained by a beach, marina, or sustainable boating tourism operator, and serves as an eco-label. The certification is awarded by the Denmark-based non-profit **Foundation for Environmental Education**, which sets stringent environmental, educational, safety-related and access-related criteria that applicants must meet and maintain.* It is awarded annually to beaches and marinas in FEE member countries. The Blue Flag programme was started in France in 1985 and in areas out of Europe in 2001. The programme promotes sustainable development in freshwater and marine areas through four main criteria: water quality, environmental management, environmental education and safety. Forty-seven countries currently participate in the program, and 4,573 beaches, marinas, and boats have this certification. In its July 2019 notification, the Environment Ministry identified the 13 following beaches in India for Blue Flag certification: Shivrajpur (Devbhumi Dwarka, Gujarat), Bhogave (Sindhudurg, Maharashtra), Ghoghla (Diu, Daman and Diu), Miramar (Panjim, Goa), Kasarkod (Karwar, Karnataka), Padubidri (Udupi, Karnataka), Kappad (Kozhikode, Kerala), Eden (Puducherry), Mahabalipuram (Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu), Rushikonda (Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh), Golden (Puri, Odisha), and Radhanagar (Port Blair, Andaman & Nicobar).

According to the Ministry, *a 'Blue Flag' beach is an eco-tourism model to provide tourists clean and hygienic bathing water, facilities/amenities, safe and healthy environment and sustainable development of the area.* The certification is awarded by the Denmark-based agency based on 33 stringent criteria in four major heads: environmental education and information, bathing water quality, environment management and conservation and safety and services in the beaches.

Kasarkod and Padubidri beaches have grey water treatment plants, solid waste management plants, disabled-friendly equipment to enable them to enter seawater, seating arrangements, clean drinking water, washroom, changing room, bathing facility, disabled-friendly and general toilets, parking facilities, solar power plant, etc.



GUJARAT'S GHOGHA-HAZIRA FERRY SERVICE, WHICH PM MODI WILL INAUGURATE SUNDAY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will Sunday virtually inaugurate the Ghogha-Hazira Ro-Pax ferry service in Gujarat. This will be the second such ferry service to be launched by the PM after the Ghogha-Dahej route three years ago, which is now dysfunctional.

What is different about the Ghogha-Hazira RoPax ferry service?

Both the services were launched to bridge the Gulf of Khambhat by providing a sea route to large number of passengers travelling to and fro between Bhavnagar located on the western side of the Gulf and South Gujarat on the east. The sea route would be shorter compared to the road. *The ferry between Ghogha — a fishing hamlet and an old port — and Hazira — a commercial greenfield port — which will be virtually inaugurated by PM Modi, is about 60 km-long and provides easier access to the city of Surat.* Via land, the route is about 400 km. In comparison, *the first ferry route inaugurated by PM Modi in October 2017, connects Ghogha to Dahej which lies near the mouth of Narmada river, north to Hazira.* This route is about 32 kilometers and connects the Dahej PCPIR and Bharuch town. Over Rs 650 crore has been spent in building the connectivity for RoPax ferry between Ghogha and Dahej. For the second route, the terminal at Hazira has been given on lease for 11 months by Adani Hazira Port Pvt Ltd for Re 1 per month.

SURAT'S SPECIAL FASCINATION OF GHARI ON CHANDI PADVO

The Chandi Padvo festival, which falls a day after Sharad Poornima, is widely celebrated by Surtis, or the people native to Surat across the country and abroad, by consuming Ghari (Sweet) and Bhusu (namkeen) sitting in the open to celebrate the full moon. Here is a look at the origins of this unique festival.

What is Chandi Padvo?

On Chandi Padvo, tradition has it that people of Surat eat only sweetmeats that are white and hence doodh pocha, kheer or ghari are made across households. Ghari, a dish made of maida filled with mava, pistachios, almonds and sugar, and fried in ghee and then dipped in ghee to give it a white coat, is native to Surat and is most popular on this day. Incidentally, the sweetmeat resembles the full moon. *Surat-based historian Sanjay Choksi says, when the Marathas fought with the British in the 18th century, Tatya Tope came to Surat with his army and were tired from the long journey. "To give energy booster to the army, Tatya Tope had shared the recipe of Ghari, a mixture of sugar, ghee, dry fruits, and milk mava, stuffed in dough, and fried topped with a coat of ghee, with the halwai, who made it for his army,"* he explains, about how this port city fell in love with the snack. This incident is mentioned in the book by historian Dr Mohan Meghani titled "Surat of 18th century". In fact, Ghari has become synonymous with Surat over the years. Ghari also emerged as a favourite on Chandni Padvo, when Surtis head to Dumas or Ubhrat beaches in the evening and have it with Bhusu, a namkeen mix found in central and south Gujarat.

The Ghari makers

Rohan Mithaiwala, a fourth generation sweet maker, said the process of preparing Ghari starts ten days before Chandi Padva. "The Ghari prices are little high, starting from ₹700 to ₹850, but still



people purchase it. We also get orders from different community organisations,” he said, estimating that nearly 150 tonnes is consumed in the city every Chandi Padvo.

KEVADIA TOURISM CIRCUIT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated 17 tourism projects around the Statue of Unity (SoU), now called the 'Kevadia Tourism Circuit', on his two-day visit to Gujarat, the first since the pandemic struck. Nestled between the Satpura and Vindhyachal mountain ranges in Kevadia of Narmada district, the 182-metre-high statue dedicated to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, built at a cost of Rs 3,000 crore, is said to be the tallest in the world. Since the SoU was inaugurated in October 2018, the state government has worked to bring Kevadia on the world map of tourism with a cluster of theme-based projects. The government projects the SoU to have an economic impact of Rs 9,000 crore by 2022, which will translate into the socio-economic uplift of the region up to a radius of about 100 km around the statue. Modi, who spent the entire day inspecting each of these tourist spots, also laid the foundation stone of four new projects that are coming up in the area. The inaugurations, which were to originally take place on March 26, had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and were ultimately done to coincide with the 145th birth anniversary celebrations of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on Saturday (October 31).

What is the Kevadia Tourism Circuit?

Kevadia, a village in the tribal Narmada district, is home to the Sardar Sarovar Dam reservoir on the Narmada river, and was a popular picnic spot even before the SoU came up. The circuit covers 35 tourist spots, out of which the Valley of Flowers, Vishwa Van, Jungle Safari, Cactus Garden, Butterfly Garden, Ekta Nursery, Tent City, Khalvani Eco-tourism, Zarwani Eco-tourism, Nauka Vihar and River Rafting, located around the periphery of the statue and the Narmada Dam, are already open. Last year, the Gujarat Assembly passed a Bill to establish the Statue of Unity Area Development and Tourism Governance Authority (SoUTA) that will have powers ranging from acquiring land for any development project in the area, which is predominantly tribal, to taking punitive action against those violating it or encroaching on it.

MAHARANI JINDAN KAUR: 'ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE CHARACTERS OF 19TH CENTURY HISTORY'

Maharani Jindan Kaur, the last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, is in news for the auction of some of her jewellery at Bonhams Islamic and Indian Art sale in London earlier this week. "As the only surviving widow of Ranjit Singh, Jindan Kaur (1817-1863) led a spirited resistance to the encroachment of the British into the Punjab, but was eventually forced to surrender. More than 600 pieces of her jewellery from the legendary treasury of Lahore were confiscated, and she was imprisoned before escaping to Nepal in 1848," notes Bonhams, in reference to the jewellery.

Who was Rani Jindan?

She was the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, founder of the Sikh empire, whose boundaries stretched from Kabul to Kashmir and the borders of Delhi. She was also *the mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh*, the last ruler of the empire, who was raised by the British. Born at Chachar in Gujranwala in 1817, Jind Kaur Aulakh was the youngest of three siblings. Her father Manna Singh Aulakh was the overseer of the royal kennels. It is said that impressed with Manna Singh's



description of his daughter's beauty and intelligence, Maharaja Ranjit Singh married Jindan in 1835 when she was all of 18. She gave birth to Duleep Singh in 1838, a year before the death of the maharaja.

When did she become the regent?

Duleep Singh was five years old when he was placed on the throne in 1843 after the death of two heirs to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Since he was just a child, Maharani Jindan was made the regent. Not a rubber stamp, she took an active interest in running the kingdom, introducing changes in the revenue system. Dr. Ganda Singh in his work on the private correspondence relating to the Anglo-Sikh War has quoted Lord Ellenbrough (Nov. 20 1843) as saying, "The mother of the boy Maharaja Duleep Singh seems to be a woman of determined course, and she is the only person apparently at Lahore, who has courage."

When did the British imprison and exile her?

The British declared war on the Sikh empire in December 1845. After their victory in the first Anglo-Sikh war, they retained Duleep Singh as the ruler but imprisoned Jind Kaur. Prof Indu Banga, a Chandigarh-based historian who specialises in the history of Punjab, says the British tried hard to vilify Jindan as she tried to rally forces against them, but "unlike many others, she did not give in." The British campaign against her was vicious, describing her as a prostitute, seductress and the 'Messalina of the Punjab', a reference to the promiscuous third wife of Roman Emperor Claudius. Jindan believed that if united, Indian rulers could oust the British. She was in touch with Bhai Maharaj Singh, who tried to rebel against the British after the annexation of the Sikh empire. Banga says, "With many historians counting the Anglo-Sikh battles as the first war of independence, Jindan has now become a heroic figure." William Dalrymple and Anita Anand have also written about Jindan in the book, 'Kohinoor: The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond', in 2016. Describing her dramatic prison break on April 19, 1849, from Chunnar Fort in Uttar Pradesh, the book says: "Dressed in beggars' rags, she fled under cover of darkness, taunting her British captors as she went." "Scattering money on the floor of her cell, Jindan scrawled a note for the guards to find: You put me in a cage and locked me up. For all your locks and your sentries, I got out by magic... I had told you plainly not to push me too hard – but don't think I ran away. Understand well, that I escape by myself unaided... don't imagine I got out like a thief."

Where did she go after escaping from Chunnar fort?

Maharani Jind Kaur arrived at Kathmandu on April 29, 1849, where she was given asylum by Jung Bahadur, the prime minister. She was given a house on the banks of river Bhagmati. She stayed in Nepal till 1860, where she continued to reach out to rebels in Punjab and Jammu-Kashmir. Her letters trying to contact rebels detained in Allahabad fort were intercepted by the British government. She established contact with Bhai Maharaj Singh in Jammu and Kashmir. She also sent emissaries to Maharaj Gulab Singh of Jammu. At one point, the British caught some funds she was sending to rebels. *Things reached such a pass that the British asked the Nepal PM to rein her in.*

Did she ever reunite with Duleep Singh?

Maharani Jindan met Duleep Singh at Calcutta in April 1861. The British, ever suspicious of the maharani's machinations, ordered then that she leave for London in May. It was due to her influence that Duleep Singh, who had converted to Christianity, returned to Sikhism. The long exile



took a heavy toll on Maharani Jindan's health. She passed away in her sleep on August 1, 1863, two years after she walked into the Kensington Gardens in 1861. Christy Campbell, author of 'The Maharajah's Box,' a book about Duleep Singh, says Jindan was "one of the most remarkable characters of 19th century history, let alone Indian or Sikh history". Jindan was buried in west London as cremation was illegal in Britain during those days. In 1997, a marble headstone with her name was uncovered during restoration at the Dissenters' Chapel in Kensal Green, and a memorial to the Maharani was installed at the site in 2009.

WHY THE 200-YEAR RAMNAGAR KI RAMLILA HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN INDIA'S ART HISTORY

For everybody who thinks that change is the only constant, a trip to Ramnagar in the month leading to Dusshera would be an eye-opener. Led by the local Maharaja of Banaras, revered as Kashi Naresh, the town plays host to Rama, Sita, Lakshman and the other characters of the Ramayana, in the form of amateur actors, who perform the epic in minute detail across localities with names such as Lanka, Ashok Vatika and Janakpur every evening for 30 days. This is different from more familiar Ramlilas that are performed across North India, mostly on a single stage, during Navratra. *Ramnagar, a boat ride from the ghats of Varanasi, has evolved as a re-imagination of the Ramayana and even boasts a pond called Ganga. Its Ramlila, organised by the royal family, is the grandest in the country and practically unchanged from the time the first performance was held in 1830.* This means there are no electric lights, people mostly sit on the rough ground to watch and trying to get a cellphone photograph could result in one being loudly reprimanded by the public or palace guards. *The largest moving theatre performance in India, with a Unesco Intangible Heritage tag, the Ramlila attracts lakhs of audiences from villages as well as scholars and stage professionals from across the country.* This year, the pandemic has forced Ramnagar ki Ramlila to do what it has always resisted — change.

As it negotiates the challenge of the coronavirus, here are a few reasons Ramnagar ki Ramlila has historical significance for Indians:

It is an old art form: *Ramnagar ki Ramlila is dated to 1830 from a lithograph by a colonial administrator called James Princep, which is present in the British Library in London.* But, even a casual look at the work, of crowds on foot, horseback and on elephants watching the Ravana Dahan, demonstrates that the Ramlila was already popular when Princep witnessed it. *According to folklore and local belief, the Ramlila was not started by Maharaj Udit Narayan Singh, who was the ruler in 1830, but by his great grandfather, Maharaj Balwant Singh, in the mid-18th century.* The scale of the performance may have expanded and the world may have become tech-savvy but the old ways of Ramnagar ki Ramlila can still draw a housefull crowd after a few centuries.

It has overcome rebellion and wars: Maharaj Udit Narayan was constantly at loggerheads with the colonial administration, who saw him as a thorn on the side. According to Kunwar Ishaan, a member of the royal family of Banaras, the British frowned upon the Ramlila as it brought large crowds of Indians together. The story of the war between Ram and Ravana and the victory of good over evil had a sub-text in the people's consciousness at a time when the freedom movement was gathering steam. *The Ramlila, however, continued. It didn't stop even in 1962, when the Indo-China war was on, and pilots on night sorties noticed lights coming from Banaras.* It was the lanterns by which Ramlila was being held. The PMO got in touch with the royal family, who arranged for the lights to be covered with leaves so that it could be seen only from the ground and not the sky.



A stamp of the past: *The Ramlila is performed by men only, with the “pure” young boys playing the “swaroops”— the roles of Ram, his brothers and Sita — being selected from Brahmin families after an extensive audition attended by the king and palace officials.* For two months, they live with scholars of the epics, spend several hours studying the Ramayana and are trained in the various gestures and vocal skills needed for their roles. *The boys are carried on the shoulders of the Ramlila workers and their feet do not touch the floor. People crowd around for their “darshan” every evening of the performance and touch their feet for blessings.* After the Ramlila, they are returned to their families and a life much less divine. The audience, too, is driven by a habit of generations. Some of the people who come, carrying the things that their grandfathers used to bring to watch the performances, such as a walking stick, the attar holder, the lota or an ancestral copy of the Ram Charit Manas. It is an annual ritual to be a part of the Ramlila every evening. They come walking, in crowded vehicles or by boat. The river banks and wells are packed with groups of devotees who wash themselves and wear clean dhoti-kurta, apply chandan on their foreheads and attar in a two-century-old ritual to attend the Ramlila. A code of behaviour also extended to the royal family which attends the performances on elephant back, as in the bygone eras.

The challenge of the present: The coronavirus has reduced this grand ritualistic performance to a reading of the Tulsidas’s Ram Charit Manas in a temple in Janakpuri, the paternal home of Sita in the Ramlila. The present Maharaja of Banaras Anant Narayan Singh tested positive for Covid-19 on September 18, and was admitted to a hospital in Gurgaon. Though recovered, he prefers to observe strict social distancing. When the Ramayanis or scholars recite from the Ram Charit Manas in the evenings, the king drives down wearing a simple dhoti-kurta. There is an emptiness in the palace and on the roads such as the town has not known for several generations.

HOW AND WHY KUMBH MELA 2021 IN HARIDWAR WILL BE DIFFERENT

The mythology behind Kumbh

Kumbh is one of the most sacred pilgrimages for Hindus. According to information shared on a website on Kumbh hosted by Uttar Pradesh’s Prayagraj Mela Pradhikaran, the founding myth of the Kumbh Mela points to the puranas (compilation of ancient legends). It recounts how *gods and demons fought over the sacred kumbh (pitcher) of amrit (nectar of immortality) called the Ratna of Samudra Manthan. It is widely believed that Lord Vishnu (disguised as the enchantress ‘Mohini’) whisked the kumbh out of the grasp of the covetous demons who had tried to claim it. As he took it towards heaven, a few drops of the precious nectar fell on four sacred sites, which we now know as Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Prayag.* The flight and the following pursuit is said to have lasted 12 divine days, which is equivalent to twelve human years, and therefore, the mela is celebrated every 12 years, staggered at each of the four sacred sites in this cycle. *The corresponding rivers are believed to have turned into amrit at the cosmic moment, giving pilgrims the chance to bathe in the essence of purity, auspiciousness, and immortality.*

How Kumbh 2021 is different from the past

First, the schedule has changed. Kumbh is celebrated once in 12 years and the previous kumbh in Haridwar was held in 2010. The next one was to be held in 2022, but is happening a year earlier. “After more than 100 years the kumbh will be held earlier. It is happening because of specific auspicious dates,”. Second, crowd management will be tackled differently due to Covid-19. For taking a holy dip in the Ganga on the dates of four Shahi Snans (March 11, April 12, April 14 and



April 27), pilgrims will have to register on a website and select a specific ghat to bathe. Each pilgrim will be allotted a specific time to visit the ghat, and will be allowed to bathe only for 15 minutes. The route map of the selected ghat will also be provided on the e-pass. The mela area and all 107 ghats too have been marked as red, green and yellow zones, according to vulnerability. GIS mapping of the entire area has been done, and if there is crowding at any particular site above the permissible limit, the control room will receive an alert that will be relayed to security force teams available nearby. The crowd capacity of each ghat has also been assessed. Further, since, in the past, stampedes have occurred in the morning or forenoon as people rush to bathe, the administration will increase the time duration to reduce crowd density during these hours.

LIKELIHOOD OF FUTURE PANDEMICS, THEIR DAMAGE POTENTIAL, AS PER A NEW REPORT

In a new report released by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem (IPBES), the authors have warned that future pandemics will emerge more often, they'll spread more rapidly, do more damage to the world and kill more people than COVID-19, unless significant measures are taken. The IPBES was established by the United Nations, but functions independently.

Pandemics in the last century

The report notes that COVID-19 is at least the sixth pandemic to have taken place in the last century since the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918. Three of the pandemics were caused by influenza viruses, one by HIV followed by SARS and COVID-19. While the current pandemic's origins lie in microbes carried by animals, "like all pandemics, its emergence has been entirely driven by human activities," the report says. *There are over 1.7 million currently 'undiscovered' viruses that exist in mammals and birds, out of which up to 827,000 could have the ability to infect people. The report goes on to say that more than 70 per cent of emerging diseases, such as Ebola, Zika and Nipah, are caused by microbes found in animals that spill over due to contact among wildlife, livestock and people. About 30 per cent of emerging infectious diseases are attributed to land use change, agricultural expansion and urbanisation. Further, almost 100 per cent of the pandemics so far, which includes influenza, SARS and COVID-19, have been zoonoses (diseases caused by germs that spread between animals and people).* The estimated value of the legal international wildlife trade in 2019 was about \$107 billion, a 500 per cent increase since 2005 and a 2000 per cent increase since the 1980s. The estimated cost of the COVID-19 pandemic is somewhere between \$8-\$16 trillion, while the economic impact of the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa amounted to \$53 billion.

How can pandemic risk be reduced?

The report suggests that *pandemic risk can be lowered by reducing the human activities that drive loss of biodiversity, by greater conservation of protected areas and through measures that reduce unsustainable exploitation of high biodiversity regions.* This, the report says, will help in reducing the contact between wildlife-livestock and humans, thereby helping prevent the spill-over of new diseases. Further, the authors suggest a number of policy options that can help reduce the pandemic risk, which includes launching a high-level intergovernmental council on pandemic prevention, countries setting mutually-agreed goals or targets regarding the environment, animals and people, and reducing zoonotic disease risk in the international wildlife trade by forming intergovernmental 'health and trade' partnership.



MATHEMATICAL PROJECTION OF COVID

A committee of experts — well-regarded mathematicians and infectious disease experts — appointed by the Department of Science and Technology to use mathematical modelling and forecast the course of the pandemic has brought good tidings. By their estimate, *India passed its COVID-19 peak in September and the decline in the overall caseload being observed for nearly a month now is to continue.* Active cases, about 7.5 lakh now, are expected to drop below 50,000 by December, and by February, the pandemic is likely to extinguish itself with only 'minimal' (not zero) infections. While it is reasonable to assume that the seven-member committee has been scrupulous, the caveat is that this is still a forecast based on mathematical modelling. There are some strong assumptions. *The decline will continue only if there are no major mutations during winter, protective antibodies are durable, and current restrictions are maintained.* There would be no significant gains from a strict lockdown beyond the district level, and current containment measures would suffice, except if there are local outbreaks that threaten to overwhelm health-care facilities there. Their calculation also showed a peak by July latest, with anything from six to 15 times the existing infections had there been no lockdown or if it had been delayed to April.

The purpose of pandemic modelling is to generate a probabilistic overview of the future and mathematical modelling has become a popular, creative exercise, with several models and forecasts being made available on pre-print servers and pending peer-review. The latest model is expected to be published in the Indian Journal of Medical Research this week, but it appears to be a quotidian exercise. *The datasets it has relied on are publicly available and the modelling employs a category of models called SEIR that estimates, within a population, those Susceptible, Exposed, Infected and Recovered.* It is extremely dependent on the quality of data that is used as an input and relies as much on simplifying assumptions that sacrifice complexity for comprehension but there is nothing to suggest, from what is known about the exercise, that it is more likely to be true than similar estimates from scores of models the world over that subscribe to a certain degree of rigour. Experts associated with the pandemic have reiterated many times that mathematical modelling ought not to be taken literally. The latest assessment too should then be used not to critique or justify past decisions but dwell more on the future. For instance, if the model suggests that the pandemic would extinguish by February with a dramatic dip by December, then should the accelerated clinical trials of potential vaccines be top priority? Mathematical models, to be useful, must induce policy or behavioural change to avoid their own worst-case scenarios and this latest assessment must be seen — no more, no less — as a tool to this end.

MANY GAINS IN FIGHTING HIV (BILALI CAMARA - UNAIDS COUNTRY DIRECTOR FOR INDIA)

In this challenging moment when we are confronted with one of the biggest health emergencies in our history, the COVID-19 pandemic, we find our strength in the gains we are making despite this disruption.

Steps forward

The newly released 2019 HIV estimates by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO)/Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with the technical support of UNAIDS tell us that *there has been a 66.1% reduction in new HIV infections among children and a 65.3% reduction in AIDS-related deaths in India over a nine-year period.* The number of pregnant women living with HIV has reduced from 31,000 in 2010 to 20,000 in 2019. Overall, antenatal coverage has



expanded, and HIV testing has increased over time and within target range. Treatment coverage has also expanded. Under the leadership of NACO, a '**Fast-Tracking of EMTCT (elimination of mother-to-child transmission) strategy-cum-action plan**' was outlined by June 2019, in the run-up towards December 2020: the deadline to achieve EMTCT. The plan entailed mobilisation and reinforcement of all national, State and partners' collective efforts — in a strategic manner, with district-level focus, and considering latest evidence — so that the States/Union Territories and the country as a whole achieve the EMTCT goal. Additionally, in March 2020, we began efforts to minimise challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2010 to 2019, India made important progress in reducing the HIV impact on children through prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. This was done through education and communication programmes; increased access to HIV services with innovative delivery mechanisms for HIV testing (community-based testing, partner testing or index testing); counselling and care; and treatment and follow-ups. India made HIV testing for all pregnant women free and HIV treatment is offered the same way nationwide without cost to pregnant mothers living with HIV through the national 'treat all' policy. Cognisant of the challenge of diagnosing 20,000 pregnant women living with HIV in an estimated 30 million pregnancies annually in India, for two years UNICEF has worked with the World Health Organization and NACO to identify high burden districts (in terms of density of pregnant women living with HIV) as the last mile towards disease elimination. Since 2002, when the EMTCT of HIV programmes or prevention of parent-to-child transmission of HIV were launched in India, a series of policy, programmatic and implementation strategies were rolled out so that all pregnant women can access free HIV testing along with other services at antenatal clinics, and free treatment regimens for life to prevent HIV transmission from mothers to babies. This has been made possible in government health centres and grass-root level workers through village health and nutrition days and other grass-roots events under the National Health Mission. Indeed, the approach being promoted by UNICEF in focusing attention and resources in high burden districts is supported by the HIV strategic information division of NACO and UNAIDS to better understand the locations and populations most HIV affected, so that technical support and HIV services can be directed towards these areas.

Still a long way to go

However, there remains a need for increased treatment saturation coverage and for early HIV testing and treatment initiation to become the normal. While periodic monitoring of the data and reviews are the mainstay of the programme response, by 2019 it was very evident to all the stakeholders that while there are successes, we have a long way to go towards the final targets. Using data-driven and decision-making approaches, we are certain that AIDS will no longer be a public health threat for children in India by the end 2030, if not before.

WHO ARE AMERICA'S MALLAKHAMB COUPLE THAT PM MODI SPOKE ABOUT IN MANN KI BAAT?

In the 70th episode of Mann ki Baat last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi dwelt on Indian sports becoming popular in many countries in the West. He mentioned the US where an ancient Indian form of sports — **Mallakhamb** — was drawing in a steady stream of players, thanks to the efforts of a couple named Chinmay Patankar and Pradnya Patankar



What is Mallakhamb?

Mallakhamb is one of the few games that is played against gravity. It functions on a synergy of mind and body, employing every muscle in a way that enables a person to develop speed, stamina and better health. The name derives from the pole used by wrestlers for practising their skills though, today, Mallakhamb has developed an identity that is separate from wrestling or kushti. *The word malla means a wrestler or an athlete in Sanskrit and can also indicate a verb, such as strong or good. Khamb or kham, in spoken Marathi, means a pole.* Therefore, Mallakhamb has come to be known as wrestling against a pole. Nevertheless, there are two other Mallakhamb styles such as 'rope mallakhamb' and 'hanging mallakhamb'. According to the Mallakhamb Federation of USA, the brainchild of the Patankars, "The origin of this ancient Indian sport can be traced to earlier part of the 12th century. A mention of wrestlers exercising on wooden poles is found in the Manasholas, written by Chalukya, in 1153 AD. *It was revived late in the 19th century by Balambhatta Dada Deodhar, physical instructor to Bajirao Peshwa II.* He took great efforts to popularise this sport."

Who are Chinmay and Pradnya Patankar?

Chinmay and his partner Pradnya, originally from Pune, are experts of the form and have several competitions under their belt. Chinmay had shot into public imagination in Pune in 1996, when he had performed the gravity-defying moves of Mallakhamb on a moving truck during a Ganesh Puja immersion. Pradnya, a state-level sportsperson of Mallakhamb, is author of Mallakhamb Book of Knowledge. The curriculum at Mallakhamb Federation of USA, the body through which the duo are spreading the sport in the US, is derived from Pradnya's book and split into Basic, Intermediate and Advanced skills in five categories, such as mounts, dismounts, balances, acro skills and intercepts.

OAXACA, THE KHADI WOVEN IN A MEXICO VILLAGE, WHICH PM MODI MENTIONED IN 'MANN KI BAAT'

In his Mann ki Baat address on Sunday (October 25), Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked people to go vocal for local while shopping during the festival season, and particularly extolled the virtues of khadi – the handwoven cloth popularised by Mahatma Gandhi. Modi made a reference to the region of Oaxaca (pronounced O-aa-ha-ka) in Mexico, where he said khadi was being manufactured, and narrated an anecdote about how khadi reached the Latin American country after a local resident became influenced by a film on Mahatma Gandhi.

What is Mexico's Khadi Oaxaca?

Khadi Oaxaca is a farm-to-garment collective which comprises around 400 families, which live and work on traditional farms and homesteads in the Oaxaca region of southern Mexico. It has been founded by Mark "Marcos" Brown, an American living in Mexico, and his wife, Kalindi Attar. On its website, the project says it uses cotton produced and cultivated on the Oaxaca coast, and produces chemical-free clothing, relying on locally harvested plant-based dyes. Before starting the project, *Brown lived in India for 12 years, and was strongly influenced by Gandhi. For two years (1986-88), he lived in Gujarat's Sabarmati Ashram, where he learned about khadi. Brown began wearing the clothes that he had spun himself, and in the 1990s, brought a Charkha (spinning wheel) back with him to Oaxaca in Mexico.* Here, in the San Sebastián Rio Hondo village, he began teaching spinning to local families, and eventually started Khadi Oaxaca in 2010. Speaking to The Indian



Express, Brown said from Mexico, “We are indeed grateful for the recognition of Khadi Oaxaca by the honourable PM Narendra Modi, and couldn’t have asked for a greater appreciation. The points mentioned by the PM were indication of his deeper understanding and love for Khadi. It is so wonderful in today’s world that India’s revered leader is looking out for the humble villager.” Brown said that he had been contacted by the Indian Embassy in Mexico to speak about Khadi Oaxaca earlier this month, but was caught unawares by Modi’s praise on Sunday.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

WHY IS THE ISSUE OF PERSONAL GUARANTORS UNDER IBC IN SC?

The Supreme Court transferred to itself all the petitions challenging the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) provisions relating to initiation of insolvency proceedings against personal guarantors. It will now hear these cases on December 2.

What is a personal guarantee?

To secure loans easily and effectively and to showcase their intent to repay bank dues on time, the promoters of some of the big business houses submit a personal guarantee to the lenders. It is sort of like an assurance from the owner or the owners of the company that the monies borrowed by their company for various purposes shall be re-paid on time as per the agreed schedule. It is different from the collateral that firms give to banks to take loans, as Indian corporate laws say that individuals such as promoters are different from businesses and the two are very separate entities. A personal guarantee is most likely to be furnished by a promoter or promoter entity when the banks demand for collateral which equals the risk they are taking by lending to the firm, which may not be doing so well.

So why is the issue of personal guarantee and guarantors in the Supreme Court?

With the recovery proceedings under the IBC not moving at the pace that it should, the government had always wanted to make promoters of loan defaulters, wilful or otherwise, accountable for their actions when they were at the helm of companies that are now undergoing insolvency resolution. *In December 2019, the government came out with a new provision that empowered banks to move an application for initiation of insolvency against personal guarantors to corporate debtors.* In cases of most big companies that were in the Reserve Bank of India's list for being big defaulters, the actions of erstwhile promoters have been under the lens of the government as well as its probe agencies. Therefore, in order to ensure that maximum recovery could be made for lenders along with the resolution of debt of companies, the Finance Ministry nudged banks to also pursue personal insolvency cases against promoters who had furnished personal guarantees for the loans taken by their firms, which later was not re-paid as per the agreed schedule. *The new provision, however, was challenged by as many as 19 promoters before different high courts, claiming that it was always a management board that ran the company and, therefore, the promoters alone should not be held liable for the default on debt repayment.*

What are the issues under challenge in these cases?

One of the major contentions is that if insolvency tribunals start accepting the plea of banks on personal insolvency, it could lead to the initiation of insolvency twice for the same debt. Though the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) has, in the past, held that corporate insolvency can not be initiated twice for the same set of default, banks have argued that apart from getting the appropriate bids for debt-laden companies, owners who have been declared to be wilful defaulters should also be held liable and their personal guarantees be invoked. For example, in the case of Bhushan Power and Steel, the former promoter of the company Sanjay Singhal and his wife Aarti Singhal had furnished personal guarantees worth up to Rs 24,550 crore to take loans from a consortium of bank led by State Bank of India (SBI). The group later defaulted on loans



worth Rs 48,000 crore. In September this year, SBI invoked the personal guarantees submitted by Sanjay Singhal. Similarly, the banks have also moved personal insolvency application against Anil Ambani after two companies promoted by him failed to pay dues on Rs 1,200 crore that they had borrowed from SBI. Ambani had given personal guarantees against these loans.

What happens to promoters or personal guarantors after these insolvency petitions?

Like corporate insolvency processes, a businessperson, be it the promoter or the personal guarantor, 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.

MARKET DICTATES AND A BLOW AGAINST EQUALITY

On October 27, the Supreme Court of India heard brief arguments on the constitutional validity of the levy of Goods and Services Tax (GST) on mobility aids used by disabled citizens. The petitioner, in Nipun Malhotra vs. Union of India, argued that the tax imposed on these products, which included wheelchairs, tricycles for the disabled, braille paper and braille watches, was patently discriminatory. But the Court indicated that the scope of its power to review the levy was slender. A decision to impose a tax, it said, was a matter of policy over which the judiciary ought not to ordinarily interfere. In adjourning the case, it suggested that the petitioner exhaust his options by submitting his grievances to the GST Council, which is the governing body responsible for determining which products are taxed, and at what rate.

END OF THE TUNNEL?

Over ₹1.05 lakh crore has been collected from the Goods and Services Tax in October, the highest monthly revenue from the indirect tax since February 2020. This marks the second successive month of a year-on-year uptick in the GST kitty — the 10.25% rise in October was preceded by a 4% increase in September. Coming on the back of six successive months of contraction in GST revenues beginning March when the lockdown was imposed, this two-month trend clearly signifies a recovery is underway in the economy, the government has claimed. October's revenues broadly pertain to economic activity that occurred in September, a month in which significant improvements were recorded in a range of high-frequency indicators, including exports and the purchasing managers' index (PMI) for manufacturing. Only a part of that can be explained by the base effect — September 2019 had seen a dip in several indicators. Indeed, the wider unlocking of the economy in September when public transport restrictions were lifted and several sectors were allowed to operate with fewer curbs, helped. After the 23.9% collapse for the economy in the first quarter of 2020-21, the sense of relief from a string of positive numbers isn't misplaced. The few signs that have come in about October's economic performance suggest GST revenues could remain healthy in November too. The manufacturing PMI for October, released on Monday, has risen even higher, indicating large firms scaled up production further. India's largest auto makers have clocked record sales in October, which incidentally should prop up the GST cess collections used to compensate States — a federal flashpoint this year.

Yet, any prognosis of a full-fledged economic recovery could still prove to be premature and illusory. Economists have reservations about reading too much into the September-October data



as a sustainable trend, for it partly represents pent-up demand brewing over the months of lockdown finding expression, and partly India's fabled festive season effect. North Block mandarins recently critiqued these 'experts' for their changing opinions, swinging from a doomsday scenario in June to a cynical 'pent-up demand' surmise when economic indicators improve. Talking up the economy is perhaps a necessary policy device at times, but equally critical is a realistic assessment of ground realities so as to prepare better for what lies ahead. One such parameter that needs attention is employment. The government has not ruled out more stimulus measures in the coming months. Much depends on the sensitivity of its evolving worldview, be it about the pandemic's spread and control, or the most challenged sectors in the economy that still need support.

WHY INVENTORY GAINS ARE HELPING OIL COMPANIES

Both Indian Oil Corporation Ltd. (IOCL) and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (BPCL) have reported strong financial results in the second quarter of this fiscal despite lower operating revenues. The key item driving profits for both companies in the quarter were "inventory gains". We examine what causes inventory gains and how they impact the financial performance of oil marketing companies. HPCL, the third major state owned oil refiner, has not yet reported financial results for the second quarter.

What are inventory gains?

*Inventory gains are registered from an appreciation in the value of inventory held by a company. In the case of oil marketing companies, inventory gains can be caused by an appreciation in the price of crude classified as **refining inventory gains** or an appreciation in the price of products such as petrol and diesel classified as **marketing inventory gains**. Refining inventory gains are a result of an appreciation in the price of crude oil in the company's inventory. OMCs purchased crude oil in April when the price of Brent crude hit a low of \$19.33 per barrel. The price of Brent crude oil recovered to around \$40- 45 \$ per barrel in mid-June though a recent fall has pushed it to \$38 per barrel in late October. OMC, can also get inventory gains from an upward change in the price of end products including petrol and diesel that they have in stock. *The price of petrol and diesel are calculated based on benchmark prices of petrol and diesel in the international market.* Notably, OMCs were likely insulated from some possible declines in the international price of petrol and diesel as they stopped revising prices on a daily basis from March 16 to June 6 when international prices of petrol and diesel fell sharply as a result of low international crude prices.*

What quantifies operational performance of OMCs when inventory gains and losses play such a major role in earnings?

While analysts do take into account the ability of a company to claw back inventory losses incurred, they assess operational performance by comparing gross profits with EBITDA or operating profit to assess the underlying operating performance of the company.

WHY DIESEL SALES ARE FINALLY GROWING SINCE LOCKDOWN

Diesel sales in India grew for the first time in October since the lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19 was imposed in March. October diesel sales of the three major state-owned oil marketing companies – Indian Oil Corporation Ltd., Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. and Hindustan



Petroleum Corporation Ltd. grew by 6.6% to 6,173 Thousand Metric Tonnes (TMT) up from 5,790 TMT in October 2019. Petrol sales which had crossed Pre-Covid levels in September also grew by 4.0% to 2,390 TMT in October. *Diesel consumption is a key indicator of economic activity and sales by the leading state-owned OMCs grew by 27.5% over diesel sales in September.*

Are diesel and petrol sales on a sustained growth trajectory?

S M Vaidya, chairman of India Oil noted in a recent press interaction that the company expected that diesel sales would reach pre-Covid levels by November and that *petrol sales had recovered fully to pre-Covid levels. Petrol sales continue to benefit from an increased preference for personal mobility but the sharp growth in diesel sales may be a result of some pent-up demand from previous months which was not fulfilled, according to industry sources.* The *sale of aviation turbine fuel, however, remained down by 50% in October with Indian airlines still serving far fewer passengers as compared to pre-Covid levels.* Indian airlines carried 3.94 million passengers during September, down 65.8% compared to September 2019.

WHY ENERGY MNCS WANT NATURAL GAS TO COME UNDER GST

Global energy majors are bullish on the growth of natural gas usage in India and have called on the government to bring natural gas under the GST regime at the India energy Forum being held this week. *Currently petrol, diesel, aviation turbine fuel, natural gas and crude oil fall outside India's Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime.* Government officials have also indicated that the government is considering bringing natural gas under the ambit of the GST regime. "GST was a welcome federal initiative to ease trade and it will be good if natural gas is included in that," said Bernard Looney, CEO of British Petroleum noting that under the current regime India was a complex market, as it has 29 markets within itself (because of differences in state laws).

Why is it important to bring natural gas under the GST regime?

Experts have argued that bringing natural gas under the GST would lead to a reduction in the cascading impact of taxes on industries such as power and steel, which used natural gas as an input. The inclusion of natural gas under the GST regime would *do away with the central excise duty and different value added taxes imposed by states.* This would lead to an increase in the adoption of natural gas in line with the government's stated goal to increase the share of natural gas in the country's energy basket from 6.3% to 15%.

HOW COVID-19 HAS AFFECTED FINANCES OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

The Reserve Bank of India's study on state governments' finances, released on Tuesday, indicates that gross fiscal deficits (GFDs) of state governments are set to double in 2020-21. With the Covid-19 pandemic having hit the financial position of states hard, the next few years are going to be challenging.

Where are GFDs of states headed?

In 2020-21, about half the states have budgeted the *GFD-to-GSDP (gross state domestic product) ratio* at or above the 3% threshold, although most of these budgets were presented prior to the onset of Covid-19, the RBI said. *The direction of possible revision is evident from the fact that the average for states presenting their budget before the outbreak of the pandemic is 2.4% of GSDP,*



while it is 4.6% for the remaining states that made their budget presentations after the outbreak. Thus, states are grappling with the pandemic with constrained fiscal space. In terms of primary balances, most states are incurring primary deficits in 2019-20, as against primary surpluses at the onset of the global financial crisis, the RBI study said.

How long will the stress continue?

The crisis literature focuses on the operation of 'scissor effects' — loss of revenues due to demand slowdown, coupled with higher expenditure associated with the pandemic. The duration of stress on state finances will likely be contingent upon factors such as the lockdown tenure and the risk of new waves of infection, all of which make traditional backward-looking tax buoyancy forecasting models unreliable, according to the RBI study. The quality of spending and the credibility of state budgets will assume critical importance. The next few years are going to be challenging for the states, it said.

What will be the impact on states?

Given the clear inter-linkages between growth and tax revenues and considering the fact that *tax revenues fall faster than GDP when growth is negative*, tax revenues are likely to be reduced for the next few years, the RBI said. Pandemic-related spending, particularly on health and other support measures, are likely to keep these expenditures high, prolonging the 'scissor effects'. In addition, states' fiscal position is likely to be affected by a surge in contingent liabilities (guarantees). In this milieu, state governments may have to face the tough choice of putting investment projects on hold, but, given the multiplier associated with capital spending, this will inevitably entail growth losses in a vicious cycle. "States' indebtedness is set to rise, and if it is not accompanied by an acceleration in growth, fiscal sustainability will become the casualty, overwhelming the modest gains of the prudence in recent years," it said.

What happened during earlier pandemics?

An event study analysis using four pandemics in India — the 1896 plague, the 1918 Spanish flu, the 1957 Asian flu and the 1974 smallpox — shows that all of these were associated with a contraction/deceleration in GDP, with the 1918 flu registering the sharpest downturn of about 13%. The recovery pattern is similar — a sharp rebound in the immediate subsequent year because of favourable base effects, followed by contraction again, and the GDP growth rate finally returning to pre-pandemic levels in 3-4 years. These outbreaks have also depressed per capita economic output, with varied magnitudes. The recovery, however, has been observed to be swift and complete within two years of the outbreak, except *in the case of the 1918 flu when GDP per capita was restored to pre-outbreak levels only in 1922.*

WHAT WHATSAPP PAYMENTS MEANS TO INDIAN USERS; WHO CAN USE WHATSAPP PAY?

Facebook-owned messaging app WhatsApp has received approval from National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) to go live on its Unified Payments Interface (UPI) service. Even though NPCI has only allowed the platform to scale its user base up to 20 million registered users from the 1 million currently, the green light means that cap will be subject to review by NPCI at a later stage. However, *WhatsApp will be subject to a cap on transactions conducted on the platform at 30% of total UPI volumes from January 1 following new rules issued by the NPCI for all service providers.* This cap on number of transactions was first discussed at NPCI more than a year ago, to



keep in check the growing dominance of non-banking payments providers like Google Pay, PhonePe, etc in the UPI ecosystem.

What does the clearance mean for the UPI ecosystem?

India's UPI ecosystem is flooded with numerous players including payment service provider banks and third-party application providers such as Alibaba-backed Paytm, Flipkart-owned PhonePe, Google Pay, Amazon Pay, among others. WhatsApp has been operating in the space with a 1-million customer cap for the last two years, and clearance from NPCI means the messaging platform can scale its presence up in a segment that is controlled in majority by just two players.

What does the clearance mean for WhatsApp?

First and foremost, the clearance will allow WhatsApp to offer service to 20 times as many users as it does now and this will assume significance in its plans to capitalise on its association with Reliance Industries. *Reliance Jio's grocery delivery service, JioMart, allows users to make orders through WhatsApp and with a payments service, the integration between the two platforms could see further augmentation.*

Who can use WhatsApp Pay?

Eventually all of WhatsApp's users with a bank account and a debit card in one of the 160 banks participating in UPI will be allowed to use the payments service but *as of now NPCI has restricted the user base to 20 million out of WhatsApp's over 400 million.* Given that WhatsApp is a non-banking payments service provider, it has tied up with five banks to enable the service — ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, and Jio Payments Bank.

How do payments on WhatsApp work?

To send money on WhatsApp in India, it's necessary to have a bank account and debit card in India. WhatsApp, like Google Pay or PhonePe, sends instructions to banks, also known as payment service providers, that initiate the transfer of money via UPI between sender and receiver bank accounts. People can send money on WhatsApp to anyone using a UPI supported app.

What has been the journey of WhatsApp's payment service?

The company has been entangled in legal and regulatory tussles with entities including RBI, NPCI and even the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to launch its UPI-based payments service to its entire customer base. After it was allowed to pilot test its product in February 2018 with 1 million customers, WhatsApp was subjected to various demands from these entities such as data localisation, presence of a local grievance officer and having domestic offices. *The company was able to meet the data localisation rule issued by the RBI, as per an audit report WhatsApp submitted to the NPCI.* A case was also filed against WhatsApp at the Competition Commission of India alleging abuse of its dominant position to launch WhatsApp Pay in India but the antitrust panel dismissed the case.

Does the 30% cap announced by NPCI impact WhatsApp's rollout?

The 30% cap announced by NPCI for third-party application providers stipulates that any of these platforms should not handle more than 30% of total transaction volumes of UPI on a three-month rolling period basis. This would *impede WhatsApp from growing beyond that point even if it was*



allowed to roll the service out to all of its 400 million+ customers. Other apps like PhonePe and Google Pay, the market shares of which exceed 30% in terms of transaction volumes have been given time till 2023 to comply with the norms.

REINFORCING RBI'S ACCOUNTABILITY

Popular narrative suggests that the Central government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a low tolerance for inflation. But this may not be very accurate. *In each of the last three quarters, average inflation has not only exceeded the target, but has persisted above the upper tolerance limit set by the Centre. Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index (CPI), was 6.7% in the January-March quarter, 6.6% in the April-June quarter (based on imputed data) and 6.9% in the July-September quarter. At 5.8%, the average inflation rate for the October-December 2019 quarter was also within a hair's breadth of the upper tolerance limit. The inflation target, notified in August 2016, is 4%. The upper tolerance level was set at 6% and the lower tolerance level at 2%. Average inflation overshooting the upper tolerance level or remaining below the lower tolerance level for any three consecutive quarters constitutes a failure to achieve the inflation target. In such an event, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is required to send a report to the Centre, stating the reasons for the failure to achieve the inflation target, the remedial actions it proposes to initiate, and an estimate of the time-period within which it expects to achieve the inflation target through the corrective steps proposed. Through amendments passed by Parliament in 2016, these new provisions were written into the RBI Act. They are aimed at ensuring enhanced transparency and accountability of the central bank and are a key feature of the inflation-targeting regime agreed upon between the RBI and Finance Ministry.*

Data limitations

For a while now, a determined lobby, with elements both within and outside government, has been injecting confusion into the discourse on the desirability of persisting with the inflation-targeting regime. This is probably because high inflation makes all that is measured in nominal terms appear rosier — like business revenues and profits, or tax collection figures in the Finance Ministry's budget arithmetic. The minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting after its August policy review suggest that the RBI's defence for the breach of the 4% inflation target and 6% upper tolerance limit was the handicap of data limitations. The normal data collection exercise of the National Statistics Office was disrupted during the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The publication of the CPI had to be suspended for the months of April and May. The CPI for these two months was imputed using proxies for several of the index's components, as field visits for collecting the requisite price data were put off, leading the MPC to conclude that the improvised prints ought to be regarded as a break in the CPI series for the purpose of monetary policy decisions.

Accommodative range

However, the break that the MPC referred to is not visible in the inflation data. The data for the last four quarters — 5.8%, 6.7%, 6.6%, 6.9% — appears continuous. The average inflation for the April-June quarter, at 6.6%, looks reasonable, despite the imputations, probably because, as the RBI's October Monetary Policy Report notes, once the COVID-19-related restrictions were lifted and non-essential activities partially restored, data collection resumed, allowing for the provisional index for June to be compiled. Prices could be collected from 1,030 urban markets and



998 villages, that accounted for 88% of the total sample. Even so, the justification of data complications, which is a rather weak one, it has been reported, is likely to be made the basis for exempting the RBI from complying with the requirement of writing to the Finance Ministry, explaining why inflation missed both the target and the upper tolerance limit. This is inexcusable. *The range around the inflation target that the Ministry provided to the RBI is for accommodating constraints and challenges like data limitations.* The press statement that the Finance Ministry had issued at the time of setting the target makes this quite clear. The whole point of the range around the target, the statement emphasised, is that it “accommodates data limitations, projection errors, short-run supply gaps and fluctuations in the agriculture production”. *The last factor is an important one for CPI inflation, as food articles constitute about 46% of the CPI basket.* The range, according to the Ministry’s statement, allows for unanticipated short-term shocks to be accommodated, even while nudging public inflation expectations to the target at the centre of the range, to which the monetary policy ought to return the economy over the medium term. It is hard to imagine what could be gained by letting the RBI side-step the institutional mechanism provided under the RBI Act for explaining the challenges it is up against in meeting the inflation target and what needs to be done to manage them. Why should the RBI not be made to explain what it plans to do to control inflation? The central bank should be allowed to state expressly what support by way of government policy it needs to meet the inflation target. This can only strengthen the RBI’s hand; it should not let go of the opportunity to reinforce the MPC framework. Transparency can enable more informed decision-making within the government, greater public scrutiny of the RBI’s performance, and an improved inflation-targeting regime. To slack off on it would be to compromise with the credibility, transparency and predictability of monetary policy.

COMPOUND CONUNDRUM

The Centre’s scheme to bear the difference between the compound interest and simple interest on retail and MSME loans availed by borrowers whose aggregate outstanding borrowings were less than ₹2 crore between March 1 and August 31, has come not a day too soon. In spelling out the norms for lenders to identify eligible beneficiaries and then ensure that *the extra ‘interest on interest’ be refunded by November 5,* the government has clearly been spurred by the Supreme Court’s admonition to expedite relief to small borrowers. With the top court having pointedly referenced the approaching festival of lights when it said “the common man’s Diwali” was in the government’s hands, the Centre has ended up setting a really tight deadline of less than two weeks for banks and NBFCs to credit the differential amount to the borrowers’ accounts. The lenders have their task cut out to make sure that they pick out all the eligible loans — education, housing, consumer durables, automobiles, consumption, credit card borrowings, as well as credit provided to MSMEs — and that the borrowings had not turned into non-performing assets as on February 29. *They will then have to refund the difference between the compound interest charged for the six-month period and the simple interest. In making all the specified borrowers eligible for the ‘ex-gratia’, the government has sought to ensure equity between those who may have availed of the repayment moratorium and others who had opted to continue to service their borrowings.*

The move, however, has understandably evoked both relief and some disquiet. Retail borrowers, especially those who continued to meet their EMI commitments notwithstanding the disruptions caused by the pandemic and lockdowns, stand to marginally benefit from the government’s payment and will be a relieved lot. On the other hand, MSMEs may find the assistance far too small to make a material difference, given the scale of economic hardship they have had to endure —



from demand destruction, to material and labour shortages and regulatory woes. Given that these businesses provide substantial direct and indirect employment and also generate valuable tax revenue, it would have made far greater economic sense for the government to have categorised them separately. The additional fiscal impact should be seen against the benefit that would accrue were even a reasonable number of these enterprises to remain viable and resume their contribution to the national economy. Also, the ₹2-crore limit for retail loans provides succour to not just 'vulnerable' borrowers but creates a moral hazard by benefiting the well-heeled too. All eyes will now be on the Court when it resumes hearing the matter next month.

WHAT IS A BULK DRUG PARK, AND WHY DOES HIMACHAL WANT ONE?

Himachal Pradesh is one of the states vying for the allotment of a bulk drug park under a central government scheme announced earlier this year for setting up three such parks across the country. The state government has identified around 1,400 acres in Una district and sent a proposal to the Centre seeking grant to set up a bulk drug park there.

What are bulk drugs or APIs?

A bulk drug, also called an active pharmaceutical ingredient (API), is the key ingredient of a drug or medicine, which lends it the desired therapeutic effect or produces the intended pharmacological activity. For example, paracetamol is a bulk drug, which acts against pain. It is mixed with binding agents or solvents to prepare the finished pharmaceutical product, i.e. a paracetamol tablet, capsule or syrup, which is consumed by the patient.

What are KSMs and DIs?

APIs are prepared from multiple reactions involving chemicals and solvents. The primary chemical or the basic raw material which undergoes reactions to form an API is called the key starting material, or KSM. Chemical compounds formed during the intermediate stages during these reactions are called drug intermediates or DIs.

Why is India promoting bulk drug parks?

India has one of the largest pharmaceutical industries in the world (third largest by volume) but this industry largely depends on other countries, particularly China, for importing APIs, DIs and KSMs. This year, drug manufacturers in India suffered repeated setbacks due to disruption in imports. In January, factories in China shut down when the country went into a lockdown, and later, international supply chains were affected as the Covid pandemic gripped the entire world. The border conflict between India and China exacerbated the situation. All these factors pushed the Indian government to call for greater self-reliance across all industries, and in June, *the department of pharmaceuticals announced a scheme for the promotion of three bulk drug parks in the country.*

What will a bulk drug park look like, and what does the scheme offer?

A bulk drug park will have a designated contiguous area of land with common infrastructure facilities for the exclusive manufacture of APIs, DIs or KSMs, and also a common waste management system. These parks are expected to bring down manufacturing costs of bulk drugs in the country and increase competitiveness in the domestic bulk drug industry. *The Centre's scheme will support three selected parks in the country by providing a one-time grant-in-aid for the*



creation of common infrastructure facilities. The grant-in-aid will be 70 per cent of the cost of the common facilities but in the case of Himachal Pradesh and other hill states, it will be 90 per cent. The Centre will provide a maximum of ₹1,000 crore per park.

How will the Centre select the three parks?

Several states including Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Telangana have expressed interest in the scheme, and are likely to send their respective proposals. A state can only propose one site, which is not less than a thousand acres in area, or not less than 700 acres in the case of hill states. The proposals should contain the estimated cost, feasibility studies, environmental risk assessment etc. A project management agency, nominated by the department of pharmaceuticals, will examine these proposals and make recommendations to a scheme steering committee, which will then approve the proposals.

How strong is Himachal's case?

The state is keen to attract investment to strengthen its economy and generate employment. It organised a global investors' meet last year, and has introduced reforms such as a single window clearance and online approval system for industrial units. *Himachal jumped nine places in this year's ease-of-doing-business rankings declared by the Centre last month, securing the seventh position in the country.* According to the state government, *Himachal already has Asia's largest pharma manufacturing hub, that is the Baddi-Barotiwala-Nalagarh industrial belt, and the state produces around half of India's total drug formulations.* Chief Minister Thakur claimed that Himachal offers power and water at the lowest tariffs in the country, and the state also has an industrial gas pipeline.

A SECURE FUTURE FOR PLATFORM WORKERS

The Code on Social Security Bill, 2020, for the first time in Indian law, attempted to define 'platform work' outside of the traditional employment category. It says: "Platform work means a work arrangement outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services or any such other activities which may be notified by the Central Government, in exchange for payment." While the long overdue move to recognise platform work has been made, *the Code has drawn criticism from platform workers' associations for failing to delineate it from gig work and unorganised work.* A categorical clarification could ensure that social security measures are provided to workers without compromising the touted qualities of platform work: flexibility and a sense of ownership. An ongoing global conversation on platform workers' rights has been around the misclassification of platform workers as 'independent contractors'; *adjudications and emerging amendments to labour laws in Ontario and California have shown a move towards granting employee status to platform workers, thus guaranteeing minimum wage and welfare benefits.* This is the view propagated by international agencies in the EU, including the European Trade Union.

Flexibility of the platform

The ostensible preference for employment status stems from the fact that *while platform work promises workers flexibility and ownership over delivery of work, they are still largely dictated by mechanisms of control wired by the algorithm. This affects pricing per unit of work, allocation of*



work, and hours. Additionally, entry into on-demand platform work like ride sharing and food delivery are dependent on existing access to vehicular assets. The average Indian worker on a ride-sharing platform has limited access to such capital. Thus, to enter the platform economy, workers rely on intensive loan schemes, often facilitated by platform aggregator companies. This results in dependence on platform companies, driven by financial obligations, thus rendering flexibility and ownership moot in the short- to middle-term investment cycle. However, contrasting evidence suggests that for specific categories of workers with basic access to capital, the flexibility of the platform is a significant attraction. Smallholder agrarian labour migrants with access to vehicular assets and capital hailing from peri-urban areas rely on the low barrier of entry and flexibility of platform work to accumulate wealth that they invest back into farm work. *The Code states the provision of basic welfare measures as a joint responsibility of the Central government, platform aggregators, and workers. However, it does not state which stakeholder is responsible for delivering what quantum of welfare.* To mitigate operational breakdowns in providing welfare services, a tripartite effort by the State, companies, and workers to identify where workers fall on the spectrum of flexibility and dependence on platform companies is critical. The role of platform workers amidst the pandemic has presented a strong case to attribute a more robust responsibility to platform aggregator companies and the State. As argued by Aditi Surie, platform workers were responsible for delivery of essential services during the pandemic at great personal risk to themselves. They have also been responsible for keeping platform companies afloat despite the pandemic-induced financial crisis. This has cemented their role as public infrastructures who also sustain demand-driven aggregators. The dependence of companies on platform workers merits a jointly assumed responsibility by public and private institutions to deliver welfare measures. A way forward for platform workers is through a socio-legal acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of work in the gig economy, and the ascription of joint accountability to the State and platform companies for the delivery of social services.

HOW AND WHY HAVE BIDDING PARAMETERS IN AIR INDIA'S DIVESTMENT CHANGED?

The Centre on October 29 announced several changes to the bidding parameters in the Air India disinvestment process. These include changing of the value on the basis of which the bid is made by a potential investor, upfront cash deposit amount, and extension of deadline for submitting expressions of interest.

What are the changes done to Air India's bidding parameters?

To begin with, the government has taken a call to *allow prospective bidders the flexibility to decide the level of debt they wish to take on along with the loss-laden airline*, thus marking a shift from the exercise of combining a fixed level of debt with the carrier. Earlier, the Centre had frozen the long-term liabilities to be bundled with the sale at ₹23,286.50 crore. Another change being made to the bid conditions is that *the winning bidder will have to deposit at least 15% of their bid amount in cash with the government ahead of the share transfer.*

Why have these changes been made?

In January, the Government had set March 17 as the deadline to sell its 100 per cent shareholding in Air India along with Air India's 100 per cent holding in Air India Express and 50 per cent share in Air India-SATS, a joint venture with Singapore Airport Terminal Services. However, on account of the Covid-19 outbreak, the deadline was extended multiple times. Following the pandemic and



its impact on the aviation industry, the government, in consultation with various stakeholders, considered several options to handle the Air India disinvestment process. According to the government, the increased amount of losses for the aviation industry globally due to Covid meant that “fixing the debt at any level could have reduced the universe of bidders”. Further, *the 15 per cent clause has been brought in to ensure that a successful investor has skin in the game.*

Will these changes hasten Air India’s disinvestment?

While the government expects that the tweaks will provide more flexibility, thereby bringing in more potential investors, executives in civil aviation still expect the bleak condition of the industry to hinder the process given that after purchasing the airline from the government, *the new investor will need to invest further to keep the loss-making airline afloat.*

What are the alternatives that the government considered?

During the meetings of the Air India Special Alternate Mechanism — a group of ministers headed by Home Minister Amit Shah to decide on the airline’s disinvestment — a number of options were discussed along with allowing bidders to submit a quote without any pre-fixed level of debt. These included the government continuing to run operations without privatisation for a “few months/years till the situation stabilises” and winding up the business operations of Air India.

Why is the disinvestment of Air India important for the government?

In the Union Budget for financial year 2020-21, the government had set itself a disinvestment target of ₹2.1 lakh crore. The government is expecting to raise ₹90,000 crore through stake sale in Life Insurance Corporation and IDBI Bank, and another ₹1.2 lakh crore through other disinvestments including BPCL, Container Corporation of India, Shipping Corporation of India and Air India.

WHY SUGAR INDUSTRY DESPERATELY NEEDS EXPORT SUBSIDY THIS SEASON

The sugar industry has reacted strongly to Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal’s announcement that the central government is not considering an extension of its export subsidy for the 2020-21 sugar season. The industry has warned of a ‘vertical collapse’ in the sector due to excessive stock, whose ramification can be felt in the years to come. Here’s why this issue has shaken the sugar industry before the start of an otherwise good season.

Why are mills reluctant to export sugar without a government subsidy?

The mills’ reluctance stems from the gap between cost of manufacturing and the current price of raw sugar in international markets. Sugar contracts at international markets are trading at ₹21-22 per kg, while the cost of production is at ₹32. The price mismatch has ruled out any export prospects as this would lead to further loss for the mills. Ironically, mills are facing this problem at a time when Indian sugar has made its mark in the international markets. *Last season, India has reported record sugar export of 60 lakh tonne, of which 57 lakh tonne have already left the country. The remaining consignment is expected to leave by the end of December. Other than the traditional markets of Bangladesh, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, Indian mills have also shipped their produce to newer countries like Iran, China, South Korea and Somalia.*

How did the mills manage to export sugar last season?



The record export level last season was possible only because of the subsidy programme offered by the central government. Mills were promised a transport subsidy of ₹10.448 per kg of sugar exported. This subsidy had helped mills bridge the difference between production costs and international prices. Also, the Union Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies was strict about compliance, which led to mills toeing the line in terms of exports. A higher demand in international markets had also seen Indian mills reporting good exports. However, last week, Goyal ruled out any extension of the subsidy scheme as the international sugar scenario is currently stable. Industry watches said *the delay in India's export subsidy scheme had seen sugar prices rallying, and the benefit is largely being drawn by Brazil, which is the largest sugar manufacturer of the world.* As a second Covid-19-induced lockdown looms large over Europe, Brazilian mills are considering diverting 48 per cent of their cane towards sugar production, much higher than the earlier 35 per cent they were planning to.

Have last season's exports helped mills generate enough liquidity?

No. The central government is yet to release the export subsidy due to the mills and the total due is as high as ₹6,900 crore. Individual mills had taken loans to facilitate exports and now they have to pay interest to the banks. Unpaid interest of ₹3,000 crore for maintaining buffer stock has also hit hard the balance sheet of mills. The Covid-19 pandemic has further delayed the release of subsidy, which has led to many mills not having sufficient liquidity at the start of the season. Naiknavare pointed out how the sugar sector failed to get any mention in the fiscal packages announced by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to boost the economy.

But why can't mills concentrate on ethanol production, given the government's emphasis on the fuel additive?

Last week, the central government has announced a ₹1-3 per litre rise in the procurement price of ethanol. This is the second signal given by the government to mills to divert cane towards production of ethanol rather than sugar. The industry has estimated that this year, nearly 20 lakh tonne of sugar will be diverted towards producing ethanol. Last year, the central government had announced an interest subvention scheme for mills to augment production of ethanol. But diversion to ethanol, although a much-needed move, will require time to materialise. With the present capacity, mills can produce 426 crore litres of ethanol, which would require diversion of 15-20 lakh tonnes of sugar. "While the government's move to encourage mills towards ethanol production is certainly welcome, it would require more capital and time. For the current season, in case exports are not made viable, not only will India lose its market share, but mills will certainly feel the liquidity crunch. The effect of this will be disastrous for the sector,".

WHAT'S NEXT IN FUTURE-RELIANCE VS AMAZON?

A tribunal in Singapore on Sunday (October 25) evening restrained Future Group and Reliance Industries Limited from proceeding with a ₹24,713-crore deal signed in August for Future Retail to sell its retail, wholesale, logistics and warehousing units to Reliance Retail and Fashionstyle. The emergency order by the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC) came on a plea from global e-commerce giant Amazon.



Why did Amazon approach SIAC for arbitration?

The arbitral institution administering the arbitration, the applicable rules and the seat of arbitration is decided as per the contractual agreement between the parties. In this case Amazon and Future Group have under their agreement agreed to refer their disputes to SIAC, with Singapore presumably being the contractual choice for the seat/place of arbitration.

Why was an emergency award passed to stop the Future-RIL deal?

Once a dispute is referred to arbitration pursuant to the agreement between the parties, the process of appointment of the arbitral tribunal takes place. *Typically, in case of a three member tribunal, both the parties appoint one member each to the tribunal, while the third member is jointly appointed by the two nominees or, if they fail to agree, by SIAC.* This process takes a certain time to complete. However, *under the rules of SIAC, parties can move SIAC to appoint an emergency arbitrator to get urgent interim relief,* even as the process of appointment of the main arbitral tribunal is underway. Accordingly, *pursuant to Amazon's request, an Emergency Arbitrator was appointed by SIAC, who after hearing the parties passed the emergency award.*

How can this interim award be enforced on the parties in India?

Currently under Indian law, there is no express mechanism for enforcement of the orders of the Emergency Arbitrator. Typically, the parties voluntarily comply with the Emergency Award. However, if the parties don't comply with the order voluntarily, then the party which has won the emergency award, in this case Amazon, can move the High Court in India under Section 9 of the Arbitration & Conciliation Act, 1996, to get similar reliefs as granted by the Emergency Arbitrator. Kabra said that in the past, High Courts in India have passed orders which indirectly enforced the reliefs granted by the Emergency Arbitrator.

Can Future Group challenge the interim award of the emergency arbitrator in India?

The Future Group cannot challenge the order passed by the Emergency Arbitrator in India. It may either apply before the Emergency Arbitrator itself showing cause why the order should be vacated or modified, or await the constitution of the arbitral tribunal and then apply before the main tribunal. However, if a petition is filed before the High Court in India under Section 9 of the Arbitration & Conciliation Act, 1996, then the Future Group could put forth its objections on why the reliefs as granted by the Emergency Arbitrator should not be granted by the High Court.

Why has Singapore become the hub of international arbitration?

Singapore has emerged as the preferred location for international arbitration involving Indian companies as foreign investors typically want to avoid the rigmarole of the Indian courts. "Foreign investors who have invested in India feel that Singapore is neutral ground for dispute resolution. *Singapore itself over time has built a stellar reputation as jurisdiction driven by rule of law with international standards and high integrity.* This gives comfort to investors that the arbitration process will be quick, fair and just," said Nishith Desai, founder of Nishith Desai Associates and a former board member of SIAC. *India now has its own international arbitration centre in Mumbai.* But in context of arbitration, this is a recent development. *According to the 2019 annual report of SIAC, India was the top user of its arbitration seat with 485 cases being referred to SIAC, followed by Philippines at 122, China at 76 and the United States at 65.*



Will this interim award have any impact on the Competition Commission of India (CCI) decision in the Future-RIL deal?

There is no specific requirement under the regulations that requires the CCI to defer its decision due this order of the Emergency Arbitrator. However, passive or perception-based impact of the order cannot be ruled out, said Kabra. "It also depends on whether Reliance and Future voluntarily make any statements before the CCI," he added.

WHAT DOES HARLEY DAVIDSON'S TIE-UP WITH HERO ENTAIL?

The tie-up announced by Harley-Davidson with Hero MotoCorp is part of the corporate makeover by the American cruiser bike brand, which involves exits from nearly 40 global markets. Harley-Davidson said it has decided to hand over sales, service and distribution of its products to Delhi-based Hero MotoCorp. Hero will also take care of sales of parts, accessories, general merchandise, riding gear and apparels of Harley-Davidson. This arrangement is similar to revamped distribution models being piloted by Harley in 16 other markets outside the United States, apart from India. While Harley-Davidson announced the shutting down of Bawal, the Haryana-based assembly factory a month ago, Hero MotoCorp clarified that it won't be taking over the plant. Speaking to analysts, Jochen Zeitz, chairman, president and CEO, Harley-Davidson, said: "Under our focussed participation model, we are exiting about 40 markets where low volumes and little profit do not warrant investments. We are establishing dealer-direct or distributor model in about 17 markets, and our 36 highest potential markets will have the leadership, resources and clearly defined operating framework that we believe will derive desirable growth and profitability in the future."

Does the deal involve equity transfer?

This is being defined as a non-equity tie-up — a distribution-based partnership that does not involve transfer of technology from Harley. A licensing agreement allows Hero to develop and sell a range of premium motorcycles under the Harley-Davidson brand name. *In September, Harley had announced the closure of India operations after 11 years of poor performance, which saw the company sell only 25,000 units – far short of its annual target of selling 10,000 units annually. Harley did not offer any clarity about the future of the Haryana factory in its statement.*

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

WHAT IS NEW SHEPHARD, THE ROCKET SYSTEM BUILT BY BLUE ORIGIN?

*A rocket system meant to take tourists to space successfully completed its seventh test launch after it took off from a test facility in Texas. Called **New Shepard**, the system is built by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's space company called **Blue Origin** and will eventually allow space tourists to experience microgravity by taking them over 100 km above the Earth.* In 2018, Blue Origin was one of the ten companies selected by NASA to conduct studies and advance technologies to collect, process and use space-based resources for missions to the Moon and Mars. In 2019, both signed an agreement that gives Blue Origin permission to use NASA's historic test stand, as a part of a growing number of partnerships between the space agency and the commercial space industry.

So, what is New Shepard?

New Shepard has been *named after astronaut **Alan Shepard**, the first American to go to space*, and offers flights to space over 100 km above the Earth and accommodation for payloads. Essentially, it is a rocket system that has been designed to take astronauts and research payloads past the **Karman line** – *the internationally recognised boundary of space*. The idea is to provide easier and more cost-effective access to space meant for purposes such as academic research, corporate technology development and entrepreneurial ventures among others.

EOS-01, INDIA'S LATEST EARTH OBSERVATION SATELLITE BEING LAUNCHED

India will send its first space mission in almost a year with a launch of EOS-01, an earth observation satellite, Saturday afternoon. EOS-01, along with nine satellites from foreign countries, would be launched by a PSLV rocket shortly after 3 pm. This will be ISRO's first mission since the launch of RISAT-2BR1, another earth observation satellite similar to EOS-01, on December 11 last year. After that, ISRO had also sent communication satellite GSAT-30 in space in January this year, but that was done using an Ariane rocket launched from French Guiana. Thereafter, ISRO's launch schedule was entirely derailed by the coronavirus epidemic. ISRO had planned more than 20 satellite launches in the fiscal year 2020-21, including high profile missions like *Aditya L1, the first exploratory mission to Sun, and unmanned Gaganyaan, the precursor to India's first manned space flight*. Half of the planned launches were those of earth observation satellites like the one that will be sent today.

New nomenclature

EOS-01 is nothing but another Radar Imaging Satellite (RISAT) that will work together with RISAT-2B and RISAT-2BR1 launched last year. EOS-01 was initially named RISAT-2BR2, and was supposed to be the third of the three-spacecraft constellation aimed at providing all-weather round-the-clock service for high-resolution images. *With EOS-01, ISRO is moving to a new naming system for its earth observation satellites which till now have been named thematically, according to the purpose they are meant for.* For example, the Cartosat series of satellites were meant to provide data for land topography and mapping, while the Oceansat satellites were meant for observations over sea. *Some INSAT-series, Resourcesat series, GISAT, Scatsat, and some more are all earth observation satellites, named differently for the specific jobs they are assigned to do, or the different instruments that they use to do their jobs.* Land and forest mapping and monitoring, mapping of resources like water or minerals or fishes, weather and climate observations, soil



assessment, geospatial contour mapping are all done through earth-observation satellites. *Henceforth, it seems, all the earth observation satellites would be called EOS-series.*

Radar imaging

EOS-01, like its cousins RISAT-2B and RISAT-2BR1, uses synthetic aperture radars to produce high-resolution images of the land. One big advantage that radar imaging has over optical instruments is that it is unaffected by weather, cloud or fog, or the lack of sunlight. It can produce high-quality images in all conditions and at all times. Depending on the wavelength of the electromagnetic radiation used by the radar, different properties on land can be captured in the image. For example, a low wavelength signal can capture tree cover or vegetation, while a higher wavelength signal can penetrate even dense tree cover to look at the contours of land beneath. EOS-01, and its sister RISATs, use X-band radars that operate at low wavelengths and are considered best for monitoring of urban landscape, and imaging of agricultural or forest land. According to ISRO, EOS-01 is intended for applications in agriculture, forestry and disaster management support. The radar images are also considered to be immensely useful for military requirements.

New Rocket

For the launch of EOS-01, ISRO would be using a new variant of its PSLV rocket that has been flown only once before, in January last year, when it had placed the Microsat-R satellite in orbit. This Microsat-R was the one that was brought down in March last year in India's first anti-satellite test, a demonstration of its capability to hit an in-orbit enemy satellite in space. This variant of PSLV does not become waste after depositing its satellite in the orbit. Instead, the last stage of the rocket, the one that remains after the satellite is separated, can acquire its own orbit and be used as an orbital platform for other onboard instruments to perform experiments in space. In effect, the fourth stage acts like another satellite, with a life span of about six months. For the PSLV, this would be the 51st flight. Only two of its launches have not been successful. Of the nine foreign satellites being carried in the mission, four each are from the United States and Luxembourg, while another is a technology demonstrator from Lithuania.

WHAT IS 16 PSYCHE, ASTEROID BELIEVED TO BE WORTH \$10,000 QUADRILLION?

A recent study has found that asteroid 16 Psyche, which orbits between Mars and Jupiter, could be made entirely of metal and is worth an estimated \$10,000 quadrillion — more than the entire economy of Earth. New images from NASA's Hubble Space Telescope offer a closer view of the mysterious asteroid 16 Psyche, *whose surface may mostly comprise iron and nickel*, similar to the Earth's core, according to the study published in The Planetary Science Journal on Monday. In fact, *scientists believe that the asteroid may be the leftover core of an earlier planet that lost its crust and mantle after multiple collisions during the creation of our solar system.* The exact composition and origins of the asteroid will be uncovered in 2022, when NASA sends an unmanned spacecraft to study it up close. But the latest data has revealed a clearer picture of Asteroid 16 Psyche than ever before. Here is everything you need to know about the asteroid and the new study.

What is asteroid 16 Psyche?

Located around 370 million kilometres away from Earth, asteroid 16 Psyche is one of the most massive objects in the asteroid belt in our solar system. The somewhat potato-shaped asteroid has a diameter of around 140 miles, according to NASA. *It was first discovered on March 17, 1853,*



by the Italian astronomer Annibale de Gasparis and was named after the ancient Greek goddess of the soul, Psyche. Unlike most asteroids that are made up of rocks or ice, scientists believe that Psyche is a dense and largely metallic object thought to be the core of an earlier planet that failed in formation.

Is the asteroid really worth \$10,000 quadrillion?

NASA scientists believe that the asteroid is made up of almost entirely of iron, nickel and several other rare materials like gold, platinum, cobalt, iridium and rhenium. Hypothetically, if it was to be transported to Earth, NASA Psyche mission's lead scientist Lindy Elkins-Tanton has calculated that the iron alone would be worth more than \$10,000 quadrillion. But in an interview with CNN, Elkins-Tanton clarified that there was no way for the asteroid to actually be brought back to Earth. "We cannot bring Psyche back to Earth. We have absolutely no technology to do that," she said. If the asteroid was somehow brought to our planet and its resources were mined, it could possibly result in a collapse of the markets, she pointed out. "There are all kinds of problems with this, but it's still fun to think about what a piece of metal the size of Massachusetts would be worth," the scientist added.

What is known about NASA's Psyche mission?

Scientists will only learn about the true composition of asteroid 16 Psyche if it is studied up close. *NASA plans to do just that two years from now, when it will launch a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida to orbit the asteroid for around 21 months. The unmanned spacecraft will reach the asteroid in January, 2026. The first objective of the mission is to capture a photograph of the metallic asteroid, after which the spacecraft will study and map it from a distance.* Another objective of the mission, led by Arizona State University, is to determine whether the asteroid is, in fact, the core of an earlier planet or if it is merely made up of unmelted material. Based on the data collected, scientists will also ascertain the age and origins of the mammoth metallic asteroid. The mission was originally slated to take place in 2023, but was later moved up to 2022.

NASA'S OSIRIS-REX MISSION SUCCESSFULLY PICKS SAMPLES FROM ASTEROID BENNU, BUT THERE IS A PROBLEM

NASA's OSIRIS-REx spacecraft, which was sent to collect rocks and dust from the surface of a near-Earth asteroid, is now so stuffed with cosmic rubble that a door was wedged open and precious samples are presently leaking into space. Days after the spacecraft first touched the surface of asteroid Bennu, located over 200 million miles away from Earth, the coordinators of the mission are now saying that it may have performed too well. "The big concern now is that particles are escaping because we're almost *a victim of our own success*," Dante Lauretta, the mission's principal investigator at the University of Arizona in Tucson, said during a NASA press briefing on Friday.

So, what is happening with the mission now?

When the team behind the mission analysed images taken of the spacecraft's collector head they realised that it had gathered far more samples than they had anticipated. So much so that the large rocks and rubble had jammed the flap that was designed to keep the samples inside the sample container. NASA TV reported that the spacecraft's robotic arm, also called the Touch-And-Go Sample Acquisition Mechanism or Tagsam, had made contact with the surface of the ancient



Bennu asteroid. While mission planners expected the total time of contact to be less than 16 seconds, the actual period of contact was a mere six seconds and most of the sample was collected within the first three seconds. The robotic arm penetrated deeply into the surface of the asteroid with such force that several large rocks were wedged around the rim of the container's lid. As a result, particles are now spilling over and escaping into space. *The mission was required to collect a minimum of 2 ounces, or 60 grams, of rocks and dust from the asteroid's surface. But researchers now believe that the arm captured at least 400 grams of material.*

What is NASA doing to minimise damage?

NASA is now scrambling to minimise the damage and rushing to stow the collection container within the spacecraft well ahead of schedule. "A substantial fraction of the required collected mass is seen escaping," Laretta explained. To preserve what is left of the surface material, the mission team has decided to cancel activities planned this weekend to prevent more sample loss due to excessive movement. Both, a braking burn, which was scheduled for Friday, and a measurement of the sample's mass on Saturday were called off this week. While they are uncertain about the exact loss rate, researchers believe that the craft is continually losing an estimated 5 to 10 grams of material. "We are working to keep up with our own success here, and my job is to safely return as large a sample of Bennu as possible," Laretta said. "The loss of mass is of concern to me, so I'm strongly encouraging the team to stow this precious sample as quickly as possible." Despite hastening the process, the craft will not be returning to Earth before 2023. It is only then that the team will be able to measure out the samples collected. But they are confident that they have enough.

But, what is asteroid Bennu?

Asteroid Bennu was first discovered by a team from the NASA-funded Lincoln Near-Earth Asteroid Research team in 1999. It was named after an Egyptian deity by a nine-year-old boy from North Carolina in 2013 who won NASA's "Name that Asteroid" competition. Located around 200 million miles away from Earth, asteroid Bennu is around the size of the Empire State Building in New York. Significantly, Bennu hasn't undergone drastic changes since its formation over billions of years ago and, therefore, it contains chemicals and rocks dating back to the birth of the solar system. It is also relatively close to the Earth. In 2016, NASA launched the OSIRIS-REx — Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, Security, Regolith Explorer — mission to collect samples of pebbles and dust from the surface of the ancient asteroid for the first time in history. It reached its target in 2018 and since then, the spacecraft has been trying to match the velocity of the asteroid using small rocket thrusters to rendezvous it. During this time it also surveyed the surface to identify sites from which it could collect samples. The spacecraft contains five instruments meant to explore Bennu including cameras, a spectrometer and a laser altimeter. The departure window for the mission will open up in 2021, after which it will take over two years to reach Earth.

WATER ON THE MOON: A DISCOVERY, AN ESTIMATE, AND WHY IT MATTERS

The Moon has water at places where none had been detected before, and has potentially more water than previously believed in regions where it was already understood to exist. In two separate studies in Nature Astronomy, scientists have reported findings with potentially huge implications for sustaining humans on the Moon in the future. One study reports the detection of water on the



Moon's sunlit surface for the first time. The other estimates that the Moon's dark, shadowy regions, which potentially contain ice, are more widespread than thought.

Why is the discovery of water important?

Apart from being a marker of potential life, water is a precious resource in deep space. For astronauts landing on the Moon, *water is necessary not only to sustain life but also for purposes such as generating rocket fuel.* NASA's Artemis programme plans to send the first woman and the next man to the Moon in 2024, and hopes to establish a "sustainable human presence" there by the end of the decade. If space explorers can use the Moon's resources, it means they need to carry less water from Earth.

What was known about water on the Moon?

Previous Moon studies, including by the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) Chandrayaan-1 mission, have provided evidence for the existence of water. *In 2009, the Moon Mineralogy Mapper (M3) instrument aboard Chandrayaan-1 found water molecules in the polar regions.* A paper in Nature Geoscience In August 2013 analysed M3 data to report the detection of magmatic water (water originating from the deep interiors) on the Moon's surface. However, *what was not established in such studies — based on observations by the Chandrayaan-1 mission, NASA's Cassini and Deep Impact comet mission, and NASA's ground-based Infrared Telescope Facility — was whether the detected molecules were water as we know it (H₂O) or in the form of hydroxyl (OH).*

What is different in the new discovery?

This time, it is confirmed H₂O molecules, discovered in Clavius Crater in the Moon's southern hemisphere. And it is the first time water has been detected on the sunlit side, showing it is not restricted to the shadowy regions. *SOFIA, which is a modified Boeing 747SP jetliner that flies at altitudes up to 45,000 feet, has an infrared camera that picked up the wavelength unique to water molecules.* The data showed water in concentrations of 100-412 parts per million trapped in 1 cubic metre of soil. SOFIA's mission is to look at dark and distant objects. The Moon, on the other hand, is so close and bright that it fills the SOFIA guide camera's entire field of view. In August 2018, just to check whether SOFIA could reliably track the Moon, scientists tried a test observation. It was from this test that came the detection of water. Scientists are now planning more observational flights.

How could the water have formed?

Space rocks carrying small amounts of water could have bombarded the Moon. Alternatively, the Sun's solar wind could have carried hydrogen, which then reacted with minerals in the lunar soil to create hydroxyl, which later transformed into water. *The sunlit surface retaining the water presents a puzzle, since the Moon does not have a thick atmosphere.* One possibility is that the water gets trapped into tiny bead-like structures that were created in the soil by impacts from space rocks. Alternatively, the water could be hidden between grains of lunar soil and sheltered from the sunlight, NASA said.

So, how widespread is water on the Moon?

On the sunlit side, it is not yet known whether the water SOFIA found is easily accessible. On the other hand, the hidden, shadowy pockets on the lunar surface called "cold traps" are spread across



a combined 40,000 sq km, the other study has reported. That is roughly the size of Kerala. The estimate used mathematical tools to analyse data from NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter. The cold traps have gone without sunlight for potentially billions of years. If they do contain ice, it means water is going to be more accessible than previously assumed.

What next?

SOFIA will look for water in additional sunlit locations to learn more about how the water is produced, stored, and moved across the Moon. Meanwhile, NASA's Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER) will carry out a mission to create the first water resource maps of the Moon.

WHY COUNTRIES ARE IN FALL BACK MODE AS DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME ENDS

Clocks in the US will "fall back" an hour on Sunday, signalling the end of Daylight Saving Time (DST) this year. In Europe, the same happened on October 25. With clocks in the US going back an hour, the time difference between New York and India will increase from the current nine and a half hours to ten and a half hours. The time difference with Britain, which was on DST or British Summer Time until October 25, has increased by 1 hour to five and a half hours, as the country is now on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). In the Southern Hemisphere, the opposite has happened, where countries have "sprung forward", and time difference with India has reduced. Here, clocks have gone ahead by an hour — in New Zealand, the switch this year happened on September 27, and in all states of Australia that have the practice of daylight saving (not all do), on the following Sunday, that is on October 4.

So, what is Daylight Saving Time (DST), and why do clocks in some countries "fall back" and "spring forward"?

DST is the practice of resetting clocks ahead by an hour in spring, and behind by an hour in autumn (or fall). During these months, countries that follow this system get an extra hour of daylight in the evening. Because the spring to fall cycle is opposite in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, DST lasts from March to October/November in Europe and the US, and from September/October to April in New Zealand and Australia. Dates for this switch, which happens twice a year (in the spring and autumn) are decided beforehand. By law, the 28 member states of the European Union switch together — moving forward on the last Sunday of March and falling back on the last Sunday in October. In the US, clocks go back on the first Sunday of November.

How many countries use DST?

DST is in practice in some 70 countries, including those in the European Union. India does not follow daylight saving time; countries near the Equator do not experience high variations in daytime hours between seasons. (There is, however, a separate debate around the logic of sticking with only one time zone in a country as large as India.) In the US, it is practised everywhere except in Hawaii and most of Arizona. In Australia, DST is observed in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania besides some other, smaller territories; and not observed in Queensland and Western Australia among other territories. Most Muslim countries do not use DST — during the holy month of Ramzan, this could mean delaying the breaking of the fast for longer. Morocco has DST, but suspends it during Ramzan. However, Iran has DST, and stays with it even during Ramzan.



What does this system mean to achieve?

The rationale behind setting clocks ahead of standard time, usually by 1 hour during springtime, is to ensure that the clocks show a later sunrise and later sunset — in effect a longer evening daytime. Individuals will wake an hour earlier than usual, complete their daily work routines an hour earlier, and have an extra hour of daylight at the end. The key argument is that DST is meant to save energy. *According to a timeanddate.com report, it was followed by a group of Canadians on July 1, 1908, when residents of Port Arthur, Ontario, turned their clocks forward by an hour. Other locations in Canada soon followed suit. However, the idea did not catch on globally until Germany and Austria introduced DST on April 30, 1916, the rationale being to minimise the use of artificial lighting to save fuel during World War I.*

So, has DST achieved its aims?

A century ago, when DST was introduced, more daylight did mean less use of artificial light. But modern society uses so much energy-consuming appliances all day long that the amount of energy saved is negligible. Various studies have been conducted on the benefits and disadvantages of DST. *Among the biggest cons is the disruption of the body clock or circadian rhythm. A USA Today report cites a study showing that DST increases the risk of heart attack by 25%, while a return to original times lowers the risk by 21%. It quotes Timothy Morgenthaler, a sleep medicine researcher, as saying that disrupted sleep patterns might affect memory, learning, social interactions and overall cognitive performance. An article in Popular Science cites studies to list out the disadvantages of DST. One hour of lost sleep in the US, one study calculated, increases the fatal crash rate by 5.4% to 7.6% for six days following the transition. Other studies found a higher rate of workplace injuries after the switch, leading to lost days of work; a slight drop in stock market performance; health problems as a result of disruption of the circadian rhythm (body clock) — and even longer sentences ordered by judges deprived of sleep.*

Countries that want DST gone

In March last year, the European Union moved to scrap the custom of DST, with the European Parliament voting 410-192. After 2021, EU member states will choose between “permanent summertime” or “permanent wintertime”. Those who choose the former will reset their clocks for the last time in March 2021; those who choose the latter would do so in October 2021. In the US too, the changing of clocks is the subject of a debate that recurs every year, and a large number of people protest against the “torture”.

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH THE ANTITRUST SUIT AGAINST GOOGLE?

The Justice Department sued Google, accusing the company of *illegally abusing its dominance in internet search in ways that harm competitors and consumers*. The suit is the first antitrust action against the company, owned by Alphabet, to result from investigations by the Justice Department, Congress and 50 states and territories. State attorneys general and federal officials have also been investigating Google’s behaviour in the market for online advertising. And a group of states is exploring a broader search case against Google.



What is really happening here?

This is one step against a single company. But it is also a response to the policy question of what measures, if any, should be taken to curb today's tech giants, which hold the power to shape markets, communication and even public opinion. Politics steered the timing and shape of this suit. Attorney General William Barr wanted to move quickly to take action before the election, making good on President Donald Trump's pledge to take on Big Tech. Eleven states joined the suit.

What is the Justice Department saying Google did illegally?

This is a monopoly defence case. The government says that Google is illegally protecting its dominant position in the market for search and search advertising with the deals it has struck with companies like Apple. *Google pays Apple billions of dollars a year to have its search engine set as the default option on iPhones and other devices. The Justice Department is also challenging contracts Google has with smartphone makers that use Google's Android operating system, requiring them to install its search engine as the default.* The Justice Department also investigated Google's behaviour and acquisitions in the overall market for digital advertising, which includes search, web display and video ads. Online advertising was the source of virtually all of Alphabet's \$34 billion in profit last year. But the search case is the most straightforward, giving the government its best chance to win. To prevail, the Justice Department has to show two things: that Google is dominant in search and that its deals with Apple and other companies hobble competition in the search market.

What will be Google's defence?

In short: We're not dominant, and competition on the internet is just "one click away." That is the essence of recent testimony in Congress by Google executives. Google's share of the search market in the United States is about 80%. But looking only at the market for "general" search, the company says, is myopic. Nearly half of online shopping searches, it notes, begin on Amazon. Next, Google says the deals the Justice Department is citing are entirely legal. Such company-to-company deals violate antitrust law only if they can be shown to exclude competition. Users can freely switch to other search engines, like Microsoft's Bing or Yahoo Search, anytime they want, Google insists. Its search service, Google says, is the runaway market leader because people prefer it.

What is the consumer harm when Google's search service is free?

Consumer harm, the government argues, can result in several ways. Less competition in a market means less innovation and less consumer choice in the long run. That, in theory, could close the market to rivals that collect less data for targeted advertising than Google. Enhanced privacy, for example, would be a consumer benefit. *Goods that are free to consumers are not exempt from antitrust oversight. In the landmark Microsoft case of the late 1990s, the software giant bundled its web browser for free into its dominant Windows operating system. Microsoft lost because, using restrictive contracts, it bullied personal computer makers and others to try to prevent them from offering competing web browser software — competition that could have undermined the Windows monopoly.*



What happens next?

Unless the government and Google reach a settlement, they're headed to court. Trials and appeals in such cases can take years. Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain: Google will face continued scrutiny for a long time.

WHATSAPP DISAPPEARING MESSAGES: WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU, AND THE LOOPHOLES

'Ephemeral messaging' has made its way to WhatsApp. The Facebook-owned messaging app has officially announced a new feature — 'disappearing messages' — to the platform, which will start rolling out to all users globally by this month. So what exactly are 'disappearing messages,' and why is WhatsApp introducing this feature to the app?

What are disappearing messages?

Disappearing messages, as the name suggests, are messages that will disappear or automatically get deleted from a chat after sometime. The idea of 'ephemeral' messages is not new, and WhatsApp is not the first app to offer this. *Other encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, Signal, Wire already offer such an option.*

How will disappearing messages work?

WhatsApp says the disappearing messages setting will work across individual chats and group chats as well. WhatsApp says once a user turns on the setting, messages in a chat or a group will disappear automatically after seven days. In group chats, admins will be the ones controlling the disappearing messages option. Users, too, will have the option of turning off the setting if they change their mind. If disappearing messages are turned on, media files such as pictures or videos sent in the chat will disappear. But they will be saved on the phone if the auto-download option is turned on.

How is WhatsApp's disappearing message feature different?

There is a difference on how disappearing messages will work on WhatsApp when compared to other messaging apps. Apps like Telegram, Wire, Signal typically offer an option where users can set a preferred time for their messages to disappear — this can range from a few seconds to a day to even a week. On Telegram, one has the option of starting a secret chat, where they can set a timer limit after which messages disappear. The timer can be set for one second to a week. Wire gives options ranging from 10 seconds to four weeks for messages to disappear. Signal lets users turn on disappearing messages for each chat individually and they can set a time limit from five seconds to a week. *WhatsApp is not giving this kind of customisation, it has decided the time limit of all users, which is fixed at seven days.*

Is there some way a disappearing chat could still get saved on WhatsApp?

WhatsApp's disappearing messages feature does have some loopholes. For example, if you decide to activate this feature, and the other user doesn't open WhatsApp during the seven-day period, while the message might disappear, the other user could still see a preview of the same in their notifications tab. WhatsApp also says that if a user replies to a message where the initial text is quoted, this text will remain in the chat after the seven-day period. Further, if someone forwards a message to another user, who does not have the disappearing messages feature turned on, the



message will not get deleted from there. If a message gets backed up to the cloud before disappearing, it will be included in the backup. However, when a user restores the backup, that message will get deleted. As always someone could take a screenshot of the message or forward it to someone else before it disappears.

What does the new feature mean for users and for WhatsApp?

For WhatsApp users, this is a much-needed feature and will certainly improve privacy. By turning on disappearing messages, users will get some more control over which chats are getting saved. Of course, as pointed out already, *nothing on the internet gets truly erased, thanks to screenshots*. For WhatsApp, meanwhile, it will raise some tricky new questions given the app is already under pressure from authorities in several countries, including India, over tracing of messages. WhatsApp has already said it cannot allow tracing of messages given the end-to-end encrypted feature and that it does not store messages or any kind of user data on its servers. *With disappearing messages, authorities could face a new set of issues when it comes to recovering messages from WhatsApp, escalating the clash further.*

WHY IS BABY SHARK THE MOST WATCHED VIDEO ON YOUTUBE?

A song with catchy tune and flashy visuals, that has caught the fancy of children across the world and made a number of parents and teachers roll their eyes -- Baby Shark -- made a new record on Monday, becoming the most-watched video on YouTube with more than seven billion views. Released four years ago, Baby Shark has beaten the Puerto Rican pop song Despacito by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee.

What is the song about?

At one-minute-an-21-seconds long, the song's repetitive "doo-doo-doo-du-du-du-du-du" refrain invites endless replays. Coupled with simple and easy to follow dance steps, it has become extremely popular among kids, especially under the age of five. Although it is unclear who the original writer of the song is, it is said to be a popular American campfire song which has been sung and recreated a couple of times. However, Baby Shark became a global sensation after it was remixed and recreated by the Seoul-based production company Pinkfong. Sung by 10-year-old Korean-American singer Hope Segoine, the video of the English version of the song, released in June 2016, broke the record of being the most watched. Although the song is in public domain and not owned by Pinkfong, the company was sued in 2019 by children's songwriter Jonathan Wright, who had recorded a similar version to in 2011 and argued that he held copyright on his own take on the material.

Exactly how popular is the song?

Baby Shark became an international hit, reaching number 32 on the Billboard Hot 100 in January 2019, and also made it to the UK Top 40 list. Pinkfong stands to have made about \$5.2 million (Rs 38.66 crore) from YouTube streams alone. The song first went viral in south-east Asia, and then in the US and Europe. It prompted a spin-off live tour, merchandise, books and more, plus reworkings of the song, including one featuring Luis Fonsi and another promoting handwashing during the COVID-19 pandemic.



WHY WAS INSTAGRAM FORCED TO CHANGE ITS POLICY ON NUDITY?

In what marks to be a fundamental policy shift, photo-sharing social media platform Instagram has updated its policy on nudity. The old policy had been accused of being discriminatory towards plus-sized women of colour. The new policy which will be implemented come Wednesday, on both Instagram and Facebook, is a step to make sure that all body types are represented fairly and equally on social media.

Why is Instagram changing its policy?

Instagram has a bunch of community guidelines which determines their restriction of content. Nude and sexual images are 'restricted' and are 'monitored on a case to case basis'. *These guidelines had often been accused of being biased towards a certain body type and a certain body colour. There is also an inherent gender bias, like how the female nipple is often banned, but the male one, not so much. The new policy which comes to effect come Wednesday aims to rectify these biases.* The policy change comes on the heels of a sustained campaign run by plus-sized black model Nyome Nicholas-Williams. In August, the UK based 28-year-old model has posted pictures of herself, taken by photographer Alexandra Cameron, for a 'confidence shoot'. The images depicted Nicholas-Williams nude, with her eyes dreamily shut, and her arms covering her breasts. Within a few hours of Nicholas-Williams posting those pictures, those pictures were deleted by Instagram, and she had also been warned by the social media giant that her account could be removed. The images from the 'confidence shoot' had drawn a lot of attention, and many users had praised the effort. *Nicholas-Williams then launched a campaign against what she deemed was a systemic censorship against black women and those who are plus-sized. Nicholas-Williams argued that Instagram has had no problems with nude photos of thin, white women.* The pictures were back up after Instagram restored them after global outrage and allegations of censorship. The hashtag #iwanttoseenyome had trended and gone viral. "Why are white plus-sized bodies seen as "acceptable" and accepted and black plus sized bodies not? Let's shift the narrative that the media and fashion has upheld for too long that depicts our bodies as somehow being wrong when that couldn't be further from the truth! I will continue to challenge and break down those societal and fashion "body standards" that have been upheld for too long," wrote Nicholas-Williams on the restored image on her Instagram page. After Nicholas-Williams campaign Instagram had planned to review its policy on nudity.

What is the new policy on nudity?

Instagram's new policy on nudity will also allow nude people hugging each other and also cupping their breasts. While Nyome Nicholas-Williams's campaign was the push needed for the shift, Australian comedian Celeste Barber too had to face the censorship wrath from the photo-sharing website. Recently, the comedian had recreated a parody image of famous South African model Candice Swanepoel. In the original image Swanepoel, a blonde, thin Victoria Secret's model is partially covered and is seen cupping her breast. As a parody, Barber had recreated the image, with a caption "When you finally sit down and your kid asks for a drink." #celestechallengeaccepted #celestebarker #funny. The image was taken down by Instagram as it violated the 'company's community guidelines on nudity and sexual activity'. Barber took up the issue with Instagram and promptly the image was back up. The head of Instagram, public policy in Australia, Philip Chua, in a statement clarified that Instagram had apologised to Barber and had subtly commented that there would be some changed made to the policy in place.



Too little, too late?

The policy shift by Instagram is being hailed by many as a necessary intervention in countering the systemic bias that existed in the beauty and fashion world. For long the idea of 'beauty' was set by typical white, western standards, and plus-sized people of colour and from the minorities felt marginalised, as they were largely ignored and more than often, censored. Influencers and content creators had called out *social media on how the picture sharing website/app is full of nude, skinny, white women but not as many coloured or plus-sized ones.* Instagram, with more than a billion users exerts enough influence in the beauty spectrum, enabling users to have direct access to the lives of celebrities, models and film stars. The new policy can perhaps make sure that we see more diverse content, and people from all body types and skin colour and ethnicities feel welcome to share their stories.

Winds of global change

The policy change by Instagram is a reflection of a larger global movement of body positivity, which challenges the inherent stereotypical norms of beauty. With its roots in the first wave of feminism in the late 1800's where a bunch of women declined to wear the corset to give their waists the desired shape, the movement today has evolved to be that of self-love and self-acceptance. Many celebrities have spoken about accepting their 'original selves', like Grammy winner singer-songwriter Billie Eilish, rapper and musician Lizzo. Closer home we have had actor Vidya Balan who has been very vocal about defying the set standards for Indian heroines.

COUNTERING DEEPFAKES, THE MOST SERIOUS AI THREAT (ASHISH JAIMAN - THE DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY AND OPERATIONS IN THE CUSTOMER SECURITY AND TRUST ORGANIZATION AT MICROSOFT, FOCUSING ON THE DEFENDING DEMOCRACY PROGRAM)

Disinformation and hoaxes have evolved from mere annoyance to high stake warfare for creating social discord, increasing polarisation, and in some cases, influencing an election outcome. Deepfakes are a new tool to spread computational propaganda and disinformation at scale and with speed. Access to commodity cloud computing, algorithms, and abundant data has created a perfect storm to democratise media creation and manipulation. Deepfakes are the digital media (video, audio, and images) manipulated using Artificial Intelligence. This synthetic media content is referred to as deepfakes (<https://bit.ly/3kNPjyA>).

A cyber Frankenstein

Synthetic media can create possibilities and opportunities for all people, regardless of who they are, where they are, and how they listen, speak, or communicate. It can give people a voice, purpose, and ability to make an impact at scale and with speed (<https://bit.ly/31NHFwO>). But as with any new innovative technology, it can be weaponised to inflict harm. *Deepfakes, hyper-realistic digital falsification, can inflict damage to individuals, institutions, businesses and democracy. They make it possible to fabricate media — swap faces, lip-syncing, and puppeteer — mostly without consent and bring threat to psychology, security, political stability, and business disruption.* Nation-state actors with geopolitical aspirations, ideological believers, violent extremists, and economically motivated enterprises can manipulate media narratives using deepfakes, with easy and unprecedented reach and scale.



Targeting women

The very first use case of malicious use of a deepfake was seen in pornography, inflicting emotional, reputational, and in some cases, violence towards the individual. Pornographic deepfakes can threaten, intimidate, and inflict psychological harm and reduce women to sexual objects. Deepfake pornography exclusively targets women. Deepfakes can depict a person indulging in antisocial behaviours and saying vile things. These can have severe implications on their reputation, sabotaging their professional and personal life. Even if the victim could debunk the fake via an alibi or otherwise, it may come too late to remedy the initial harm. Malicious actors can take advantage of unwitting individuals to defraud them for financial gains using audio and video deepfakes. Deepfakes can be deployed to extract money, confidential information, or exact favours from individuals. Deepfakes can cause short- and long-term social harm and accelerate the already declining trust in news media. Such an erosion can contribute to a culture of factual relativism, fraying the increasingly strained civil society fabric. The distrust in social institutions is perpetuated by the democratising nature of information dissemination and social media platforms' financial incentives. *Falsity is profitable, and goes viral more than the truth on social platforms.* Combined with distrust, the existing biases and political disagreement can help create echo chambers and filter bubbles, creating discord in society. Imagine a deepfake of a community leader denigrating a religious site of another community. It will cause riots and, along with property damage, may also cause life and livelihood losses. *A deepfake could act as a powerful tool by a nation-state to undermine public safety and create uncertainty and chaos in the target country. It can be used by insurgent groups and terrorist organisations, to represent their adversaries as making inflammatory speeches or engaging in provocative actions to stir up anti-state sentiments among people.*

Undermining democracy

A deepfake can also aid in altering the democratic discourse and undermine trust in institutions and impair diplomacy. False information about institutions, public policy, and politicians powered by a deepfake can be exploited to spin the story and manipulate belief. *A deepfake of a political candidate can sabotage their image and reputation. A well-executed one, a few days before polling, of a political candidate spewing out racial epithets or indulging in an unethical act can damage their campaign.* There may not be enough time to recover even after effective debunking. Voters can be confused and elections can be disrupted. *A high-quality deepfake can inject compelling false information that can cast a shadow of illegitimacy over the voting process and election results.* Deepfakes contribute to factual relativism and *enable authoritarian leaders to thrive.* For authoritarian regimes, it is a tool that can be used to justify oppression and disenfranchise citizens. Leaders can also use them to increase populism and consolidate power. *Deepfakes can become a very effective tool to sow the seeds of polarisation, amplifying division in society, and suppressing dissent.* Another concern is a liar's dividend; *an undesirable truth is dismissed as deepfake or fake news.* Leaders may weaponise deepfakes and use fake news and an alternative-facts narrative to replace an actual piece of media and truth.

Major solutions

To defend the truth and secure freedom of expression, we need a multi-stakeholder and multi-modal approach. Collaborative actions and collective techniques across legislative regulations, platform policies, technology intervention, and media literacy can provide effective and ethical countermeasures to mitigate the threat of malicious deepfakes. Media literacy for consumers and



journalists is the most effective tool to combat disinformation and deepfakes. Media literacy efforts must be enhanced to cultivate a discerning public. As consumers of media, we must have the ability to decipher, understand, translate, and use the information we encounter (<https://bit.ly/2HF1Us8>). Even a short intervention with media understanding, learning the motivations and context, can lessen the damage. *Improving media literacy is a precursor to addressing the challenges presented by deepfakes.* Meaningful regulations with a collaborative discussion with the technology industry, civil society, and policymakers can facilitate disincentivising the creation and distribution of malicious deepfakes. *We also need easy-to-use and accessible technology solutions to detect deepfakes, authenticate media, and amplify authoritative sources.* Deepfakes can create possibilities for all people irrespective of their limitations by augmenting their agency. However, as access to synthetic media technology increases, so does the risk of exploitation. Deepfakes can be used to damage reputations, fabricate evidence, defraud the public, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. To counter the menace of deepfakes, *we all must take the responsibility to be a critical consumer of media on the Internet, think and pause before we share on social media, and be part of the solution to this infodemic.*

WHY THIS IS THE WORST WILDFIRE SEASON IN WESTERN US

Fast-moving wildfires in southern California have seriously injured two firefighters as of Monday, and forced over 100,000 people to evacuate in what has been referred to as the worst wildfire season the state has seen on record. *Out of the six largest wildfires in California recorded since 1932, five occurred in 2020.* The largest out of these were in August, called the August Complex fires, and burned an area of about 1,032,264 acres, resulting in one death. This year has also seen the most destructive and deadliest wildfires, with the North Complex wildfire coming at number five in both the categories since the records have been maintained. The fires caused the skies around the San Francisco Bay area and in some parts of Oregon and Washington to turn orange as a result of the smoke and ash, and also affected the air quality in these areas.

Wildfire season in California

Typically, wildfire season in the western US stretches from late spring until seasonal winter rains and snow arrive. Further, around the world, wildfires or forest fires occur during hot and dry seasons. Since dry leaves, shrubs, grass and deadwood are easily combustible, they are easy to ignite. Ignition can either happen naturally such as from lightning strikes, or can be triggered accidentally, such as from cigarette stubs. Sometimes, however, ignition can be intentional, such as to clear the land or to control an incoming forest fire by removing vegetation that would provide more fuel to it. Such fires typically come to an end when there is no more vegetation to burn or because of rain.

How did the California wildfires start this year?

NASA's Earth Observatory has noted that wildfires were ignited in California in August after an "unprecedented outburst of dry lightning". This year has also recorded at least ten lightning complex fires. *One reason could be that climate change is leading to more lightning storms.* But there are other ways by which wildfires can be ignited. As per The New York Times, *most wildfires in California are caused by people.* The El Dorado fires for instance, that have been mostly contained now, were ignited after a family used a "pyrotechnic device" to announce the gender of their new baby, the report mentions. *Other reasons include power transmission lines or other utility equipment that can ignite fires in remote areas. Once fires are started, they are made worse by*



strong, dry winds. According to a paper published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2017, *humans are responsible for 84 per cent of the wildfires.* The co-author of this paper Jennifer Balch told Science magazine in an interview the same year that in the US, of the 1.5 million wildfires on record, 25 per cent were started due to the burning of trash and debris, about 22 per cent were started due to unknown human causes and the next biggest reason for wildfires includes arson, followed by heavy equipment, campfires, children and smokers.

Why are they especially deadly this year?

As per the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), while wildfires are a natural part of the state's landscape, the fire season in the state and across the Western US is starting earlier and ending later each year. The department notes that *climate change is a "key driver" of this trend, with warmer spring and summer temperatures, reduced snowpack and earlier spring snowmelt, which create longer and more intense dry seasons. These dry seasons have increased the moisture stress on vegetation and have therefore made forests more susceptible to severe wildfires.* According to CAL FIRE, from January 1-October 25 this year, there have been more than 8,800 wildfires in the state that have burned an area of more than 4 million acres. The fires have led to 31 fatalities and have damaged or destroyed more than 10,000 structures. *A combination of record high temperatures, strong winds and greater number of lightning storms could be contributing to the severity of the current wildfire season in California.* The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was published in 2013, identified a few factors that could influence the way wildfires play out. These include *a global increase in average temperatures, global increases in the frequency, intensity and extent of heatwaves (breaching of historically extreme temperature thresholds) and regional increases in the frequency, duration and intensity of droughts.*

So, is climate change entirely to blame?

Scientists are wary of attributing any single contemporary event to climate change, mainly because of the *difficulty in completely ruling out the possibility of the event having been caused by some other reason, or a result of natural variability.* In an analysis of scientific articles published since January 2020 that established a link between climate change and fire risk, the authors note that natural variability is superimposed on the increasingly warm and dry conditions that have resulted from climate change, which has led to more extreme fires and more extreme fire seasons. The New York Times has noted fire suppression, strong gusts of winds called the Santa Ana wind and the possibility of people igniting fires as reasons other than climate change that are making wildfires in California especially catastrophic.

WHEN WOMEN HUNTED BIG GAME

About 9,000 years ago, hunter-gatherers buried a teenager with hunting tools in the Andes mountains of South America. When researchers analysed the remains, unearthed in 2018, they found that the hunter was a female, aged between 17 and 19 at her death. This led them to question: Was this a one-off, or were female hunters common among hunter-gatherer societies? What they found goes against a widely held belief — that among early humans, the men hunted and the women gathered. Between 30% and 50% of the hunters in these populations were female, the researchers concluded from an analysis of burial records in the Americas. The study, by researchers at the University of California, Davis, is published in 'Science Advances'.



The discovery

During excavations at the high-altitude site Wilamaya Patjxa in Peru in 2018, archaeologists found five burial pits with six individuals. Two of the individuals were associated with hunting tools. Because many people are buried with the objects they used in life, the researchers concluded that the two were hunters. One had been buried with 24 stone artefacts, including projectile points for hunting big game and scrapers for use on animal carcasses. The team estimated that this individual was female. Six months later, this was later confirmed by an analysis of dental protein at UC Davis. The other individual was male, aged 25-30.

A wider distribution

It was the female hunter that got the researchers wondering. They looked at published records of burials over a wide period throughout North and South America, and identified 429 individuals from 107 sites. Among them, 27 individuals were associated with big-game hunting tools — 11 female and 16 were male. “We asked a rather simple statistical question: given a population of hunters in which, say, 50% were female, how many female hunters would we expect to observe in a random sample of 27 individuals drawn from that population?... When we did the math, we found that the range of theoretical proportions of female hunters that could explain the observed archaeological counts ranged between 30% and 50%,” UC Davis anthropologist Randy Haas, lead author of the study, said by email. *This level of participation is in stark contrast to recent hunter-gatherers, where hunting is a decidedly male activity with low levels of female participation*, the researchers noted. Moreover, the Wilamaya Patjxa female hunter has been identified as the earliest hunter burial found in the Americas.

The bigger picture

The researchers note that this is not the first time that hunting tools have been found with female burials, but some scholars have been reluctant to ascribe female hunting to these tools. For example, after hunting tools had been excavated from a female burial in the US in 1966, a study in the ‘American Antiques Journal’ observed: “Since the burial has been determined to be a female, the inclusion of a projectile point preform has been difficult to explain. However, if the artifact had been used as a knife or scraper, typically women’s tools, then its inclusion with the burial is a more consistent association.” *The new study argues that labour practices were non-gendered.* “The archaeological findings changed my understanding of how labour was divided among hunter-gatherer societies,” Haas told The Indian Express. “It now seems likely that for the vast majority of our species’ existence, which was as hunter-gatherers, both females and males had very similar labour roles and presumably status as a result. This insight — for me at least—underscores that many of the gender inequalities we see today do not have a biological basis.” The researchers now wish to understand how sexual division of labour in different times and places changed among hunter-gatherer populations in the Americas.

WHAT DOES A NEW STUDY TRACING ANCIENT DOG DNA TELL US?

A new study published in Science magazine says that dogs were likely the first animals domesticated by humans, shedding light on the early history of dog populations and their relationship with humans.



What are the findings of the study?

The study, which was led by scientists at the Francis Crick Institute, University of Oxford, University of Vienna and archaeologists from over 10 countries, has found that *right after the Ice Age, there existed at least five different species of dogs that had distinct genetic ancestries*. Studying ancient genomics involves extracting and analysing DNA from skeletal remains, which helps researchers understand evolutionary changes that happened thousands of years ago. For this study, researchers sequenced ancient DNA from 27 dogs, some of which lived nearly 11,000 years ago across Europe, the Near East and Siberia. In their analysis, the researchers also included previously sequenced genomic data from five other dogs.

What does the study tell us?

While dogs were thought to have evolved from wolves, it cannot be said for certain how and when this happened. Through their analysis, researchers have found no evidence of multiple origins of dogs from present-day wolf populations. Rather, their investigation reveals that dogs likely evolved from a now-extinct wolf population. "Wolves were the first animal with which humans formed a mutualistic relationship, eventually giving rise to dogs," the study says. *Essentially, the finding reveals that the diversity we see in dogs today originated when humans were still hunters and gatherers, which roughly gives them the time period when the domestication started happening*. Pontus Skoglund, author and group leader of the Crick's Ancient Genomics laboratory was quoted as saying in a press release: "Some of the variation you see between dogs walking down the street today originated in the Ice Age. By the end of this period, dogs were already widespread across the northern hemisphere."

So, what is the significance of this?

The study shows that over the last 10,000 years, the early dog lineages mixed and moved to give rise to the dogs we know today. For instance, early European dogs that were initially diverse appear to originate from two highly distinct populations, one of which is related to Near Eastern dogs and another to Siberian dogs. But, this diversity is not present in European dogs today, implying that at some point it was lost. In a Twitter thread, Skoglund said new dogs came into Europe during the agricultural expansion, where they met the dogs already present there.

But why study dogs?

Since dogs are humans' oldest animal companions, studying them provides scientists insights into how far back their relationship goes, thereby increasing their understanding of human history. Research teams are still trying to figure out the human cultural context in which dogs were first domesticated. Significantly, some other questions also remain unresolved. For instance, the geographic origin of dogs is still not clear and requires further probing.

HOW WATER BEARS SURVIVE LETHAL UV RADIATION

"I know an animal that can live in boiling water or in solid ice. It can go 10 years without a drop of water - the tardigrade or water bear. They have survived all five mass extinctions," says Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson in an episode of Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey. Awestruck by this episode, Sandeep M. Eswarappa from The Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, started exploring these tiny creatures that are *less than 1 millimetre long*. His new paper shows that *a tardigrade called*



Paramacrobotus BLR strain (BLR for Bengaluru) has a protective fluorescent shield which helps it survive harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

Hunting for tardigrades

It was an exploratory study, and the team hunted for tardigrades within the institute campus. About 1,300 species have been reported worldwide. “We knew we could find them on algae and similar vegetation, so we scraped off moss from the campus’ concrete walls and trees and tried to isolate the tardigrades. Though we collected nearly 100 samples, we finally succeeded in finding just one species,” says Harikumar R. Suma, who is the first author of the paper published in the journal *Biology Letters*. The study found that *Paramacrobotus* sp. survived beyond 30 days after 15 minutes exposure to germicidal UV radiation (one kilojoule per square metre). At this radiation dose, another species of tardigrade called *Hypsibius exemplaris* died within a day, and most of the roundworms were found dead within a week. When a four times higher radiation was given, about 60% of the *Paramacrobotus* sp. survived beyond 30 days. To further confirm their findings, the team coated the *H. exemplaris* and roundworms with the fluorescent extract from *Paramacrobotus* sp. Animals with the fluorescent coat were found to survive longer than the control animals without. But why does this protective coat show fluorescence? “In addition to the UV protective function, we speculate that the fluorescence might serve as a signal to other organisms around — like an indication: ‘Hey the tardigrade is glowing, there is UV radiation here, let’s get away’. It provides a survival advantage to these tardigrades by reducing competition,” explains Dr. Eswarappa.

Evolved fluorescence

The team writes that Paramacrobotus could have probably evolved this fluorescence mechanism to counter the high UV radiation of tropical southern India. The UV dose in Bengaluru, where it was isolated, could go up to 4 kilojoule per square meter on a typical summer day. The paper adds, the “small fraction of non-fluorescent variants that co-exist in the same moss habitat may have other mechanisms to escape from UV radiation, for example, living deeper inside the moss where UV radiation cannot reach.”

OUTLOOK BLEAK FOR HIMALAYAN BROWN BEARS

A recent study on the Himalayan brown bear (Ursus arctos isabellinus) has predicted a significant reduction in suitable habitat and biological corridors of the species due to climate change, prompting scientists to suggest an adaptive spatial planning of the protected area network in the western Himalayas for conserving the species. The Himalayan brown bear is one of the largest carnivores in the highlands of the Himalayas. The study carried out in the western Himalayas by scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) “We have taken the Himalayan brown bear as an example because it is a top carnivore of the high-altitude Himalayan region. The elevation gradient in which the brown bear is distributed is most vulnerable to global warming as this elevation belt is getting warmer faster than other elevation zones of Himalayas,” he added. “Such studies are very crucial as the habitat of such species is highly vulnerable to climate and unless we plan in advance, we cannot sustain its population in future,” Kailash Chandra, director of ZSI, said.



A 100 MILLION-YEAR-OLD FISH IN KERALA, NAMED AFTER A CHARACTER IN LORD OF THE RINGS

It looks like a dragon, swims like an eel, and has remained hidden for a hundred million years. After a social media post made a researcher in Kerala curious, a type of fish was discovered in the watery underground rocks of the state that scientists have named "Gollum", after the dark and conflicted character of JRR Tolkien's epic saga 'Lord of the Rings'. 'Aenigmachanna gollum' belongs to an old family of fish, called dragon snakeheads, which retains its primitive characteristics after all these millennia. Besides the Gollum, a sister species has also been discovered, called 'Aenigmachanna mahabali'. The scientists call the find one of the most exciting in the fish world of the last decade.

A rare sighting

The discovery of a new family of fish is very rare. The dragon snakeheads have evaded scientists till now because they live in subterranean aquifers and come to the surface only after heavy flooding from rain. The closest relative of the family Aenigmachannidae is the Channidae, of which at least 50 species can be found in the streams and lakes of Asia and tropical Africa. According to molecular analyses, the two families split from each other 34 million to 109 million years ago. "This may indicate that Aenigmachanna is a Gondwanan lineage, which has survived break-up of the supercontinent, with India separating from Africa at around 120 million years ago," the researchers have said in the paper.

Relic from another time

The lack of evolution can be seen in the shortened swim bladder of the dragon snakeheads as well as fewer vertebrae with ribs. These indicate that the family is less specialised than regular snakeheads. *The family also has eyes and a reddish brown pigmentation, which is unusual as most subterranean fish are pale and have no eyes.* Unlike the Channidae, the Aenigmachannidae also lack the suprabranchial organ that allows the former to breathe air and proliferate widely.

Powered by social media

It is likely that the Gollum and Mahabali would have remained unknown for longer without the power of social media. At the beginning of 2018, Rajeev Raghavan, a fish researcher at Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies and co-author of the present study, *saw a post on social media of a curious fish that a person had found in a well in the backyard.* He could not recognise the creature and emailed the picture to Britz, who couldn't understand it either. Raghavan and his colleagues started to collect more specimens of the fish for a scientific study that would bring Britz all the way to India. Then, in a flooded paddy field in Kochi, Britz would see the elusive fish rise to the surface late one night. *The Gollum snakehead was first identified as a new species and genus in May 2019 in a study published in Zootaxa. Soon after the researchers came across a single specimen of its sister, the Mahabali snakehead.*

There's more unknown

The researchers say that the area where Aenigmachanna was collected is part of the Western Ghats – Sri Lanka Hotspot — which is among the richest biodiversity hotspots in the world. Ten other species of subterranean fish have been discovered in the aquifers. This area also services



around six million wells in the region so the water table is lowering — a danger to other unknown life forms that have resided here for millennia.

SRI LANKA RESCUES 120 STRANDED WHALES

Pooling their manpower and expertise in a joint overnight operation, Sri Lanka's navy, coast guard, local volunteers and conservation experts have rescued nearly 120 stranded whales and pulled them back to the deep sea. On Monday afternoon, residents of Panadura — some 25 km south of Colombo on the island's west coast — reported sighting a school of whales by the shore. Within hours the Sri Lankan navy and Coast guard deployed nearly 70 personnel to the spot. However, three whales and one dolphin were found dead along the shore, said Dharshani Lahandapura, chairperson of the Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA), following the unprecedented mass stranding in the country.

According to MEPA authorities, the marine mammals were short-finned pilot whales, that are said to be found in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans.

SMELL A FISH

Why is fish smell unpleasant for some people?

Researchers have found that some people carry a mutation in a particular gene that makes fish odour less intense. An olfactory receptor gene called trace amine-associated receptor 5 (TAAR5) was pinpointed as the reason for this smell variation. The study conducted in Iceland involved examining the olfactory genes in humans. A sniff test was conducted for over 9,000 people. Participants were asked to smell odours from pen-like devices. After sniffing each pen, the researchers asked what the smell was, the intensity, and the pleasantness of that smell. They sniffed key ingredients found in licorice, cinnamon, fish etc. *The TAAR5 variant affects perception of fish odour containing trimethylamine, a compound found in rotten and fermented fish.* In the smell tests, those participants who have the gene variant were more likely to not smell anything when presented with the fish odour or could only smell it with less intensity and often named the odour incorrectly. The results were published in Current Biology. *A note from Cell Press adds that while humans have fewer olfactory genes compared to other species, some of the genetic variations that people do carry makes them more sensitive to particular smells such as licorice or cinnamon, not less. The researchers say they will continue to collect data on odour perception and have also planned to investigate the smell deficits in COVID-19 patients.*

BODY MASS INDEX OF INDIAN 19-YEAR-OLDS AMONG LOWEST IN 200 COUNTRIES

India ranks third and fifth from the bottom respectively among countries where 19-year-old girls and boys have a low body mass index, according to a study in The Lancet to be published on Friday. The study provides new estimates for height and BMI trends in 2019 across 200 countries after analysing data from 2,181 studies. *BMI is measured as the weight in kg divided by the square of the height in metres.* World Health Organization guidelines define a normal BMI range as 18.5 to 24.9, overweight as 25 or higher, and obesity as 30 or higher. *The mean BMI of 19-year-old boys is 20.1 in India, compared to a high of 29.6 in the Cook Islands and a low of 19.2 in Ethiopia. For Indian girls, the mean BMI is again 20.1, compared to a high of 29.0 in Tonga and a low of 19.6 in Timor-Leste.* The mean height of Indian 19-year-olds is 166.5 cm for boys and 155.2 cm for girls, well below



the high of Netherlands boys (183.8 cm) and girls (170 cm). The 20 cm or higher difference between countries with the tallest and shortest mean height represents approximately 8 years of growth gap for girls and approximately 6 years for boys. For example, 19-year-old girls in India have the same mean height as 12-year-old Dutch girls, said Prof Majid Ezzati, from Imperial College, London, and senior author of the study said. The analysis charts child and adolescent physical growth trends over 35 years. "In developing countries like India, we have a dual burden i.e., overnutrition and undernutrition," said Dr A Laxmaiah, head of the Public Health Nutrition division at the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad. "The prevalence of overweight and obesity among adolescents of both Indian girls and boys is lower when compared to children of developed nations. The reasons could be several, like variations in the epigenetic, dietary intakes, familial, psychosocial, parental education, occupations, income etc," Dr Laxmaiah said. Dr Laxmaiah stressed the need for regular diet and nutrition surveys in India to avert the increase of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents. "Overweight and obesity are mostly carried over to adult age and are causes for many metabolic disorders like insulin resistance, diabetes, hypertension, CVDs, stroke, and some cancers."

98.6°F VS NEW NORMAL: WHY IS BODY TEMPERATURE DECLINING OVER TIME?

For several years now, doctors and researchers have known that 98.6°F is not really the gold-standard "normal" body temperature it was once considered to be. Studies in the US and Europe have found average body temperatures declining over time. But does this trend also hold good outside of high-income countries? Indeed, body temperatures have declined in an indigenous rural population in Bolivia, a 16-year study has found. Published in Science Advances, the study also looks at possible reasons that may have caused this decline among people in general.

What is the case for and against taking 98.6°F as "normal" body temperature?

The German doctor Carl Reinhold August Wunderlich, who in 1851 pioneered the use of the clinical thermometer, took over a million measurements of 25,000 patients, and published his findings in a book in 1868, in which he concluded that the average human body temperature is 98.6°F. In recent years, however, different studies have found the human body temperature averaging out differently, including at 97.7°, 97.9° and 98.2°F. One of the largest such studies, published last year, found that body temperatures among Americans have been declining over the last two centuries.

So, what does the new study add?

In previous studies, the reasons for declining body temperatures were not clear, nor was it known whether a temperature below 98.6°F is "normal" outside of high-income countries. The new study made 18,000 observations of body temperature in 5,500 individuals among the Tsimane, an indigenous population in the Bolivian Amazon. *"The Tsimane are indigenous forager-horticulturalists who inhabit a tropical environment rife with diverse pathogens — from familiar ones like a cold or pneumonia, to less familiar, like hookworm and tuberculosis,"* lead author Michael Gurven, an anthropologist at University of California, Santa Barbara, said by email. Greater exposure to infection can lead to higher inflammation, which in turn can lead to a higher body temperature. "From earlier studies, we also know that Tsimane experience higher inflammation due to this high infectious burden. And so we expected to find that body temperatures would be higher among Tsimane than they are in the US, UK and Germany," Gurven said. *Instead, the study found, average body temperatures among the Tsimane have fallen by 0.09°F per year; they average*



roughly 97.7°F today. This decline in less than two decades, the researchers noted, was about the same as that observed in the US over two centuries.

What could be the reasons for this?

The study looked at a number of hypotheses about factors that may be causing the decline of body temperature among people in general, and tested these against their findings among the Tsimane.

BETTER HEALTHCARE: One hypothesis is that improved hygiene and healthcare in high-income population groups have led to fewer infections over time and, in turn, to lower body temperature. While the Tsimane live a rural lifestyle with a relatively low access to healthcare, they do have better access than they did two decades ago. Indeed, some infections were found to be associated with higher body temperature. But when the statistical model adjusted the temperature findings for infection, it found that reduced infection alone could not explain the declines. “This is to say that the decline in body temperature over the duration of the study is not altered by considering patient characteristics, including their medical diagnoses,” Gurven said.

LOWER INFLAMMATION: People use anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen more frequently than earlier. Again, even after accounting for biomarkers of inflammation, body temperature declines over time remained among the Tsimane.

BRIEFER ILLNESS: Since people have greater access to treatment, has it reduced the duration of infection? That was another hypothesis the study tested. The findings among the Tsimane, indeed, were consistent with this argument. If a study participant had a respiratory infection in the early stages of the 2002-18 study, it led to having a higher body temperature than the temperature if they had the same infection more recently.

BODIES WORKING LESS: Another hypothesis is that people are healthier, so their bodies might be working less to fight infection. Also, our bodies may not have to work as hard as before in order to regulate internal temperature, because of air-conditioning and winter heating. The Tsimane do not use such advanced technology, but do have more access to clothes and blankets.

So, what are the implications?

Together, the findings underline that there is no single cause that could explain the decline. The researchers said it's likely a combination of factors — all pointing to improved conditions. The researchers do not expect their findings to influence how doctors use body temperature readings in practice. Doctors already acknowledge there is no universal ‘normal’ body temperature for all people at all times. Among its limitations, the study used the same type of thermometer, but not the same thermometer over the entire 16 years. In the earliest study years, the sample size was smaller. The study did not account for pregnancy or lactation, or the time of day when body temperatures were recorded.

WHY WORLD POLIO DAY IS OBSERVED ON OCTOBER 24, WHERE INDIA STANDS

October 24 is observed as World Polio Day every year in order to call on countries to stay vigilant in their fight against the disease. As per the WHO, since 1980, the cases of wild poliovirus have decreased by over 99.9 per cent as a result of vaccination efforts made around the world. *World Polio Day was established by Rotary International over a decade ago to commemorate the birth of Jonas Salk, who led the first team to develop the vaccine against the disease.* In the last three decades, 3rd floor and 4th floor Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur; Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), led by national governments and the WHO, has been monitoring the disease situation globally.

What is polio?

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Polio is a crippling and potentially deadly disease that affects the nervous system... *Because the virus lives in the faeces (poop) of an infected person, people infected with the disease can spread it to others when they do not wash their hands well after defecating (pooping). People can also be infected if they drink water or eat food contaminated with infected faeces.* Most people with polio do not feel sick. Some people have only minor symptoms, such as fever, tiredness, nausea, headache, nasal congestion, sore throat, cough, stiffness in the neck and back, and pain in the arms and legs. In rare cases, polio infection causes permanent loss of muscle function (paralysis). *Polio can be fatal if the muscles used for breathing are paralyzed or if there is an infection of the brain.*" The virus multiplies in the intestine, from where it can invade the nervous system and can cause paralysis. *Once that happens, the patient is crippled for life because there is no treatment for the affliction.* Polio infection, however, can be easily prevented by a vaccine. *There are three variants of the poliovirus, numbered 1 to 3. For a country to be declared polio-free, the wild transmission of all three kinds has to be stopped. For eradication, cases of both wild and vaccine-derived polio infection have to be reduced to zero.*

Which are the countries where the disease has seen recent outbreaks?

In 2019, polio outbreaks were recorded in the Philippines, Malaysia, Ghana, Myanmar, China, Cameroon, Indonesia and Iran, which were mostly vaccine-derived (a rare strain of the virus genetically mutated from the strain in the vaccine. According to the WHO, if the oral vaccine-virus is excreted and allowed to circulate in an un- or under-immunised population for at least 12 months, it can mutate to cause infections). As per the CDC, *Afghanistan and Pakistan are the two countries that are the last stronghold of the wild poliovirus. In Pakistan, the number of reported wild poliovirus cases has increased in 2020.* On the other hand, on August 25, *the African Region was certified as wild poliovirus free. As per the CDC, as of October 7, there were more than 440 cases of poliovirus around the world, as compared with 378 and 71 cases globally in 2018 and 2019 respectively.*

What is India's situation with regard to the disease?

India was declared polio-free in January 2014, after three years of zero cases, an achievement widely believed to have been spurred by the successful pulse polio campaign in which all children were administered polio drops. The last case due to wild poliovirus in the country was detected on January 13, 2011.