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INTERNATIONAL

WHAT IS PARLER, NOW-MUTED RIGHTWING PLATFORM?

Parler's CEO on Thursday said the network may not coming back online in an interview to Reuters. Parler, an alternative social network popular with conservatives in the US, has literally gone offline after being *booted out of Apple's App Store and Google Play Store and denied hosting services by Amazon Web Services (AWS) after the recent violence at the US Capitol*. But what is Parler, and why have big tech companies taken such a strong action against what is a relatively unknown social network outside of the United States?

What is Parler and why is it in the news?

Parler is a micro-blogging social network, similar to Twitter. On Parler, one sees all the posts from everyone they follow in reverse chronological order. But unlike Twitter, *Parler does not recommend content to users*. It also claims it does not collect user data for privacy reasons. Further *you cannot crosspost to other platforms*. So there's no sharing of your Parler post to Facebook or Twitter, though people do take screenshots and post to other platforms. *It is believed to have around 10 million users globally and 8 million in the US*, according to data by Sensor Tower analytics. *Over the past couple of years, the platform has become a hotbed for US conservatives, supporters of Donald Trump and those who believe in the QAnon conspiracy theories*. In fact, after being kicked off from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, Trump had indicated he would be moving to a new platform and Parler was seen as the likely candidate. *Parler pitches itself as a neutral platform in favour of free speech as enshrined in the American constitution, with no restrictions whatsoever. For instance, after the Capitol Hill violence, many of the posts on Parler called for mass executions of 'left traitors'. Such content was not removed by Parler*. The platform has seen a jump in its user base in recent months, especially in the runup to the US elections. Parler launched in 2018 and is *co-founded by John Matze, Jr. and Jared Thomson*, with headquarters in Nevada. But *Parler has another powerful backer: investor and co-founder Rebekah Mercer, daughter of billionaire hedge-fund investor Robert Mercer. The Mercer family has also contributed heavily to Donald Trump's campaigns in the past*. Mercer's link to Parler was reported first by the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). According to WSJ, Matze told the paper that Mercer's backing to Parler "was dependent on the platform allowing users to control what they see."

Why did Apple and Google remove Parler?

On January 8, two days after mob violence at the US Capitol both Apple and Google removed the Parler app from their respective app stores. Both companies had asked Parler to step up moderation on the platform and remove content which had glorified the violence. Some of the posts on Parler called for "execution of traitors" referring to US Congressmen. The company refused to do this. In a statement, Google said, "We recognise that there can be reasonable debate about content policies and that it can be difficult for apps to immediately remove all violative content, but for us to distribute an app through Google Play, we do require that apps implement robust moderation for egregious content." "We have always supported diverse points of view being represented on the App Store, but there is no place on our platform for threats of violence and illegal activity. Parler has not taken adequate measures to address the proliferation of these threats to people's safety."



We have suspended Parler from the App Store until they resolve these issues,” Apple said in a statement.

Why did Amazon remove Parler?

By Sunday, Amazon’s cloud hosting service AWS had also removed Parler, effectively rendering it out of service. AWS said Parler had violated its terms of service by allowing content, which was inciting violence. In response, Parler has sued Amazon for violating the contract and called the ban politically motivated. *Parler is now considering moving to Epik, which is a domain registrar known for hosting far-right extremist content. Epik also hosts another platform called Gab, which is pitching itself as another ‘free speech’ platform, but is proliferated by extremist content.*

TRUMP IS ONLY AMERICAN PRESIDENT TO BE IMPEACHED TWICE

Outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump has entered the record books for being the only American President to be impeached twice. The moment of ignominy came after the House of Representatives passed a motion of impeachment against him, this time for “incitement of insurrection,” following the assault on the U.S. Capitol building on January 6 by a violent pro-Trump mob. His first impeachment, in September 2019, was for “abuse of power” and “obstruction of justice” over his dealings with Ukraine and attempts by Congress to investigate the same, yet he survived in office owing to a Senate acquittal. On this occasion, not only did the House vote resoundingly, by a margin of 232-197, to impeach him but it passed with an unprecedented margin of bipartisan support after 10 Republicans crossed the aisle. This might signal a broader mood across Congress, particularly in the Senate, to vote differently to the outcome last time, specifically that there will be sufficient support among Republican ranks for a Senate conviction. Given the tight timeline leading up to the inauguration of Democratic President-elect Joe Biden on January 20, it might be that the Senate does not have the opportunity to conduct a full trial based on the article of impeachment sent to it by the House, before Mr. Trump demits office. Nevertheless, Senate Democrats have vowed to carry out the trial even after the fact, including not only a vote on convicting him for high crimes and misdemeanours but also potentially on barring him from running again. The question looming before Congressional Republicans is this: are they, as a group united in safeguarding mainstream conservative values, convinced that the harm that Mr. Trump has done to the presidency and the fabric of American society warrants banning him from the highest office in the land, or will there be too many holdouts within their ranks to successfully bring closure to this turbulent saga in American politics? The answer also depends on what Senate and House Republicans make of the broader “movement” that he has come to represent — a rowdy, vicious campaign built on white privilege and regularly indulging in racist attacks, yet one that has pulled in elements of economically disenfranchised middle America. Will they believe that they can cut off Mr. Trump from leading this cohort, yet appear responsive to the needs of the 74 million Americans who voted for him? Or will they fear that they have no other leaders of national standing who could bring the kind of support that he did into the Republican tent? The course of action that Senate Republicans choose now will determine which vector the country’s battered politics will travel along — one that strikes a balance between national interest and the traditional formula of economic growth with social pluralism, or one that gives ever greater voice to nativist populism and disregard for the cherished institutions of democracy.



AFTER U.S., RUSSIA PULLS OUT OF OPEN SKIES TREATY

Russia announced on Friday it was pulling out of the Open Skies treaty, saying that the pact, which allows unarmed surveillance flights over member countries, had been seriously compromised by the withdrawal of the United States. The move, announced by Russia's Foreign Ministry, comes days before U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's January 20 inauguration amid fears of a burgeoning arms race. Moscow's last major nuclear arms pact with Washington is set to expire next month. The United States left the Open Skies arms control and verification treaty in November, accusing Russia of violating it, something Moscow denied. Russia said in a statement that Moscow had made specific proposals to other members to mitigate against the impact of the U.S. exit but that those proposals were not backed by Washington's allies. Moscow will formally notify other member states about its exit once it has completed unspecified withdrawal procedures at home, it said. The exit process usually takes months to be finalised.

Sharing of intelligence

Russia has raised concerns that despite leaving the treaty Washington could potentially retain access to overflight intelligence gathered by allies who remain members in the treaty. The Kommersant newspaper reported earlier that Moscow had tried to get guarantees from other countries that they would not share such intelligence with the U.S. but had not been given any assurances. Arms control tensions have been rising between Moscow and Washington and New START, their last remaining major nuclear arms control treaty, is set to expire in February. Mr. Biden has said he's keen to renew it but it remains unclear for how long.

CUBA REDESIGNATED AS TERRORIST

The Trump administration's decision to redesignate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, taken in its last days, appears to be a blatantly politicised move, bereft of any strategic or moral reasoning. In the announcement, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited Cuba's hosting of 10 Colombian rebels, a few American fugitives and its backing for Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as evidence for its "support for acts of international terrorism". *The designation now puts the Caribbean country with Iran, North Korea and Syria, and would trigger fresh sanctions, making it more difficult for Cuba to do business.* Havana has stated that returning the Colombian rebels would complicate the peace process in which it is a mediator. With regard to Venezuela, Cuba is following a foreign policy which it thinks serves its best interests, dealing with the country's government, irrespective of Washington's opinion. Not even the harshest critics of the single-party communist government in Havana, which faced domestic protests recently for freedom of expression, would allege its involvement in terrorist activities. *As the Trump administration prepares to hand over power to a new President, it is taking a host of consequential foreign policy decisions that would make it difficult for Joe Biden to move quickly on his foreign policy agenda. America's acrimony towards Cuba has its roots in the Cold War period.* As U.S. President Barack Obama noted when he opened up towards Cuba, their adverse relations were a relic of the past. He had taken a more realistic approach towards the Cubans than his predecessors. The U.S. has punished Cuba for decades with harsh sanctions, hoping that the Castro regime would eventually collapse. But the Cuban communists survived even the fall of the Soviet Union. With the Cold War memories fading and a new generation of Americans demanding a reset in foreign policy, Mr.



Obama re-established ties, opened the American embassy and travelled to Havana, marking a new beginning. The logical approach of his successor should have been taking more confidence-building measures between the two countries and working towards a gradual normalisation of ties. But Donald Trump did just the opposite. It is strange that the U.S., the world's largest military power that had cooperated with communist China since the early 1970s, still treats this tiny communist country that lies off the Florida coast as an enemy. Mr. Biden, during his campaign, had criticised the Trump administration's Cuba policy and promised a more open approach. He could reverse the terror listing, but it would take time as the decision should follow a review process. Perhaps that is what Mr. Trump, who resisted the November election result till the Congressional certification of Mr. Biden's victory, wants. Mr. Biden should not be deterred by these last-minute policy sabotages.

The terror designation hampers foreign investment and can only be removed after a formal review by the Biden administration. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited Cuba's ties with Colombian rebels, alliance with leftist Venezuela and sanctuary to several U.S. fugitives in justifying the blacklisting. "With this action, we will once again hold Cuba's government accountable and send a clear message: the Castro regime must end its support for international terrorism and subversion of U.S. justice," Mr. Pompeo said in a statement, referring to former leaders Fidel and Raul Castro. "The U.S. will continue to support the Cuban people in their desire for a democratic government and respect for human rights, including freedom of religion, expression and association." Former President Barack Obama in 2015 delisted Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism as he moved to normalise relations.

DECODING CUBA'S CURRENCY REFORMS (GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM - DIRECTOR - STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, AGNOSHIN TECHNOLOGIES PVT LTD)

The devaluation of the Cuban peso (CUP) and the withdrawal of the convertible peso (CUC), the second currency of the country, neither of which can be traded internationally, caps Cuba's gradual economic transition since the end of the Soviet Union. The reforms that came into force on January 1 aim to eliminate price distortions arising from multiple exchange rates and reduce Cuba's dependence on imports of basic commodities. These conditions have been exacerbated by the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, decline in the export of the nation's famed medical services, the depletion of foreign exchange revenues from tourism, and the crippling impact of U.S. economic sanctions. As per the latest devaluation plan announced in December by President Miguel Diaz-Canel, the CUP's artificial one-to-one parity with the U.S. dollar has been removed. The currency will instead trade at 24 pesos to the greenback and the CUC will be phased out in six months. The CUP is in circulation in the domestic economy and serves as the principal medium by which goods are priced and wages paid.

A dual domestic currency

During the turmoil in Cuba's sugar industry and a plunge in nickel prices in the 1990s, a volatile CUP had fallen to 140 to the dollar. Against this backdrop, the CUC was introduced in 1994 as a unit of account and store of value, to prevent the country's excessive reliance on the U.S. dollar following the end of the former Soviet Union. In recent years, this second currency has more or less steadied at one CUC to 24 CUPs in official exchange outlets and is the predominant mode of



transaction for tourists and residents at high-end shopping outlets and other imported goods. Apart from the disparities attributed to the prevalence of a dual domestic currency, Havana has at times had to deftly deploy the surge in dollar remittances and tourism to bolster the peso, by legalising the greenback in the 1990s. It has also had to respond in kind to American sanctions at other instances, as when the government in 2004 imposed a 10% tax on the exchange of the dollar for CUCs. Last July, Havana scrapped the 10% surcharge in a sequel to the 2019 opening of stores trading principally in dollars. The recent shift is part of the government's bid to boost dollar transactions alongside other hard currencies, especially after tourism was closed in the wake of the pandemic. There is concern that the circulation of hard money could reinforce the segmentation and distortions of the past that resulted from access to the CUC for public sector companies at preferential exchange rates.

An important objective

The country's switch back to a single currency was an important objective in the economic transformation plan envisioned in the 2011 Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba under former President Raul Castro. Among the expected gains from a unified peso are transparency of firms in terms of costs and profits, higher economic productivity and incentives for exports. Experts have opined that a corresponding devaluation of the peso was a necessary first step to discontinue the dual currency. The government of President Diaz-Canel has sought to cushion the likely impact of high inflation resulting from the devaluation with a generous wage and pension hike for state employees, besides a roll-back of subsidies to state-owned firms. There are concerns, however, that it could still leave a sizeable private and informal sector labour force exposed. In addition, there is the real risk that the adverse effects from high prices could further incense protesters who have been demanding protection for civil liberties and artistic freedom following the detention of a well-known rap singer. Predictably, the government has been quick to dismiss the voicing of dissent as U.S. interference in Cuba's internal affairs. Havana must take citizens along in order to implement the new reforms.

MOUNTING PRESSURE ON CHINA, U.S. BLACKLISTS XIAOMI, CNOOC

The U.S. government has blacklisted Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi Corp. and China's third-largest national oil company for alleged military links, heaping pressure on Beijing in President Donald Trump's last week in office. The Department of Defense added nine companies to its list of Chinese firms with military links, including Xiaomi and state-owned plane manufacturer Commercial Aircraft Corp. of China (Comac). U.S. investors will have to divest their stakes in Chinese companies on the military list by November this year, according to an executive order signed by Mr. Trump last November. Xiaomi did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Xiaomi Corp. overtook Apple Inc. as the world's No. 3 smartphone maker by sales in the third quarter of 2020, according to data by Gartner. Separately, the Commerce Department put China National Offshore Oil Corp. (CNOOC) on the entity list, an economic blacklist that forbids U.S. firms from exporting or transferring technology with the companies named unless permission has been obtained from the U.S. government. The move comes after about 60 Chinese companies were added to the list in December, including drone maker DJI and semiconductor firm SMIC. CNOOC has been involved in offshore drilling in the disputed waters South China Sea, where Beijing has overlapping territorial claims with other countries including Vietnam, the Philippines,



Brunei, Taiwan, and Malaysia. “China’s reckless and belligerent actions in the South China Sea and its aggressive push to acquire sensitive intellectual property and technology for its militarisation efforts are a threat to U.S. national security and the security of the international community,” U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said. “CNOOC acts as a bully for the People’s Liberation Army to intimidate China’s neighbours,” he added.

UNVEILED DOCUMENT HIGHLIGHTS TRUMP’S MIXED CHINA LEGACY

The newly declassified 2018 Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, made public by the Trump administration in its last week in office, underlines how prominently “strategic competition between the U.S. and China” set Washington’s regional policy over the past four years, and President Donald Trump’s mixed record in effectively addressing that challenge. Among the objectives outlined in the document are promoting American values throughout the region to “counterbalance” values being promoted by China, deterring China from using force or threats against U.S. allies and partners, and building a credible economic response and advancing “U.S. global economic leadership” to counter China’s influence and its projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. China this week expectedly hit out at the document, saying it “proves the malign motives of the U.S. side to contain China”. Asked by State media specifically about its references to “protecting Taiwan and helping India contain China”, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson in Beijing, Zhao Lijian, dismissed the framework as “certain politicians on the U.S. side want[ing] to mark their legacy”, saying it “reeks of Cold War mentality” and “belongs to the dustbin of history”. The Trump administration certainly did achieve some of the outlined objectives, particularly in expanding security cooperation with India, Japan and Australia — or the “Quad”. However, its economic aspirations, as well as building a broader coalition to respond to China’s actions, remain, at best, works-in-progress. Mr. Trump’s inconsistent approach to many of America’s own allies and partners, particularly on the trade front, has been one major obstacle. Indeed, one of his first acts in office was to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which would have created the world’s biggest trading bloc without China. The agreement was later concluded without the U.S.

China-led trade bloc

The end of his term, meanwhile, saw the China-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement come into force in November last year. This includes Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand — four countries that the U.S. had hoped to align with to offer a robust economic regional response to China. The document notes China’s aims “to dissolve U.S. alliances and partnerships in the region” and “exploit vacuums and opportunities created by these diminished bonds”. Yet, one of the biggest criticisms of Mr. Trump’s foreign policy has been his hot-and-cold approach to allies, for instance, demanding South Korea pay more to maintain a U.S. military presence there. His successor, Joe Biden, has declared repairing alliances as one of his immediate priorities as well as a shift away from the messaging of “America First”.

Unpredictable U.S.

Wary of the unpredictability in Washington, countries including India and Japan moved to try and shore up relations with China. India in June 2017 proposed holding an “informal summit”, which it went ahead with in 2018 and 2019 despite a border crisis in Doklam erupting only days after



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal to Chinese President Xi Jinping. However, China's own actions on several fronts, ultimately, would end up, more than anything else, help further some of the goals in the U.S. strategic vision, particularly in building security partnerships. Rather than look to "dissolve" U.S. partnerships as the framework had feared, Beijing's actions, from the crisis sparked on the India border by its transgressions last year to renewed tensions in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea, only helped deepen them. Relations with India emerge as one major positive. The framework describes as one of its "desired end-states" the U.S. becoming India's "preferred partner on security issues" — a trend that the past four years has certainly seen - as well as the two countries cooperating to counter Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia — which, however, remains a work-in-progress.

A STRONG INDIA WOULD ACT AS 'COUNTERBALANCE' TO CHINA: U.S.

With days to go before its end, the Trump administration has declassified a sensitive document on the U.S. strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific' from 2018. The 10-page document outlines objectives and strategies with regard to China, North Korea, India and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Maintaining "U.S. strategic primacy" in the region and promoting a "liberal economic order" while stopping China from establishing "illiberal spheres of influence" is the U.S.'s first national security challenge, as per the document. The other two challenges are ensuring that North Korea does not threaten the U.S. and advancing U.S. economic leadership globally. With regard to India, one of the 'desired end states' of the U.S.'s strategy is for the U.S. to be India's preferred partner on security issues and for the two countries to "cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter Chinese influence" in South Asia, Southeast Asia and other regions of "mutual concern". Several sentences in the document — including in sections on India — have been redacted.

Border dispute

The U.S. aims to help India become a net security provider in the region, solidify a lasting strategic partnership with India "underpinned by a strong Indian military able to effectively collaborate with" the U.S and its regional partners. These objectives it plans to achieve via enhanced defence cooperation and interoperability; working with India "toward domestic economic reform" and greater leadership roles for India in the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. *Consequently, the U.S.'s to-do list has on it offers of support to India via military, diplomatic and intelligence channels "to help address continental challenges such as the border dispute with China and access to water, including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China."* Last year, *India and China were engaged in their deadliest border dispute in decades along the Line of Actual Control, in which 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed.* Just last week U.S. Ambassador to India Kenneth Juster had said that the U.S. cooperated with India to counter China's "aggressive" actions along the LAC, but did not get this cooperation.

Act-East policy

The U.S. also seeks to bolster common principles, including the peaceful resolution of disputes and the transparent infrastructure-debt practices (a reference to alternatives to financing by China's Belt Road Initiative, which has led to untenable debt positions in borrowing countries), as per the strategy. The U.S. aims to support India's "Act East" policy and "its aspiration to be a leading global



power, highlighting its compatibility with the U.S., Japanese and Australian vision” of the Indo-Pacific. “A strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China,” is one of the underlying assumptions of the strategy, which expects Chinese military, economic and diplomatic influence will continue to increase in the short term. “China aims to dissolve U.S. alliances and partnerships across the region. China will exploit vacuums and opportunities created by these diminished bonds,” the document says. On Russia, it says the country will “remain a marginal player” in the region relative to the U.S., China and India. On North Korea, a stated U.S. objective is to, “*Convince the Kim regime that the only path to its survival is to relinquish its nuclear weapons.*” The official reason for the early declassification of the document, 20 years ahead of time, was “*to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners, the enduring commitment of the U.S. to keeping the Indo-Pacific region free and open long into the future,*” said national Security Advisor Robert C O’ Brien in a covering note. “Frankly, the early declassification doesn’t tie the Biden administration’s hands,” Ankit Panda, a senior fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told The Hindu. “I suspect it’s an attempt by some in the outgoing administration to make their mark on policy clear and public, but it’s not a document that speaks to tremendous strategic foresight,” he said. “There’s a considerable bit of dissonance across this document, however, in its professed goal of spreading American and liberal values and the complete lack of any language on human rights. That again isn’t particularly surprising given how the administration has gone about things,” Mr. Panda wrote in a post analysing the document.

UGANDA’S BOBI WINE REJECTS ELECTION RESULTS, CLAIMS VICTORY

Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine on Friday claimed victory in the presidential election, rejecting as a “complete sham” early results that gave President Yoweri Museveni a wide lead. Mr. Wine said he felt under threat as soldiers surrounded his home on Friday evening after he alleged that Thursday’s election was rigged and said “every legal option is on the table” to challenge the official results, including protests. He referred to himself as the “President-elect.”

POPE SAYS WOMEN CAN READ AT MASS, BUT STILL CAN’T BE PRIESTS

Pope Francis changed church law on Monday to explicitly allow women to do more things during Mass, while continuing to affirm that they cannot be priests. The Pope amended the law to formalise and institutionalise what is common practice in many parts of the world: that women can read the Gospel and serve on the altar as eucharistic ministers. Previously, such roles were officially reserved to men even though exceptions were made. The pontiff said he was making the change to increase recognition of the “precious contribution” women make in the church, while emphasising that all baptised Catholics have a role to play in the church’s mission. But he also noted that doing so further makes a distinction between “ordained” ministries such as the priesthood and diaconate, and ministries open to qualified laity. The Vatican reserves the priesthood for men. The change comes as Pope Francis remains under pressure to allow women to be deacons — ministers who perform many of the same functions as priests, such as presiding at weddings, baptisms and funerals. Currently, the ministry is reserved for men.



BRIDGING THE GULF

*The Gulf reconciliation summit, in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, where the kingdom and its allies decided to end their blockade of Qatar, has brought to an end, for now, their long feud. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade and severed diplomatic ties, accusing the tiny Gulf country of supporting terrorism. They also issued 13 demands for it to be lifted, which included shutting down the Qatar-funded TV network, Al Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base and reducing diplomatic relations with Iran. Qatar did not budge despite the heavy economic cost. When the Saudi and Emirati airspaces were closed, Iran offered Qatar global connectivity. Al Jazeera is still live. And, Qatar has invited more Turkish troops, bolstering its ties with Ankara, which is eager to play a bigger role in West Asia. Moreover, it played an important role in the U.S.-Taliban deal and continued to host talks between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government. If the original Saudi plan was to isolate Qatar and make it kneel, it has backfired. And in the last weeks of the Trump administration, MBS and his allies seem to have realised their strategic folly. Qatar has made few concessions to reach the reconciliation. The 13 specific demands were replaced by a broad agreement on non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs and cooperating to ensure regional stability and security, which can be open to different interpretations for different sides. After the summit, Qatar's Foreign Ministry has said that *the country had no intention of altering ties with Iran and Turkey*. In practice, the Saudi side stepped down from its demands and made amends with an unshaken Qatar as a new President is going to assume power in the U.S. *The Saudi U-turn could be the result of a genuine tactical rethink. The rift in the Gulf helped Iran and Turkey, Riyadh's main rivals, while it failed to scuttle Qatar's standing*. Iran, reeling under U.S. sanctions, also got some financial relief from Qatari pay-outs for using its airspace. *By lifting the air and sea blockades, the Saudis and the Emiratis could deny Iran of those funds and also try to put up a united Arab regional front as Joe Biden is preparing to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal*. The Saudis may also be hoping that bridging the Gulf between two American allies would help them warm up to the Biden administration. While ending the feud is welcome, it cannot be overlooked that this unnecessary crisis was born out of an ill-thought-out Saudi-Emirati strategy of coercion. It reflects poorly on them. They should learn from the mistakes and build ties based on mutual interests and cooperation, not on threats and coercion.*

IRAN WARNS AGAINST ACTION OVER SEIZED SOUTH KOREAN VESSEL

Iran warned on Monday its seizure of a South Korean tanker in the Gulf must not be politicised, after the U.S. and France urged the Islamic Republic to release the ship. *"We have repeatedly told... the intervening parties, whether they are the United States or France, that the case does not concern them at all and that they will not help to solve a technical problem if they politicise it," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh*. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seized the Hankuk Chemi and arrested its multinational crew of 20 near the strategic Strait of Hormuz one week ago. The move came as Tehran urged Seoul to release billions of dollars of Iranian assets frozen in South Korea as part of U.S. sanctions. The U.S. and France have called for Iran to release the ship. A State Department spokesperson called the seizure "part of a clear attempt to extort the international community into relieving the pressure of sanctions". South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun reached Tehran on Sunday for negotiations.



MALAYSIA DECLARES STATE OF EMERGENCY OVER VIRUS SURGE

Malaysia's king declared a nationwide state of emergency on Tuesday to fight a coronavirus surge and Parliament was suspended, with critics charging that it was a bid by the unstable government to cling to power. The surprise move came a day after the Prime Minister announced sweeping new curbs across much of the Southeast Asian nation, including the closure of most businesses, and warned the health system was "at breaking point". Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah agreed to declare an emergency until August 1 following a request from *Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, the national palace* said in a statement. It is the first time Malaysia has declared a national state of emergency in over half a century and Mr. Muhyiddin, in a televised address, confirmed Parliament would be suspended and elections would not take place for the time being.

Not a coup, says PM

But the leader, whose 10-month-old administration is showing signs of falling apart, insisted that "the civilian government will continue to function". "The emergency declaration... is not a military coup and a curfew will not be enforced," he said, insisting that he was committed to holding a general election once the outbreak is brought under control. The announcement came after Mr. Muhyiddin's key coalition allies started withdrawing support, which could have led to the collapse of the government and snap national polls that some feared could worsen the outbreak. Mr. Muhyiddin has narrowly survived a series of challenges in Parliament since taking office but is now thought to have lost his majority. Malaysia kept the virus in check for much of last year with a tough lockdown but, once curbs were eased, cases accelerated and have repeatedly hit fresh records in the recent days. The country has reported more than 1,38,000 virus cases and 555 deaths. As well as suspending political life, the declaration gives the government powers to take over private hospitals as government facilities become overwhelmed, and get extra help from the military and the police, Mr. Muhyiddin said.

HAPPILY UNMARRIED

It's a truth not acknowledged enough that a woman — single, married or pregnant — is always in possession of a surfeit of useless advice. Seoul city authorities, however, have come up with a category of counsel that can only be described as: How not to inconvenience your husband as you struggle with the minor matter of childbirth. The advisory aimed at pregnant women asks them, among other things, not to look dishevelled as they cook meals for their husbands, clean out the fridge, make sure there is enough toilet paper in the house, and arrange for childcare if they have other children — all this, before they admit themselves to the hospital. This remarkable piece of condescension was crafted in 2019, but its rediscovery on social media has led to an uproar, followed by demands for an apology. It comes at a time when South Korea is grappling with a declining population and falling birth rates — in 2020, for the first time, the number of deaths in the country outstripped births. For *the fourth-largest economy in Asia, this is a crisis — and it hopes to prod women into having more children through public campaigns and generous parental leave policies*. The women have other battles to fight. *South Korea's gender pay gap is one of the largest among 37 countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development*. Professional mobility is difficult given the entrenched sexism in corporate life. A growing feminist movement has led to a sharp questioning of the inequalities of marriage in a deeply patriarchal society. As a



result, motherhood and the “second shift” it entails is not high on women’s agenda: The number of South Korean women who believe they need to marry fell to 44 per cent in 2018 from 62 per cent in 2008. In a world not run by patriarchal values, motherhood and marriage could arguably be hard to sell to women, given the cost on their lives and bodies. The Seoul city authorities’ vision of domestic slavery in the service of entitled men illustrates precisely why South Korean women are running away from its tyranny.

AFGHANISTAN RAISES ‘DELAY’ IN INDIA’S ACCEPTANCE OF ENVOY

More than three months after Afghanistan announced its next Ambassador to India, New Delhi has yet to grant its agrément, or acceptance of the Afghan government’s nominee, officials in both capitals confirmed. The delay, which follows the government’s decision not to accept two other names proffered earlier, was raised by senior officials in Kabul who met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval during a two-day visit to Afghanistan. Sources confirmed that Afghan Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar also discussed the issue with Mr. Doval during their meeting and with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during a phone call last week, and the Indian side assured the Afghan government that the issue would be resolved shortly. “The agrément is almost done,” an official told The Hindu, shortly after the meeting with Mr. Doval in Kabul. “It is under process and a matter of days.” According to the sources, the name of Farid Mamundzay, who was a senior political adviser to the Afghan National Security Council, and a former Deputy Minister of Policy and Technical Affairs at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, was proposed as the next Ambassador in September 2020.

MEA rejects contention

Afghanistan has not had a full-rank Ambassador in Delhi since September 2018, when Ambassador Shaida Abdali resigned unexpectedly in order to stand for elections. Since then, diplomat Tahir Qadiry assumed charge as Charge d’Affaires, but is ending his tenure this month for another foreign assignment. The Ministry of External Affairs declined to reply to questions on the issue officially, and dismissed the contention that there had been any “delay”. When contacted, MEA officials aware of the protocol concerns pointed to a number of reasons, beginning with the initial delay by the Ashraf Ghani government in naming a replacement for Mr. Abdali, and subsequently its preoccupation with elections, the coronavirus pandemic and the Doha peace process. However, they confirmed that since 2019, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had sent at least three names, beginning with senior government official Walid Tamim in July 2019, and subsequently floated the name of Kawoon Kakar, a former adviser to President Ghani. Mr. Tamim was appointed a Deputy Minister in the Finance Ministry pending his credentials from New Delhi, the government had announced, but when New Delhi did not respond to either name, the MFA proposed Mr. Mamundzay. On September 3 last, Mr. Mamundzay even tweeted that he was “honoured & humbled to have been designated as the new Afghan ambassador to India”, calling India a “generous neighbour” and a “strategic partner with strong historical, political & cultural links” to Afghanistan. However, The Hindu confirmed that New Delhi’s letter of agreement has not so far been conveyed to the Afghan side, leading to the queries put to Mr. Doval and Mr. Jaishankar.



'Senior' envoys sent

Sources who didn't wish to be identified said India had always sent "senior" envoys to Afghanistan and, therefore, expected that Kabul would reciprocate. New Delhi had also requested that the Ambassador-designate have ties with all political parties in Afghanistan and took into account India's security sensitivities in the region, the sources added. While delays in providing agreement letters are not uncommon, it is extremely rare for a host country to reject the names of one, let alone more suggested names of incoming diplomats, especially when they are from a country with friendly ties, as Afghanistan and India share.

MEMORIAL ON CAMPUS WILL BE BUILT AGAIN: JAFFNA UNIVERSITY V-C

Days after the Jaffna University administration bulldozed a structure erected in memory of war victims, setting off students protests, the university's Vice-Chancellor on Monday promised to "rebuild" the memorial on campus. Urging a group of students to end their hunger strike, V-C S. Srisatkunarajah laid a "foundation stone" for the said new structure. "The development [of the destruction on Friday night] has caused a lot of concern within the country and outside too. People in the U.K. are talking about it. Tamil Nadu is boiling. Authorities felt the situation had to be diffused," he told The Hindu on Monday, when asked what prompted his shift. Earlier, the V-C had said he had instructed the university's administrative staff to remove the memorial — a sculpture of hands crying out of help — erected two years ago to commemorate the victims of Sri Lanka's civil war. The decision, he said, followed "instructions" from authorities, including Defence, Intelligence, Education Ministry officials, on grounds that it was an "unauthorised structure". The University Grants Commission said the memorial at the Jaffna University threatened "north-south unity".

Demolition slammed

The removal of the structure, dedicated to victims of the final phase of the civil war, triggered spontaneous students protests, drawing national and international attention. Many, including other national student bodies, slammed the move, that they said curbed Tamils' right to remember their loved ones. "After this became a big issue, I got messages from authorities, asking me to take steps," Prof. Srisatkunarajah said. Asked if the structure, termed "unauthorised", had been authorised now, he said it had been cleared "in principle". "We have to later work out the design and form it will take. It will be something that marks peace, not war." The Jaffna-based Uthayan newspaper reported that the Pradeshya Sabha, or local administrative body in Nallur, Jaffna on Monday granted permission to erect a memorial on campus. Meanwhile, businesses and shops across the north and east observed a hartal on Monday, protesting the demolition, local media reported.

THE TERROR MASTERMIND

Just six days after his arrest on January 2, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, the known Lashkar-e-Taiba mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai terror strikes, was sentenced to a five-year jail term on terror financing charges on January 8. The speed with which the wheels of justice turned in Pakistan in the case of Lakhvi's terror financing case are in sharp contrast to the years he remained charged in the Mumbai attack case, in which he was eventually bailed out. It's evident that where Indian

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pressure and American prodding didn't work in ensuring Lakhvi's conviction in the Mumbai terror strikes, in which 166 persons were killed, Islamabad's fears about punitive action from the Financial Action Task Force, or FATF, seem to have done the trick. Islamabad has been facing the heat from the financial watchdog for some time on the issue of terror financing and has called upon Pakistan to make sure it complies fully with its action plan prior to a key FATF meeting in February.

Saeed's conviction

Lakhvi's sentence is also in line with that of Jamaat-ud-Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed's conviction in four terror-financing cases in November and February 2020. In October 2020, FATF decided that Pakistan would remain on its grey list, pending full compliance with its action plan. In a statement, FATF said Pakistan needed to work in four areas to address "strategic deficiencies" as far as terror financing was concerned. Among other things, Pakistan needed to demonstrate effective implementation of targeted financial sanctions against all "[UN-mandated] 1267 and 1373 designated terrorists". So, here we have the context behind all the "action" from the Pakistani establishment relating to Lakhvi and Saeed, who prospered and thrived in the warm embrace of the Pakistani establishment for decades. They are now being treated as a public liability and, hence, the arrests and rather speedy convictions. Also, key for the Pakistan Army/ intelligence establishment is that their convictions are not in relation to an India-related terrorist case. Bending before India, or being seen to be bending before India, is not good policy for any Pakistani establishment. The fallout of an India-terror related conviction would be a hot potato to handle, given that many key figures in the Pakistani establishment said at the time of the Mumbai terror strikes that these had been conducted by India itself. In Lakhvi's case, the prosecution seems to have had its way with the Lahore anti-terrorism court judge. "The court was informed that Lakhvi was a founding member of the banned LeT, which was proscribed in the country in 2002 due to its involvement in terrorism, while the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) has also imposed financial restrictions on him," The Express Tribune reported on Friday. The court held that a "dispensary" was under Lashkar's charge and being used for "terrorist purposes". In all, the Dawn newspaper reported that the Pakistani Punjab's counter-terrorist department had registered 41 FIRs against Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the parent wing of the Lashkar) leaders, of which trial courts had "decided" as many as 27 cases.

Strategic decision

It's clear that a strategic decision has been taken to shut down the JuD-Lashkar combine by the Pakistani establishment. However, even during his time as an "under trial" detainee in Adiala jail, Rawalpindi, Lakhvi could receive guests and use the Internet, access a mobile phone and watch television. He is even believed to have fathered a child while in jail. So, the jury will have to wait and watch what kind of "jail treatment" awaits Lakhvi this time. The secrecy with which the Pakistani deep State operates makes it difficult to assess what exactly is happening. A recent arrest warrant for Masood Azhar, leader of the Jaish-e-Muhammad, confirms after years the presence of the wanted terrorist in Pakistan. Remember that Azhar was one of the terrorists exchanged by India in return for the passengers of the hijacked Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar in December 1999. Given their being creatures of the Pakistani establishment, and the enduring interest in using non-State actors to foment trouble in Jammu and Kashmir, it's quite likely that new outfits



may have already received the blessings of the deep State. For now, Lakhvi and Saeed are in jail. Azhar's fate will be keenly watched in India.

WHY PAKISTAN IS OUTRAGED OVER ARAB ROYALS GETTING PERMITS TO HUNT VULNERABLE HOUBARA BUSTARD

Eleven members of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) royal family arrived in *Pakistan's Panjgur district in Balochistan on Saturday to hunt the internationally protected and highly vulnerable houbara bustard under a license issued by Pakistan's foreign ministry*. Earlier this week, the country also issued special permits to Dubai Ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the crown prince and five other members of their family to hunt the bird during the 2020-21 hunting season, Pakistan daily The Dawn reported. But this is not the first time royals from the Gulf and their wealthy friends have descended on the deserts of Pakistan to hunt the rare bird species. These secretive and controversial private hunting expeditions date back over four decades and have continued even after Pakistan's Supreme Court imposed a blanket ban on the killing of the houbara bustard in 2015. The order was later reversed.

What is the houbara bustard?

The houbara bustard — a large terrestrial bird found in parts of Asia, the Middle East and Africa — is known to migrate in thousands to the Indian subcontinent every winter. In fact, it is similar to the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard, which is native to India. After breeding during the spring season, the Asian bustards migrate south to spend the winter in Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula and nearby Southwest Asia. Some Asian houbara bustards live and breed in the southern part of their ranges including parts of Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. According to the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC), roughly 33,000 Asian houbara bustards and over 22,000 of the North African houbara bustards remain today. The main reasons for the decline in the species' population are poaching, unregulated hunting and the degradation of its natural habitat, the IFHC website states.

Why is the houbara bustard hunted in Pakistan?

Vast swathes of land in Pakistan are allocated in blocks to wealthy dignitaries from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, who arrive in the country to hunt down the birds using hunting gear and falcons every winter. *They kill the birds for sport and also because its meat is supposed to have aphrodisiac qualities*. Media coverage is not permitted at these cloak and dagger hunting expeditions, but the scale of each hunt is believed to be considerable. Each party has a convoy of over a dozen SUVs accompanying it and very often the dignitaries come with their own cooks and staff, locals told the BBC.

Why does Pakistan allow Arab royalty to hunt the houbara bustard?

For over four decades, the Pakistan foreign ministry has been extending yearly invitations to wealthy and powerful Arabs for hunting houbara bustards in the deserts of Balochistan and Punjab, *in an attempt to strengthen the country's diplomatic relations with Gulf nations*. Arab hunters first started coming to Pakistan to hunt in the 1960s after the houbara population in the Arabian peninsula began to dwindle. *Similar hunting expeditions also took place across the border*



in Rajasthan, where Arab royalty ruthlessly hunted the Great Indian bustard until the practice was banned in 1972 following widespread backlash. In Pakistan, too, the Supreme Court imposed a ban on hunting the houbara bustard in 2015. However, the ban was lifted the next year and the government continued to issue special permits to Arab royalty to hunt the birds during the winter. Challenging the ban, the government had argued that wealthy Arabs brought prosperity to under-developed areas surrounding the hunting fields and the ban would have a negative impact on Pakistan's relations with Middle Eastern nations. Each permit allows the individual to hunt a total of 100 bustards in a designated area during a 10-day safari. But the Arab VIPs are known to violate the terms of the permit and kill far more bustards than agreed upon. In 2014, a Saudi Arabian prince and his entourage allegedly shot down 2,100 houbara bustards during a three-week hunting safari, sparking nationwide outrage.

Backlash

The incident in 2014 sparked a nationwide outcry amongst conservationists against the hunting of the vulnerable birds in Pakistan. It was this backlash that culminated in the Supreme Court's ban on hunting the bird, which was later revoked. Notably, *Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, who himself had once opposed hunting the bird while he was an opposition leader, personally approved the special passes to Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum and his family members.* Earlier this week, after Pakistan allowed UAE royals to hunt the bird, 10-year-old Ahmed Hassan filed a plea in the Islamabad High Court seeking a ban on hunting falcons and other endangered birds in the country, ANI reported.

WHO ARE THE 'DIFFICULT FOUR' COUNTRIES, AND WHY IS INDIA ONE OF THEM?

On January 11, *Chatham House, the century-old UK-based policy institute also known as the Royal Institute of International Affairs, published a report proposing a blueprint for Britain's future foreign policy after Brexit. Titled "Global Britain, Global Broker", the report sketches a bold path ahead for the UK.* Most strikingly, *the Chatham House report groups India on the other side of a "new divide in international affairs — between open societies where citizens have the capacity to fight for their rights and those where these rights are denied". Along with Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, India is classed as one of the "difficult four" countries, destined to count among the UK's "rivals" or "awkward counterparts" as it pursues its global goals.* Kate Sullivan de Estrada, Associate Professor, International Relations of South Asia, University of Oxford, explains why the report, which is "in no way a statement on behalf of the UK government," chose to characterise India as such. "Part of the justification for labelling India 'difficult' centres on a critique of India's domestic political developments," she writes in her opinion piece in The Indian Express. *The report notes how "the overt Hindu nationalism of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is weakening the rights of Muslims and other minority religious groups, leading to a chorus of concern that intolerant majoritarianism is replacing the vision of a secular, democratic India bequeathed by Nehru".* This is no trivial observation and it should surprise no one, least of all the Indian government. Behind closed doors across North Atlantic and European capitals, diplomatic concerns — usually unspoken in public — have been bubbling since 2014 about growing religious and other forms of intolerance and the suppression of critique and dissent in India's domestic space. The report also states that India is a reluctant supporter of liberal democracy, is "ambivalent" about human rights abuses within other states, and possesses "a long and consistent record of resisting being corralled



into a ‘Western camp’’. What can be done to resist and challenge the implicit and explicit conceptions in the Chatham House report? The next two years will see India move into a critical period of high-profile international activity, both as an elected member of the UN Security Council and as host of the 2023 G20 Summit. “India can leverage these positions of influence to centre a more demanding vision of internationalism that disrupts the civilisational and racialised hierarchies that linger from Europe’s imperial era,” she concludes.

WHY AMSTERDAM WANTS TO BAN TOURISTS FROM ITS CANNABIS CAFES

The Dutch capital of Amsterdam, which has the reputation of being the world’s “weed capital”, may soon ban non-residents from its iconic cannabis coffee shops as part of its wide-ranging measures to combat organised crime and illicit drug trade. The ban, which may come into force in 2022, is being pushed by Amsterdam’s environmentalist mayor Felke Halsema and is backed by police and prosecutors, reports said.

Amsterdam’s recreational drug tourism

‘Soft’ drugs such as hashish and marijuana, despite being illegal in the Netherlands, support a thriving drug tourism industry in the country. According to Dutch government data, around 58 per cent of all tourists who come to Amsterdam, do so mainly to consume cannabis. Currently, around 2 crore tourists annually visit Amsterdam, a city of 8.5 lakh people, and this number is expected to climb to 2.9 crore by 2025, as per a Guardian report. According to Forbes, Amsterdam’s coffee shops along with its well-known Red Light District attract more than 10 lakh visitors every month. This cannabis tourism industry is allowed to survive because under Dutch law, possession of under 5 grams of the drug has been decriminalised since 1976 under the country’s so-called “tolerance policy”. This means that although production of the substance is illegal, coffee shops are allowed to sell it, creating what is popularly referred to as Amsterdam’s “cannabis culture”. Every year, Amsterdam hosts a “Cannabis Cup”, where new marijuana varieties are awarded. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the coffee shops have remained open, but only takeout and delivery is allowed.

The proposed ban

Currently, Amsterdam has 166 coffee shops that sell cannabis. As per a Euronews report, only residents of the Netherlands with a passport could enter coffee shops once the ban comes into force. Although Amsterdam has still not enforced a residency criteria, it has in recent years taken steps to reduce overcrowding – such as driving up taxes, restricting new hotels from coming up and reducing the number of shops that attract tourists. In implementing these measures, Amsterdam would be following the example of Maastricht and Den Bosch cities, which have already enforced similar bans that are backed by a 2012 law. The new measures are expected to be implemented next year upon the completion of a consultation and transition period for coffee shops. After this happens, the city could then have less than 70 shops to service the diminished crowd. Defending the proposed move, Halsema has said that Amsterdam would remain “open, hospitable and tolerant”, but cut down on mass tourism and the criminal elements. “Amsterdam is an international city and we wish to attract tourists – but for its richness, its beauty and its cultural institutions,” she has said. Critics, however, have said that if the ban comes into force, the cannabis



trade would move from coffee shops to the streets, thus giving a chance for organised crime to expand.



DreamIAS



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

REFRAMING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES (M.K. NARAYANAN - FORMER NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER AND A FORMER GOVERNOR OF WEST BENGAL)

The year 2021 should see a cementing of the many trends that had their genesis in 2020. Leadership change in the United States is perhaps the most awaited change, but is unlikely to bring about a major power shift in the international arena. *Even before the changeover, and despite the promise of a Biden presidency to invigorate the U.S.-Europe axis, Europe has turned its back on the U.S. and revived its China links, by 'concluding in principle the negotiations for an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment'.* In one swift move, Europe has thus shattered all hope that China would remain ostracised in 2021. Many countries will now find themselves scrambling for cover. *India which has greatly curtailed its relations with China since April 2020, (in the wake of Chinese aggression in Eastern Ladakh) will find itself 'out on a limb', with many countries likely to seek closer economic relations with China now.*

A stronger China

The year 2021, hence, begins on a triumphal note for China and China's Supreme Leader, Xi Jinping. *China is about the only major country which had a positive rate of growth at the end of 2020, and its economy is poised to grow even faster in 2021. Militarily, China has further strengthened itself, and now seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific Ocean with its announcement of the launch of its third aircraft carrier in 2021. Simultaneously, it is seeking to strengthen its military coordination with Russia.* Consequent on all this, and notwithstanding Chinese intransigence in several matters including its *heavy-handed actions in Hong Kong and Uighur, China's position across Asia is, if anything, stronger than in 2020.* News emanating from China is that President Xi will further cement his position, both as Party leader and as President during 2021, despite internecine tensions within the Communist Party of China. China is, hence, unlikely to concede any ground to its opponents across the world in 2021, a fact that India will need to reckon with. *It cannot expect any Chinese concessions in Eastern Ladakh, until India 'makes amends'.*

Economy first for Europe

The new year will be dominated by strong authoritarian leaders like Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. International politics may not be very different from that in 2020, but any hope that the Compact of Democracy would emerge stronger will need to be eschewed. Europe, minus Britain following Brexit, and the retirement of Germany's Angela Merkel, could become even less relevant in world affairs. The China-EU Investment Treaty which saw Europe capitulating to China's brandishments is an indication that Europe values its economy more than its politics. Major changes are afoot in Eurasia and West Asia which could lead to significant shifts. Russia is beginning to display greater interest in the affairs of countries on its periphery and, together with strengthening ties with China and reaching an entente with Turkey, this seems to signal reduced interest in countries such as India. In West Asia, the Abraham Accords, leading to a realignment of forces in the Arab world, have sharpened the division between the Saudi Bloc and Iran-Turkey. *Despite the hype surrounding the Abraham Accords, the situation, however, remains fluid and has not reduced the risk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel. This does pose*



problems for India, since both have relations with it. Meanwhile, China demonstrates a willingness to play a much larger role in the region, including contemplating a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran. Saudi Arabia could find the going difficult in 2021, with a Biden Administration taking charge in Washington. The healing of wounds among the Sunni Arab states in the region should be viewed as a pyrrhic victory at best for Saudi Arabia. One by-product of this could be a sharpening of hostilities between the Sunni and Shia camps. Given the strategic flux in the region, Iran could well be tempted to use its nuclear capability to enhance its position, confident that the West may be unwilling to challenge it at this juncture.

India isolated

At the start of 2021, India seems the odd man missing as far as these developments are concerned. No breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations has, or is likely to occur, and the confrontation between Indian and Chinese armed forces is expected to continue. India currently plays no significant role in West Asia. India-Iran relations today lack warmth. In Afghanistan, India has been marginalised as far as the peace process is concerned. While India's charges against Pakistan of sponsoring terror have had some impact globally, it has further aggravated tensions between the two neighbours, and in the process, also *helped Pakistan to cement its relations with China.* While hostility between India and Nepal appears to have reduced lately, relations continue to be strained. Through a series of diplomatic visits, *India has made valiant efforts to improve relations with some of its neighbours such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, but as of now worthwhile results are not evident.* One key takeaway is that as India-China relations deteriorate, India's neighbours are not averse to taking sides, increasing India's isolation. Whether India's perceived marginalisation from global mainstream events as we enter 2021 signifies a sharp drop-off in its foreign policy capabilities is, no doubt, debatable. India's foreign policy objectives are to widen its sphere of influence, enhance its role across nations, and make its presence felt as an emerging power in an increasingly disruptive global system. It is a moot point though whether any of these objectives has been achieved. Today, India's voice and counsel are seldom sought, or listened to. This is a far cry from what used to happen previously. India will serve as the president of the powerful UN Security Council for the month of August, 2021, but if it is to make a real impact, it must be seen to possess substantial weight to shape policies, more so in its traditional areas of influence.

Diplomacy and perceptions

Many explanations could be available for this state of affairs. Admittedly, our diplomats conduct their activities with a high degree of competence, but they are possibly hampered by other factors. One, could be the kind of policy choices the country has adopted in the recent period, which have possibly altered the perception of India in certain quarters. *There is again a perception that India's closeness to the U.S. has resulted in the weakening of its links with traditional friends such as Russia and Iran, impacting the country's image.* Perhaps the most relevant explanation could be the shifting balance of power in the region in which India is situated, notably the rise of China, and the enlarging conflict between the two biggest powers in Asia, compelling many nations to pick sides in the conflict. A less obvious, but perhaps more relevant aspect, could also be that India's foreign policy suffers from an ideational vacuum. It is not the sharp decline in the economy, problems caused on account of the pandemic, or the growing polarisation in values across nations and societies, but more possibly India's inability or failure in the ideational realm that lies at the root of our foreign policy inadequacies.



More misses than hits

Currently, India remains isolated from two important supranational bodies of which it used to be a founding member, viz., *the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)*. *Efforts to whip up enthusiasm for newer institutions such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have hardly been successful. India has opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (a majority of Asian countries are members), and failed to take advantage of the RIC, or the Russia, India and China grouping, even as relations with Russia and China have deteriorated.* On the other hand, India's foreign policy imperatives, across Asia and South Asia in particular, today seem to be a mixture of misplaced confidence, sometimes verging on hubris (as in the case of Nepal), a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of neighbours such as Bangladesh and long-time friends (such as Vietnam and Iran), and according excessive importance to the policy needs and pressures of nations such as the U.S. There is possibly a misplaced perception in much of Asia that the India of today is not unwilling to sacrifice its strategic autonomy under U.S. pressure. As part of the ideational restructuring of India's foreign policy, what is urgently required, apart from competent statecraft, is the adoption of prudent policies, pursuit of realistically achievable objectives, and, above all, a demonstration of continuity of policy, irrespective of changes in the nature of the Administration. These may be time consuming, but are a surer recipe for success in attaining foreign policy objectives.

RECLAIMING SAARC FROM THE ASHES OF 2020

Thirty-six years after it first began, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), appears to be all but dead in the water. The year 2020 marked the sixth year since the leaders of the eight nations that make up SAARC were able to meet. Further evidence of its perilous position, if any was needed, came on the SAARC charter day on December 8, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that India's position on cross-border terrorism from Pakistan that led New Delhi to refuse to attend the SAARC summit in 2016 in Islamabad, is still in place. This indicates that the grouping, which cannot convene unless all leaders agree to meet, is unlikely to do so in the near future.

The shadows over the meets

Over the past year, India-Pakistan issues have impacted other meetings of SAARC as well, making it easier for member countries, as well as international agencies to deal with South Asia as a fragmented group rather than a collective, working with each country in separate silos or in smaller configurations. However, the events of 2020, particularly the novel coronavirus pandemic and China's aggressions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) shone a new spotlight on this mechanism, and should make the Modi government review its position and reverse that trend. India's problems with Pakistan on terrorism, territorial claims and on its role in blocking SAARC initiatives on connectivity and trade are well known. *Even so, India's refusal to allow Pakistan to host the SAARC summit because of those problems is akin to giving Pakistan a 'veto' over the entire SAARC process.* The insistence is particularly puzzling given that Mr. Modi and his cabinet ministers continued to attend Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings along with their Pakistani counterparts, including the SCO Heads of Government meeting in November where New Delhi even invited Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan (he deputed another official). While

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China's incursions in Ladakh and the Galwan killings constituted the larger concern in the year, India did not decline to attend meetings with the Chinese leadership at the SCO, the Russia-India-China trilateral, the G-20 and others. No concerns over territorial claims stopped the Modi government from engaging with Nepal either, despite Mr. K.P. Sharma Oli's decision to change Nepal's map and Constitution to include Indian territories. In a year when the pandemic has forced most multilateral summits to go online, it is inexplicable that India cannot attend a virtual SAARC summit hosted by Pakistan, which would allow the South Asian process to move forward.

Pandemic-caused challenges

Second, reviving SAARC is crucial to countering the common challenges brought about by the pandemic. To begin with, studies have shown that South Asia's experience of the pandemic has been unique from other regions of the world, and this needs to be studied further in a comprehensive manner ("Pandemic Preparedness and Response to COVID-19 in South Asian Countries"; <https://bit.ly/3qdhCsN>) in order to counter future pandemics. Such an approach is also necessary for the distribution and further trials needed for vaccines, as well as developing cold storage chains for the vast market that South Asia represents. *The pandemic's impact on South Asian economies is another area that calls for coordination.* Apart from the overall GDP slowdown, global job cuts which will lead to an estimated 22% fall in revenue for migrant labour and expatriates from South Asian countries (<https://bit.ly/2MRZvKp>), there is an expected loss of about 10.77 million jobs and US\$52.32 billion in GDP in the tourism sector alone from the impact of COVID-19 (<https://bit.ly/39oXRHV>). World Bank reports that have estimated the losses have all suggested that South Asian countries work as a collective to set standards for labour from the region, and also to promoting a more intra-regional, transnational approach towards tourism, citing successful examples including the 'East Africa Single Joint Visa' system, or similar joint tourism initiatives like in the Mekong region or the Caribbean islands.

A time for regional initiatives

In the longer term, *there will be a shift in priorities towards health security, food security, and job security, that will also benefit from an "all-of" South Asia approach. The impact of COVID-19 will be seen in broader, global trends: a growing distaste for 'globalisation' of trade, travel and migration all of which were seen to have helped the pandemic spread from China, as well as a growing preference for nativism, self-dependence and localising supply chains.* While it will be impossible for countries to cut themselves off from the global market entirely, regional initiatives will become the "Goldilocks option" (not too hot and not too cold), or the happy medium between globalisation and hyper-nationalism. It would be important to note therefore, that as the world is divided between regional trade arrangements such as new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA (North America), the Southern Common Market, or MERCOSUR for its Spanish initials (South America), the European Union (Europe), the African Continental Free Trade Area, or AfCFTA (Africa), the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC (Gulf) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP (South East Asia and Australasia including China), India's only regional trading agreement at present is the South Asian Free Trade Area, or SAFTA (with SAARC countries).



China's quest

In dealing with the challenge from China too, both at India's borders and in its neighbourhood, a unified South Asian platform remains India's most potent countermeasure. At the border, it is clear that tensions with Pakistan and Nepal amplify the threat perception from China, while other SAARC members (minus Bhutan), all of whom are Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partners of China will be hard placed to help individually. Significantly, from 2005-14, China actually wanted to join SAARC. Officials recall that every SAARC summit during that decade period saw a discussion on whether China could be upgraded to member status (from observer status). On each occasion, it was fought back by India and most other countries in the grouping, with the logic that despite sharing boundaries with three South Asian countries, China is not South Asian. Despite the rebuff, China has continued to push its way into South Asia, as several statistical indicators for investment, trade, tourism and South Asian student preferences for universities (<https://bit.ly/3i4jfwI>; <https://brook.gs/2LMpv9q>; <https://brook.gs/2LG1t07>). In the past year, the Chinese government, and its Communist Party of China party arms such as the United Front Work Department, or the UFDW have used the opportunities presented by the pandemic to push ahead with this quest. Apart from sending medicines, personal protective equipment kits, and promising vaccines to most SAARC countries as part of its "Health Silk Road" initiative, China's vice minister has held three separate meetings with combinations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and discussed economic issues and Sinovac vaccine availability with them (<https://bit.ly/3i2vlQk>). Experts suggest that it is only a matter of time before Beijing holds a meeting of all SAARC countries (minus India and Bhutan), for they are all part of the BRI, and even that they will be invited to join RCEP, which India declined.

India's steps, more bilateral

In contrast, India stepped up its health and economic diplomacy in the region, but apart from one SAARC meeting convened by Mr. Modi in March, these have been bilateral initiatives, not a combined effort for South Asia. These are some of the reasons that led all SAARC leaders other than Mr. Modi to urgently call for the revival of SAARC during their charter day messages. Despite the despondency, the rationale for its existence remains intact: while history and political grievances may be perceived differently, geography is reality. Seen through Beijing's prism, India's SAARC neighbourhood may be a means to contain India, with the People's Liberation Army strategies against India over the LAC at present, or in conjunction with Pakistan or Nepal at other disputed fronts in the future. New Delhi must find its own prism with which to view its South Asian neighbourhood as it should be: a unit that has a common future, and as a force-multiplier for India's ambitions on the global stage.

TERROR TRAIL

In his speech to the UN Security Council (UNSC) marking 20 years since the resolutions that announced a global commitment to the war against terror after the U.S. 9/11 attacks, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made a pitch for greater coordination between counter terrorism agencies worldwide. He highlighted the necessity to streamline the process of the UN's top body in designating terrorists while strengthening coordination in the agencies that check their financial resources. *First, the world must acknowledge that terrorist organisations use not only extortion and money laundering, drugs and wildlife trafficking to raise funds, but, in the present and*

3RD FLOOR AND 4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



future, will use loopholes in digital security and the “anonymity” provided by block chain technology to access finances. Second, in a clear reference to Pakistan, he spoke of the need to link actions between the UN and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and for countries that “wilfully provide financial assistance and safe havens” as well as “5 star” treatment to criminals and terrorists, to be held to account by them. His words are significant given that a FATF committee, the Asia Pacific Joint Group (APJG), is meeting this week to finalise recommendations for the FATF on whether to continue Pakistan’s ‘greylisting status’, downgrade it to a blacklist, or let it off, decisions that India is watching closely. Finally, he pointed to countries that allow their “political and religious” affinities to decide on issues of designation of terrorists, blocking and unblocking requests at the UNSC for such reasons rather than technically evaluate the evidence against these individuals. While the broad message here was for China, which has often blocked India’s efforts to designate individuals at the UNSC, this also includes Turkey and Malaysia which have helped Pakistan avoid stringent measures at the FATF thus far. While Mr. Jaishankar’s words were meant for the global struggle with terrorism since 2001, their import is for India’s particular problems with Pakistan and cross-border terrorism in the present for the impending decision at the FATF plenary next month. Pakistan’s recent actions, including the sudden arrests and quick convictions of most wanted figures Zaki Ur Rehman Lakhvi and Hafiz Saeed, and the warrant for JeM chief Masood Azhar, all in cases of terror financing, indicate that Islamabad is aware of the importance of these decisions for its economic future; for the moment, the government is appearing to fall in line with the FATF’s 27-point action plan. By drawing the connection between the actions of the UNSC and the FATF together, Mr. Jaishankar is indicating that India is not only watching what Pakistan does but also how the international community “walks the talk” on “zero tolerance to terrorism”.

POLICY CLOUD DELAYS VACCINE EXPORT TO BRAZIL

A special plane from Brazil to carry the first exports of Covishield, the India-made coronavirus vaccine, was delayed on Friday, amid confusion over clearance for the shipment, officials here said. The flight, due to leave Brazil on Thursday and return on Saturday with two million doses of the vaccine, was put off, the Brazilian Ministry of Health announced, citing logistical and licensing issues. According to the officials, Brazilian authorities have now intimated them that the plane would leave Recife in Brazil on Saturday morning (IST), but only if it receives clearances from India. The MEA declined to comment specifically on the Brazilian shipment of vaccines, and whether the Brazilian plane would receive the necessary permissions in time. Asked on Thursday how soon India might release vaccines for export to other countries including those in the neighbourhood like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka who have also put in requests, MEA spokesperson Anurag Srivastava had said that it was “too early” to tell. “As you know, the vaccination process is just starting in India,” Mr. Srivastava said, adding, “It is too early to give a specific response on the supplies to other countries.” However, Brazilian officials cited a statement made by Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan on January 5, saying in “absolutely clear” terms that there was no hold on exports of the vaccines. The Health Ministry did not respond to a question from The Hindu on whether its orders were at variance with the MEA’s statement.



NATION

SHORTER PARADE ROUTE, MORE TABLEAUS THIS REPUBLIC DAY

The Republic Day parade this year will see marching contingents terminate at the India Gate C-Hexagon instead of the Red Fort. Earlier, the parade used to cover around 8 km but this year the distance has been reduced to roughly 3 km. The parade will now end at the National Stadium. “The distance has been cut short in order to maintain social distancing. The number of members in a marching contingent has been reduced from 144 to 96. The number of tableaux has, however, been increased to 32 this year. In previous years, there were an average of 28 tableaux on display.

Bharat Parv cancelled

Every year, the tableaux are parked at the Red Fort for a week after the parade for public viewing, but this year the tableaux will not be put on display, said the officer. Due to this, the Red Fort will not be closed for a week this year. It will be closed only on Republic Day. Following social distancing guidelines, *the six-day Bharat Parv event that is usually organised on Rajpath lawns from January 26-31 has been cancelled.* Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only 25,000 visitors will be permitted to witness the Republic Day parade compared with the usual over one lakh. Children under the age of 15 will not be allowed at the event. The police officer added that security arrangements and restriction on the number of visitors for the Beating Retreat ceremony was also discussed at the meeting.

HC NOD TO TERMINATE 28-WEEK PREGNANCY

The Delhi High Court on Monday granted permission to a woman to terminate her 28-week pregnancy after AIIMS medical board said her foetus can be aborted as it suffered from anencephaly, a condition where the skull bone is not formed. The woman stated that an ultrasonography at the gestational age of 27 weeks 5 days found that the foetus suffered from anencephaly, making it incompatible with life. In India, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act stipulates a ceiling of 20 weeks for termination of pregnancy, beyond which abortion of a foetus is statutorily impermissible.

ADULTERY LAW MUST STAY FOR MILITARY: GOVT.

The Supreme Court admitted a petition filed by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) seeking to exempt armed forces personnel from the ambit of a Constitution Bench judgment of 2018 that decriminalised adultery. One of the chief reasons given by the government for seeking exemption is, incidentally, that *“there will always be a concern in the minds of the Army personnel who are operating far away from their families under challenging conditions about the family indulging in untoward activity.”* A three-judge Bench led by Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman said the plea had to be considered by a Constitution Bench because the original verdict, striking down Section 497 (adultery) of the IPC, was pronounced by a five-judge Bench in September 2018. The court referred the case to the Chief Justice to pass appropriate orders to form a five-judge Bench to clarify the impact of the 2018 judgment on the armed forces. *The government said in the petition that personnel of the Army, Navy and the Air Force were a “distinct class”. They were governed by special legislation, the Army Act, the*



Navy Act and the Air Force Act. Adultery amounted to an unbecoming conduct and a violation of discipline under the three Acts. The special laws imposed restrictions on the fundamental rights of the personnel, who function in peculiar situation requiring utmost discipline. The three laws were protected by *Article 33 of the Constitution*, which allowed the government to modify the fundamental rights of the armed forces personnel. The judgment of 2018 created 'instability'. It allowed a personnel charged with carrying on an adulterous or illicit relationship to take cover under the judgment.

₹1,364 CRORE GIVEN TO WRONG BENEFICIARIES OF PM-KISAN

PM-KISAN payments worth ₹1,364 crore have been wrongly made to more than 20 lakh ineligible beneficiaries and income tax payer farmers, according to information provided by the Agriculture Ministry in response to an RTI request from activist Venkatesh Nayak. *There are 11 crore beneficiaries registered under the scheme. Punjab tops the list of States, accounting for 23% of those who wrongly received money. Maharashtra and Assam also saw a large number of such payments.* As The Hindu had reported, a number of State Agriculture Departments have now been tasked with recovering the money wrongly paid. PM-KISAN is the Centre's flagship scheme to provide income support worth ₹6,000 a year to farming families. *When it was launched just before the general election in 2019, it was meant to cover only small and marginal farmers who owned less than two hectares. Later that year, large farmers were included in the scheme as the government removed the land size criterion.* However, certain exclusions remained. *If any member of a farming family paid income tax, received a monthly pension above ₹10,000, held a constitutional position, or was a serving or retired government employee, they were not eligible for the scheme.* Professionals and institutional landholders were also excluded. Until July 2020, 20.5 lakh people who should have been excluded had wrongly received PM-Kisan payouts. According to the Agriculture Ministry data, *56% of these undeserving persons belonged to the "income tax payee" category, while the remainder belong to the "ineligible farmers" category.* However, *72% of the payout amount was paid to the income tax payees, indicating that this category continued to receive money for multiple instalments before their ineligible status was discovered and they were weeded out of the scheme's beneficiary database.* Punjab (23%), Maharashtra (17%) and Assam (14%) account for more than half of the beneficiaries of wrong payments, followed by Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, with 8% each. *Almost all the wrong payments in Punjab and Assam went to those in the "ineligible farmers" category, while Maharashtra had the highest number of payouts to "income tax payee" farmers.*

FARM LAWS, THEIR CONSTITUTIONAL VALIDITY, AND HOPE (P.D.T. ACHARY - FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE LOK SABHA)

With the Supreme Court of India staying the operation of the farm laws and setting up a committee of experts to negotiate with the government and the farmers, the agitation being carried on by the farmers is entering a new phase. The farmers' unions have not reacted favourably to the formation of the experts' committee. As it happens, the committee does not comprise entirely impartial experts. Most of them are well known and strong defenders of the farm laws, and are critical of the agitation.



The situation now

For conducting negotiations with both the government and the farmers, the members of the committee ought to and should be known to have an open mind on the core issues, which alone will create a necessary confidence in the parties concerned. The farmers have, however, made it clear that they will not agree to anything less than the repeal of these laws. This would mean that the present agitation is likely to continue indefinitely. It is not yet clear what impact the report of this committee will have on the final decision of the Supreme Court on the question of the constitutional validity of the farm laws. That is the real issue before the Supreme Court. So whatever the experts' committee recommends, the question of the constitutional validity of the farm laws can be decided only after a proper hearing of the matter before the Court. The most curious thing about a decision on this issue by the Supreme Court is that if the Court upholds the validity of the laws, the agitation will not stop because the farmers' demand is for the repeal of the laws. But the government of India seems to have taken a maximalist approach, particularly on the question of a repeal of the farm laws. While the repeal of a law is a simple legislative act, having to repeal a law in which the government has invested a lot of its prestige is not so easy especially for a government which is extremely proud of its numerical majority in the Lok Sabha, which has generated a great deal of hubris. On the other hand, the farmers are unyielding on the demand for a repeal.

Not in accordance with rules

The constitutional validity of the farm laws has been challenged in the Supreme Court mainly on the ground that Parliament has no legislative competence to enact these laws, the subject matter of which is essentially in the State list. But there is a more fundamental reason to challenge these enactments which will be examined now. *It is a universally acknowledged fact that the voting on the Farm Bills in the Rajya Sabha was not done in accordance with the rules of the House. These rules require the Chair to order the recording of votes (division) by members even when one member demands it. The Deputy Chairman of the House, who was conducting the proceedings at that time, did not order division although a few members openly and loudly demanded it.* It is true that there was disorder in the House but it could have been controlled and a proper voting could have been conducted. Disorder was not taking place for the first time in the House. Thus, there was a violation of the rules of the House in passing the Bills by voice vote when there was a demand for division.

Voice vote is unrecognised

But the matter goes beyond the violation of the House rules. It involves the violation of the Constitution itself. Article 100 says that all questions at any sitting of either House shall be determined by a majority of votes of the members present and voting. Majority can be determined only in terms of number, and therefore what this Article requires is that all questions in the House should be determined by recording the votes of the members present and voting. Majority cannot be determined through voice vote. *In fact the Constitution does not recognise voice vote to determine majority in a legislature. However, deciding a question by voice vote is a practice prevailing in all legislatures.* This was devised for the sake of convenience and there is always an assumption that since the government of the day has a majority, any proposal before the House has the support of the majority. But that assumption goes *when a member demands voting in the*



House and the Chair has, then, no option but to order the actual voting. Since this was not done and the Bills were all passed by voice vote, there is a violation of the rules as well as the Constitution.

Options before the judiciary

It is true that Article 122 of the Constitution protects the proceedings of the House from judicial review. But this protection is available only when the proceedings are challenged on irregularity of procedure. Violation of the Constitution is not a mere irregularity of procedure. The Supreme Court in Raja Ram Pal's case had clarified that the proceedings can be challenged on substantive grounds like violation of the Constitutional provisions. Therefore, the Farm Bills were passed in the Rajya Sabha in violation of Article 100 of the Constitution and can be challenged in the Supreme Court on that ground. Now what are the options before the Supreme Court if and when such a challenge is made? The Court can strike down the whole laws as the requirement of *Article 107* has not been fulfilled. This Article says that a Bill shall not be deemed to have been passed unless it has been agreed to by both Houses. As has been explained above, the Bills have not in fact been passed by the Rajya Sabha because the majority had not been determined in accordance with Article 100. It would mean that the three Bills did not become laws. The Court may also invalidate the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha and send the three 'Acts' back to that House for further proceedings in accordance with the constitutional provisions. If this happens, it may provide a good opportunity to the government to revisit these laws. These can then be referred to a Select Committee of the Rajya Sabha which can invite the farmers and all other stakeholders and finally produce better Bills. Such an opportunity is invaluable in the present circumstances when the government is facing virtually a no-win situation. If, on the other hand, the government decides to withdraw the Bills after these are sent back to the Rajya Sabha on the ground that it wants to bring fresh Bills with altered proposals, it will have that option too under the rules of the House. The possibility of these options can be creatively considered for finding a solution to this problem.

Centrality of Parliament

We may not forget that the issue that needs to be settled by the top court is only the constitutional validity of the laws. In resolving a problem like the agitation by farmers against the laws, the centrality of Parliament in the legislative process in all its dimensions should not be lost sight of. *Once the Court decides the legality or constitutionality of a law, the political and legislative aspects of the issue will have to be dealt with only by Parliament.* Parliament and its systems alone can produce a satisfactory solution. The only condition is that the government which is accountable to Parliament should genuinely demonstrate its faith in those systems.

PUBLICATION OF NOTICE OF MARRIAGE NOT MANDATORY, SAYS ALLAHABAD HC

The Allahabad High Court has ruled that the provision of publication of notice of intended marriage under the Special Marriage Act, 1954, is not mandatory. The court, in a significant judgment delivered on January 12, said making such publication mandatory "would invade the fundamental rights of liberty and privacy, including within its sphere the freedom to choose for marriage without interference from state and non-state actors, of the persons concerned". A Bench of Justice Vivek Chaudhary mandated that *while giving notice under Section 5 of the Act, it shall be optional for the parties to the intended marriage to make a request in writing to the marriage officer to publish or*



not to publish a notice under Section 6 and follow the procedure of objections as prescribed under the Act.

Couple's choice

In case the parties do not make such a request, the officer "shall not publish any such notice or entertain objections to the intended marriage and proceed with the solemnisation of the marriage". The requirement of publication of notice under Section 6 and inviting or entertaining objections under Section 7 can only be read as directory in nature, to be given effect only on request of parties to the intended marriage and not otherwise, the court observed in the 47 page judgment. The interpretation of Sections 6 and 7 read with Section 46 containing the procedure of publication of notice and inviting objections to the intended marriage in the Act of 1954 has to be such that would uphold the fundamental rights and not violate them, the court said. The court was disposing off a habeas corpus writ filed by a Muslim woman who married a Hindu man after converting as per Hindu rituals. However, her father was not permitting her to live with her husband even though the couple desired to live together. The woman and her father appeared in court in person where she expressed her desire to live with her husband and the father too "fairly accepted" her decision since she was an adult, had married of her own volition and wanted to live with her husband. At this juncture, *the court took note of the personal experience narrated by the couple who expressed that they could have solemnised their marriage under the Act but said it required a 30 days' notice to be published and objections to be invited from the public at large. They said that any such notice would have been an invasion of their privacy and would have caused unnecessary social pressure and interference in their free choice with regard to their marriage. The personal laws did not impose any such condition of publication of notice, inviting and deciding objections before solemnising marriage, the couple submitted.* The counsel for the petitioners also stated that the situation may become more critical with the notification of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020, as it says conversion of religion for marriage is unlawful. The counsel further submitted that interfaith couples were not in a position to raise these issues before solemnising their marriages as litigation further attracted unnecessary attention and put social pressure on them.

PANEL CLEARS PARLIAMENT PROJECT

The Union government's proposal to construct a new Parliament building was on Monday approved by the Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC), whose clearance was mandated by the Supreme Court in its January 5 judgment allowing the project. The court ordered that the permission of the HCC, which is headed by an Additional Secretary of the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry and includes government officials primarily, should be obtained before any work starts on the ground. At a press conference, Housing and Urban Affairs Secretary Durga Shanker Mishra said the committee had discussed the proposal and cleared it on Monday. The panel looked at the preservation of heritage as per the Unified Building Bylaws, 2016. Permission was not sought earlier as the Ministry, whose Central Public Works Department is carrying out the project, felt there was no heritage involved. The new building was proposed to be built adjacent to the existing Parliament, which was built in the 1920s. Since the court ordered it to get the approval of the HCC, the Ministry had complied, Mr. Mishra said. Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Puri said the timeline for the completion was 2022, the 75th year of Independence.



THE DEBILITATING SIDE-EFFECT OF A FLAWED VACCINE TRIAL

More than a decade since the human clinical trial of the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine — it was controversial and carried out without proper consent on nearly 23,500 girls in the 10-14 age group in Vadodara, Gujarat and Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh — and eight years after the Supreme Court of India slammed the government for slipping into “deep slumber” in addressing the “menace” of illegal clinical trials carried out in India by multinational countries, nothing much seems to have changed. *The phase-3 clinical trial of Bharat Biotech’s COVID-19 vaccine, Covaxin, by a private hospital in the Bhopal-based Peoples College of Medical Sciences & Research Centre appears to suffer from serious violations and as a result, closely resembles the HPV vaccine trial.* The HPV vaccine trial was carried out by the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), a non-governmental organisation, in collaboration with the governments of Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat and *the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). Incidentally, the ICMR, tasked with promulgating research ethics guidelines, is the co-sponsor of the Covaxin trial.* The *informed consent process*, the cornerstone of ethics in clinical trials, was grossly violated during the HPV trial in Andhra Pradesh; consent forms of nearly 2,800 child participants were signed by a hostel warden or headmaster and not the parents.

Many missteps

During a press conference on January 10 and even earlier to other media outlets, the Covaxin trial participants alleged that they were ignorant of what they were signing up for. If true, it amounts to the consent nowhere close to being a truly informed one. According to them, *no efforts were apparently taken to explain and inform them of the pros and cons of taking part in the trial, nor were they told that they would either get a vaccine candidate or a placebo.* Instead, they were misled by the trial site to think they were getting a COVID-19 vaccine for free. *The participants were not made aware of their rights to free medical care in case of any adverse events.* They were not given any time or option to discuss with the family before signing the consent form, either. As documents show, at least in a few instances, the consent was taken after vaccination, which amounts to a serious violation. They also alleged that they were not given a copy of the consent form and other documents to prove their participation. *Following the October 2013 Supreme Court order, the Indian regulator had in 2019 made mandatory an audio-video recording of the informed consent process of each vulnerable individual participant before conducting clinical trials. And a written consent from the participant had to necessarily be taken before the audio-video recording of the informed consent process.* Since *many of the 700-odd participants are illiterate, an impartial witness should have been present during the entire informed consent process to append his/her signatures to the consent form.* There is no evidence that this was followed, based on what the participants said during the press conference. In the Covaxin trial in Bhopal, over a dozen of the 700 adults from three-four communities living close to the hospital have told the media that they were lured with monetary benefits of ₹750. *Luring people to participate in clinical trials by offering money is unethical.* However, the company in a press release states that a decision was taken to reimburse all participants at the rate of ₹750 for each study visit. The company claims the reimbursement amount was approved by every institutional ethics committee at the study sites, and is not an inducement. *While reimbursement for actuals, such as lost wages and cost of transportation to the trial site, is permissible, it amounts to inducement when a payment of ₹750 is openly announced; during the press conference, the participants highlighted the payment announcement.* It is unclear



if the institutional ethics committee even approved street announcements to be made inviting people to the trial. Whether a site can advertise and even the content of such promotional material need prior approval from the institutional ethics committee.

Follow-up and care

While free medical care in case of any adverse event is a right of each trial participant, there have been at least a few documented instances of violation. In other cases, the participants, unaware that they were part of a clinical trial and hence entitled to free medical attention, had sought care from private practitioners. With at least some participants not possessing their own mobile phones, medical follow-up over phone, even if there was one, was not actually possible. *If the HPV vaccine trial was investigated by a Parliamentary Standing Committee, such an independent investigation becomes all the more necessary as the ICMR is the co-sponsor of the trial.* One of the participants at the Peoples College of Medical Sciences & Research Centre died on December 21. While Bharat Biotech claims that all due processes were followed following this development, it is unclear why no information about the death of the trial participant, who belongs to a tribe, was made public by the Indian regulator. In the case of serious adverse events following injection with AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine in a trial outside India, the information was made public, and the trial was halted at all sites while an investigation was under way. The Serum Institute was also ordered to halt the trial by the Indian regulator pending investigation.

Act quickly

Only a thorough and impartial probe will restore confidence in clinical trials. All the more as a couple of COVID-19 trials have already progressed to the phase-3 trial stage and few more are in the early stages of testing. With two vaccines already approved for restricted use and the virus spread slowing down, recruiting participants will prove to be all the more challenging. The conduct of a highly unethical trial, if not thoroughly and quickly investigated, can adversely impact the conduct of these studies already under way.

THE LOGISTICS OF A MASSIVE VACCINATION DRIVE

The Union Health Ministry on Saturday announced that the COVID-19 vaccination drive will begin on January 16, after the forthcoming festivals of Lohri, Makar Sankranti, Pongal and Magh Bihu. The government had earlier approved emergency use authorisation (EUA) for two vaccine candidates — the Serum Institute of India's Covishield vaccine developed jointly by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, and Bharat Biotech's indigenous Covaxin. With Saturday's announcement, the country is set to begin population-level immunisation for COVID-19 and finds itself facing one of the biggest logistical challenges in a long while.

What are the challenges?

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, speaking to reporters on Friday, said about vaccine distribution in the U.S.: "[It would be] the greatest operational challenge we will ever face as a nation." In India, with its vast geographical spread, the sheer volume of population, and questions of access, the vaccination drive will be fraught with challenges, and the most careful planning down to the last mile is required, not only to vaccinate and provide both the doses, but to also monitor adverse



events. The Centre recently conducted dry runs of COVID-19 vaccination to check if the systems laid down for the operationalisation of vaccine delivery are in place and working well.

Who is in line for a vaccine?

Priority will be given to the healthcare and frontline workers, estimated to be around 3 crore in number, followed by those above 50 years of age and the under-50 population groups with co-morbidities, numbering around 27 crore, the Health Ministry said on Saturday. People who have an active COVID-19 infection or associated symptoms are advised not to come to vaccination camps to avoid spreading the virus. They may seek a vaccine 14 days after the symptoms abate, according to the FAQ issued by the Health Ministry earlier. Taking the COVID-19 vaccine is entirely voluntary.

What is Co-WIN?

In good measure, the dry runs were not only a step to test the operational feasibility of various States to roll out the vaccine programme effectively, but also a recce to see if the electronic vaccine intelligence network, eVIN, used during routine immunisation programmes, and remodelled as Co-WIN, was functional at the field-level. Co-WIN aspires to be a comprehensive digital database of every COVID-19 vaccine that will be administered in India — tracking beneficiaries, intimating them about vaccine sites and dates, pre- and post-vaccination procedures, issuance of vaccination certificates, and follow up through the booster dose. On January 5, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said the details of healthcare and frontline workers in line for a shot had already been updated on the Co-WIN system, in bulk, by State and district health authorities. Currently, self-registration is not allowed on the application. It has been promised that 'at a later stage of implementation', Co-WIN will also be available as an application or as a website in multiple Indian languages so that beneficiaries can access it to keep track of their own progress and be connected organically to the system, if questions were to arise. It will also be a tool for others to "register" for a vaccine once the first line of targeted beneficiaries is cleared. Aadhar or any accepted photo ID card may be used to verify the identity of the applicant to prevent misuse. Additionally, documents authorised by specialists to indicate co-morbidities or any other health conditions may be demanded. Further details are also awaited on the steps that will be taken to allocate turns in the schedule after the registration and for further communication regarding the date and venue of vaccination, even to people who may not have access to devices or the Internet. *As per current information, text messages will be sent out after registration, telling the registrant where and when to go to get the shot. After the second dose, Co-WIN will generate a digital certificate of completion for individuals who have been vaccinated.* Messaging, chatbots and helpline assistance are available on the app, and any adverse event after the vaccination may be communicated back to the authorities through one of these access points.

What is the kind of field-level mobilisation required for the drive?

The existing State and district health networks are readying themselves to set in place every nut and bolt in the elaborate systems that will be required for the vaccination drive. This includes mobilising personnel, making sure transportation systems are in place to take the vaccine packs to different camps, ensuring healthcare personnel are able to reach the spot on time, making sure a cold-chain system is in place, identifying and removing hurdles that might prevent beneficiaries



in the general population (at a later date) from reaching the spot, and ensuring coordination between different teams on actual vaccination days to avoid any hitches.

JALLIKATTU: PRIDE & POLITICS

With Assembly polls round the corner in Tamil Nadu, the Pongal festival and Jallikattu, the traditional bull-taming sport, have caught the attention of the BJP and Congress. While the BJP organised Pongal celebrations led by national and state leaders in several districts, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was in Madurai on Thursday to witness a Jallikattu event. In the past, both the BJP and the Congress have faced public anger for their stands on Jallikattu, a controversial sport which has faced long legal battles over cruelty to animals, and which at the same time is a symbol of Tamil culture. In their present efforts to celebrate these cultural symbols ahead of elections, the two national parties have attacked each other over their past stands.

What is Jallikattu?

The bull-taming sport is popular in Madurai, Tiruchirappalli, Theni, Pudukkottai and Dindigul districts — known as the Jallikattu belt. *Jallikattu is celebrated in the second week of January*, during the Tamil harvest festival, Pongal. A tradition over 2,000 years old, Jallikattu is a competitive sport as well as an event to honour bull owners who rear them for mating. It is a violent sport in which contestants try to tame a bull for a prize; if they fail, the bull owner wins the prize. *In an age when the farm sector is largely mechanised, there are no major monetary benefits for bull owners in breeding Jallikattu bulls other than the prizes they get during the Jallikattu events. Traditionally, these used to be a dhoti, a towel, betel leaves, bananas and a cash prize of Rs 101. Over the last two decades, the prizes have included grinders, a fridge and small furniture.*

Why is Jallikattu important in Tamil culture?

Jallikattu is considered a traditional way for the peasant community *to preserve their pure-breed native bulls*. At a time when cattle breeding is often an artificial process, conservationists and peasants argue that Jallikattu is a way to protect these male animals which are otherwise used only for meat if not for ploughing. Kangayam, Pulikulam, Umbalachery, Barugur and Malai Maadu are among the popular native cattle breeds used for Jallikattu. *The owners of these premium breeds command respect locally.*

Why has Jallikattu been the subject of legal battles?

In India, legal battles surrounding animal rights issues emerged in the early 1990s. A notification from the Environment Ministry in 1991 banned the training and exhibition of bears, monkeys, tigers, panthers and dogs, which was challenged by the Indian Circus Organisation in the Delhi High Court. In 1998, dogs were excluded from the notification. Jallikattu first came under legal scrutiny in 2007 when the Animal Welfare Board of India and the animal rights group PETA moved petitions in the Supreme Court against Jallikattu as well as bullock cart races. The Tamil Nadu government, however, worked its way out of the ban by passing a law in 2009, which was signed by the Governor. In 2011, the UPA regime at the Centre added bulls to the list of animals whose training and exhibition is prohibited. In May 2014, days before the BJP was elected to power, the Supreme Court banned the bull-taming sport, ruling on a petition that cited the 2011 notification.



So, is it legal or banned now?

That is the subject of a case pending in the Supreme Court. The state government has legalised these events, which has been challenged in the court. In January 2017, months after the death of Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa, massive protests erupted across Tamil Nadu against the ban, with Chennai city witnessing a 15-day-long Jallikattu uprising. The same year, the Tamil Nadu government released an ordinance amending the central Act and allowing Jallikattu in the state; this was later ratified by the President. PETA challenged the state move, arguing it was unconstitutional. In 2018, the Supreme Court referred the Jallikattu case to a Constitution Bench, where it is pending now. The main question to be resolved is whether the Jallikattu tradition can be protected as a cultural right of the people of Tamil Nadu which is a fundamental right. Article 29 (1) mandates that "any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same". Like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka too passed a law to save a similar sport, called Kambala. A similar attempt by Maharashtra, too, was challenged in court, before it was passed as a law. Except in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where bull-taming and racing continue to be organised, these sports remain banned in all other states including Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra due to the 2014 ban order from the Supreme Court.

What is the politics playing out?

After the DMK regime in 2009 had issued a notification in favour of Jallikattu, it was the 2011 amendment by the Union Environment Ministry that led to the ban on Jallikattu in 2014. While the UPA regime was blamed for the ban, the BJP at the Centre too had shown an indifferent approach to the controversy until the 2017 uprising in Chennai, attended by thousands of people whose slogans often targeted the Narendra Modi regime. Now, the two parties are competing with each other to assert their support to the Jallikattu event. Rahul Gandhi said at Madurai on Thursday that he had witnessed Jallikattu and that it was safer for both bulls and bull tamers. He also charged BJP with making efforts to suppress Tamil culture and language. For the BJP, national general secretary in charge of Tamil Nadu in-charge C T Ravi has accused Rahul of hypocrisy, reminding him of the UPA government's stand that Jallikattu is "cruel and barbaric". The BJP is in alliance with the ruling AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, while the Congress is an ally of the main opposition DMK.

ARNAB'S CHATS WITH EX-BARC CHIEF REVEALED

In the supplementary chargesheet filed by the Mumbai police on TRP tampering by a few news channels, the alleged WhatsApp conversations between Republic TV Editor Arnab Goswami and recently arrested former Broadcast Audience Research Council (Barc) CEO Pratho Dasgupta point to a cosy relationship. The transcript of the WhatsApp messages, running into more than 1,000 pages and intercepted from Mr. Dasgupta's phone, shows many instances of him asking Mr. Goswami to reach out to the government on his behalf. In one such instance, on April 4, 2019, just days before the Lok Sabha poll, Mr. Dasgupta asked Mr. Goswami *to stall a proposal of the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRAI) to make the Barc's viewing data public instead of just supplying it to the channels.* Mr. Dasgupta tells Mr. Goswami that if the data is made public, many channels could be blacked out by multi system operators (MSOs) and local cable operators (LCOs). "With public data, MSOs and LCOs will push you guys for more carriage," Mr. Dasgupta tells Mr. Goswami. At this, Mr. Goswami assures him that when the BJP government returns, the TRAI won't have teeth.

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He also asks Mr. Dasgupta to send him points on how these reforms could politically hurt the government. “With channels getting blacked out, impact of messaging on TV will reach lesser people and hence diluted impact,” Mr. Dasgupta replied as per the transcript. Mr. Dasgupta further added: “Can you help by telling AS to tell TRAI to pipe down on Barc?” The reference to “AS” is also made repeatedly in the transcript, with Mr. Goswami claiming to have a close relationship with him. The initials have not been spelt at any place in the transcript. Two days later, Mr. Goswami responds that, “a strong message has been conveyed to TRAI”. There are also many instances in the transcripts of Mr. Goswami boasting about his proximity to the “PMO” and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; he details his visits to Delhi to meet various Ministers.

WHAT ARE THE NEW JHARKHAND COMBINED CIVIL SERVICES EXAMINATION RULES, 2021?

Jharkhand has for the first time framed rules pertaining to Jharkhand Civil Services. This will supersede The Bihar Civil Services (Executive Branch) and The Bihar Junior Civil Services Recruitment Rules of 1951, and will be applicable for appointment to direct quota vacancies in various services such as the Jharkhand Administrative Service, Jharkhand Police Service among others.

Why was the Jharkhand Combined Civil Services Examination Rules, 2021 needed?

The Jharkhand Public Service Commission (JPSC), which conducts Combined Civil Service Examination, has conducted only six exams in 20 years. In 2010, an FIR was lodged against a former member for alleged irregularities in written exams and interviews. At least 204 petitions—related to confusion, corruption in the selection process and irregularities among others—were filed in the High Court with more than 30 per cent cases pending in the courts. In *the last examination, the result of the Prelims examinations was declared thrice*. In the first instance, around 5,000 candidates qualified for the Mains, but the result was cancelled because the reservation rule for OBC candidates was not taken into account. In the second revised result, 6,103 candidates qualified, but SC/ST students were ignored leading to cancellation of the results. The new rules aim to avoid any such confusion.

What do the new rules state?

To begin with, *a calendar of vacancies will be published at the start of each year* which wasn't done until the last exam. According to new rules, the cadre-controlling department shall calculate the number of vacancies each year on January 1 with respect to the service to be filled in that particular year by direct recruitment and shall provide requisition for appointment to the Commission after roster clearance through the Department of Personnel, Administrative Reforms and Rajbhasha. Secondly, *marks obtained in Main (Written Test) Language Paper which is only qualifying in nature will not be added to the aggregate marks for calculation of percentage of marks, or for preparation of merit list for Main (Interview Test), or for preparation of final merit list*. This is a huge relief for candidates as earlier it was up to the whims and fancies of officers to decide whether to add those marks or not in preparation of merit list. The government has made it clear that those marks will be considered as qualifying. *While making service allocation, the reserved category candidates—who have not availed any relaxation—recommended against unreserved vacancies may be adjusted against unreserved vacancies by the Commission, and if he cannot, then*



he shall be adjusted in reserved category if they get a service of higher choice in the order of their preference. The rules state that the candidates who obtain minimum qualifying marks of 40 in 'aggregate' shall only be considered by the Commission while preparing the selection list for Main Examination and for preparing the merit list for the purpose of Main (Interview) Test. However, the minimum qualifying marks will be relaxed for Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes and Females to 32%; Extremely Backward Classes to 34%; Backward Classes to 36.5%; and Primitive Tribal Group to 30%. Confusion arose in the 6th JPSC exam where it was not clear whether the minimum qualifying marks were calculated subject wise or in aggregate.

For each vacancy, 15 candidates will be selected for Main (Examination). In 2016, for 326 posts, a total of 34,634 applicants were eligible for the Mains exam. The candidates to job ratio was more than 100.

Rules that experts say may create controversy

The new rules say that the number of candidates to be admitted to the Main (Written) Examination will be approximately 15 times the total number of advertised vacancies. Further, *irrespective of category, the '15-times' number will be selected in the Prelims and in case of inadequate representation from reserved category then the commission may at their discretion keep the cut-off marks up to eight percent less than that it was for the 'last selected candidate', but it shall not be less than the minimum marks. So, technically there is no reservation in Prelims. For example: If there are 100 vacancies, the first 1,500 candidates will be selected for the Mains irrespective of which category they belong to.* Later, if there are no adequate representation from reserved category/categories, then the Commission may reduce the cut-off marks—for those categories who did get enough representation—not more than 8% from the marks obtained by 1500th candidate—and that too it should be less than the minimum qualifying marks mentioned in the rules.

Pawan Jha, who has been teaching students preparing for JPSC since 2002, said: “This particular rule will affect many prospective students. Ideally the Commission should select 15 times the advertised vacancy in respective categories, rather than selecting 1500 candidates purely on merit. For example: if, there are 100 total vacancies, and 27 seats are reserved for OBCs, then 405(15 times 27) candidates from OBC community should be selected for Mains and likewise for other categories rather than selecting 1500 candidates for mains. There may be a possibility that some seats may remain vacant.”

There is no provision in the news rules for the graduation final year/appearing applicants. The UPSC, however, has a provision.

The request for withdrawal of candidature received from a candidate after he has submitted his application will be not entertained by the Commission. The number of attempts of candidates may also get affected. Also, candidates would demand return of money paid for the application forms.

MUGHAL HISTORY WHITEWASHED IN TEXTS, SAY TWO EDUCATIONISTS

At its meeting on textbook reforms on Wednesday, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education heard presentations from right-wing organisations and educationists, one of whom was



at the centre of a debate on the "saffronisation" of textbooks under the Vajpayee government. They argued that Mughal history is being whitewashed in Indian textbooks, and crowding out space for history from the Vedic era. The panel's agenda for the meeting was to remove "references to un-historical facts and distortions about our national heroes", to ensure "equal or proportionate references to all periods of Indian history" and to highlight the role of great women in Indian history.

New syllabus

"It has been over two decades since textbook reforms have been discussed at the platform of a parliamentary committee. We thought it fit to apply our mind considering the new National Education Policy is in place and new syllabus is being written," committee chairman and senior BJP leader Vinay Sahasrabuddhe told The Hindu. *The panel heard depositions from educationists J.S. Rajput and Shankar Sharan, as well as two right-wing leaning organisations, the Bharatiya Shikshan Mandal and the Shiksha Sanskriti Nyas.* From 1999 to 2004, *Dr. Rajput* was director of the body responsible for drafting school textbooks and setting the national curricular framework, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). *During his tenure, he spearheaded a process of controversial textbook revision, which critics have slammed as a communalisation of Indian history.* According to sources, both Mr. Rajput and Mr. Saran argued that the amount of space given to the Mughal era versus the reign of Hindu kings needed to be balanced. They argued that Indian history was falsely written as though foreign rule existed only for 200 years of the British Raj, without taking into account the 1,000 years before that. The Mughal era had been whitewashed, and their role as invaders had been muted, they claimed. The two right-leaning organisations also spoke on similar lines, asserting that there was a need for children to be taught "Indian culture" from the Vedic era onwards. The influence of Marxist historians on the Indian textbooks needed to be corrected, the witnesses told the committee. "In today's meeting, no member raised any objection, because these were merely depositions and there is no need for us to rectify their positions," one of the members said.

NCERT revision

The NCERT is currently in the process of revising textbooks, and is likely to complete the process by 2024. Some members of the committee suggested that it be speeded up to 2022 instead. One member recommended that the Education Ministry consider how to change higher education syllabi as well, to ensure that it aligns with the changes in school textbooks. The Director of NCERT, the CBSE Chairman and the Secretary of School Education were present at the meeting. Sources said that it was decided that they would depose at a later date.

AVOIDING DROPOUTS IN SCHOOL

The Union Education Ministry's directive to the States to launch a mission to avoid large-scale dropouts in schools in the coming year, partly by relaxing the detention policy, should end the anxiety of millions of students about their academic prospects. Managing schooling during COVID-19 has been a challenge, with UNESCO estimating that at the end of 2020, about 320 million students were locked out of schools globally. *South and West Asia are among the regions where students are at highest risk of not returning to schools and tertiary institutions, along with sub-Saharan Africa.* Assessing the problem is key to planning for 2021. The Indian school education system remains



top-down in making policy, which may not advance educational reform, but the vast administrative resources can be used to quickly assess the pandemic's impact on students, teachers and schools. The pandemic year has thus far witnessed apprehensive governments keeping the majority of school instruction online, and treading carefully when it comes to reopening campuses. They must prioritise the door-to-door surveys needed to identify students who are not in a position to return to classes when schools reopen, and whose economic circumstances have changed due to the pandemic's impact on their families. Clearly, the priority should be to draw up a database, to plan incentives that will prevent dropouts. Education continues to be covered by a cess on tax, and the funds could be deployed in 2021 towards this objective, through the Centre's Samagra Shiksha scheme and other COVID-19 relief plans. *The irrevocable role played by examinations in determining the fate of students, who come from varied backgrounds and preparation, has long been criticised for its rigidity, and these arguments were raised afresh when the Centre removed the no-detention policy under the RTE Act a couple of years ago. In the year of the virus, asymmetries among groups of students stand aggravated, and any detention would be illogical and unjustified.* Particular mention should be made of the situation for girls, whose enrolment in higher numbers has been achieved over the years with considerable effort, as well as children in less-urbanised States where access to schools is weak. When the pandemic had still not swept India in February last year, Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal said, among the reasons for children remaining out-of-school or dropping out were poverty, economic reasons, and ill-health. The economic factors have, over the past dozen months, been exacerbated by COVID-19, while *the digital divide witnessed in online education became an unprecedented cause of deprivation.* Moreover, vaccination cannot cover the bulk of the population quickly, and education can possibly achieve a semblance of normality only well into the next academic year. *This is the time to create a safety net for education, letting no student fall through.*

BAN SEX-SELECTIVE SURGERIES ON INTERSEX INFANTS AND CHILDREN

The Delhi Commission for Protections of Child Rights (DCPCR), in an order on Wednesday, recommended that the Delhi government should declare a ban on medically unnecessary, sex selective surgeries on intersex infants and children except in the case of life-threatening situations. The commission passed the order after deliberating on a plea that brought to its notice that there have been instances wherein intersex people are treated as disabled, and hence are approached through a medical lens, reducing them to an 'impairment' leading to medical interventions that can lead to long-term impairments and requiring lifetime medical care. The plea added that *most of the times these surgeries are conducted without prior, free and fully informed autonomous consent.*

Adviser to the commission, a human rights activist Anjali Gopalan, in her response said that such medical interventions are violative of the fundamental right to bodily integrity and physical autonomy. She added that some intersex people can face significant health issues that require treatment, which may include hormone-based therapy or surgery while others do not require medical intervention. The Delhi Medical Council in its response said that surgical interventions and gender-related medical interventions should be delayed until the patient can provide meaningful informed consent/assent to these interventions.



Madras HC order

The DCPCR also said it had taken due notice of the judgment of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court wherein the court directed the Government of Tamil Nadu to ban sex reassignment surgeries on intersex infants and children.

A STEP BACK IN GENDER EQUALITY (SUNNY JOSE - RBI CHAIR PROFESSOR AT THE COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, SOUTHERN REGIONAL CENTRE, HYDERABAD)

Is the electoral promise of *paying women for carrying out domestic work and care work* a progressive public policy? The proposal, put forth by Kamal Haasan's political party, Makkal Needhi Maiam, has generated curiosity and reopened the old but unsettled academic debate. On the face of it, the proposal might appear progressive. However, closer scrutiny suggests otherwise.

Disproportionate burden of work

Women bear a disproportionately high burden of unpaid domestic work and care work in India. It would be instructive here to examine how Tamil Nadu, where the electoral promise is being made, fares vis-à-vis India. The all-India Time Use Survey (2019) says that 82% of females (six years and above) as against 24% of males from Tamil Nadu participate in unpaid domestic work. The huge disparity persists even if we look at the age group of 15-59 years: 90% of females and 24% of males participate in domestic work. A similar disparity prevails at the all-India level as well: 81% of females (six years and above) and 26% of males participate in unpaid domestic work. There is an equally huge disparity in the average time spent by participating males and females. While females (six years and above) in Tamil Nadu spend, on average, 261 minutes a day in unpaid domestic work, males spend only 91 minutes. The corresponding figures for *females and males in India are 299 minutes and 97 minutes, respectively.* The data suggest that females bear more than 83% of the burden of domestic and care work both in Tamil Nadu and India. Can the proposed policy address the huge burden that women are forced to endure daily? Posed differently, what should a progressive policy proposal aim at: paying women a wage for domestic and care work or addressing the huge gender disparity? The insights offered by the feminist economist Diane Elson (2017) are pertinent. The gist of her argument is this: public policy should aim at closing the huge gender gap in unpaid domestic and care work through '*recognition, reduction and redistribution*' (Triple-R). The party's proposal only satisfies the first component of Triple-R, that is 'recognition'. Paying a wage is a formal recognition of the fact that unpaid domestic and care work are no less important than paid market work, as the latter is parasitic on the former. *Since it is women who predominantly carry out unpaid domestic and care activities, often at the expense of their employment prospects and health, the monetary reward is a recognition of their contribution to the well-being of the household and the opportunities forgone by women.* The proposal appears progressive, for this reason and to that measure.

Failing two aspects

If the broader aim of a progressive public policy is to close the gender gap in unpaid domestic and care work, how does the proposal measure up? Specifically, will paying women a wage for domestic and care work reduce their disproportionately huge daily burden? The proposal not only fails miserably in this aspect, but also has *the potential to increase women's burden.* This is because



paying monetary benefits carries with it *the possible danger of formally endorsing the social norm that domestic and care work are 'women's work', for which they are being paid*. The purportedly progressive proposal thus has *the risk of furthering the gender disparity in unpaid work within homes*. What's more, it also fails in the other crucial aspect of 'redistribution' of the burden of unpaid work. *In fact, it might give space for men to claim that women are bound to do these unpaid activities as they are being compensated for the time spent or income foregone, and that women can at best expect men only to help but not participate daily in carrying out these activities*. The fact that only 24% of men from Tamil Nadu participate in and spend less time than women on unpaid domestic work calls for *a policy proposal that increases men's participation and the time they spend in unpaid work at home*. Instead of incentivising men to participate more in household work and reducing women's burden by redistributing the responsibility, the current proposal might do the opposite. Incentivising men, monetarily or otherwise, to participate more and spend longer hours in carrying out unpaid domestic work is one thing, but paying women a wage for shouldering the primary responsibility is another. At best, the latter might help meet what the academic Caroline Moser referred to as 'practical' gender needs. But it cannot possibly address the 'strategic' gender needs of reducing and redistributing women's burden. The electoral promise, therefore, lacks the transformative potential of achieving gender equality in sharing unpaid work.

FELLED BY FIRE

The deadly fire that snuffed out the lives of 10 infants in the Bhandara District General Hospital in Maharashtra is a shocking reminder that safety norms in several medical facilities in India do not pass muster. The parents of the babies who perished in the sick new-born unit have been plunged into a lifetime of trauma. Some of the victims, a few just days old, had been brought to the hospital for better care from smaller health facilities; seven had a providential escape. There are reports of poorly trained staff failing to respond adequately. The terrible blaze joins the long list of such accidents recorded in government and private hospitals, underscoring a painful reality: safety protocols are yet to be institutionalised even in places where people legitimately expect a high degree of professionalism. Last year, there were devastating fires in COVID-19 facilities in Vijayawada and Ahmedabad, with several casualties, blamed on poor oversight by fire authorities or faulty electrical repairs. The Maharashtra government has ordered a probe into the Bhandara fire to be concluded in three days, and a fire audit of hospitals, but a perfunctory inquiry cannot effectively address the underlying causes. *Hospital fires are a distinct entity, and research indicates that there are specific factors that trigger them off and aggravate their impact. Intensive Care Units, neonatal ICUs and operating rooms are often the site of fires, implicating the presence of a high concentration of oxygen in a confined space*. A review of Indian hospital fires published in the Journal of Clinical Anaesthesia identified *higher oxygen availability in intensive care facilities as the likely primary cause, with motors and electrical units in the room providing the ignition, and plastics fuelling it*. It is worth considering, therefore, whether hospitals have been audited with such factors in mind, and to evaluate national building safety codes against international practice. *Oxygen monitors for hospital rooms, to ensure that the ambient level is within safe norms — set at a maximum of 23.5% by the U.S. National Fire Protection Association — could help avert an accident. Locating electrical equipment for air-conditioners with sparking potential away from oxygen saturated areas may also reduce the risk*. As the health sector expands, it is essential that all new infrastructure conforms to rigorous safety standards, a small premium to stop disasters such as the Bhandara carnage. If the government sets the bar high enough, ensuring full adherence to



safety in its buildings, regulatory authorities can compel commercial structures to fall in line. *The Centre should also create a public platform for insights gained from inquiries into hospital fires to be shared.* Hospitals should mandatorily hold regular safety and evacuation drills which are key to saving lives when disaster strikes.

THE FRONT SEAT IN ELECTRIC MOBILITY (SYED ALI - AN INDEPENDENT ANALYST ON INDIA-LATIN AMERICA AFFAIRS)

The progression to electric vehicles is important for India because such vehicles are sustainable and profitable in the long term. *Reducing dependence on crude oil will save the government money, reduce carbon emissions, and build domestic energy independence. Besides being an economically and environmentally viable option,* India's transition to electric vehicles will allow us to fine-tune our infrastructure. *This will also influence India's foreign policy as our energy security dependence will shift from West Asia to Latin America.* India imported 228.6 MT of crude oil worth \$120 billion in 2018-19, which made it the third-largest oil importer in the world in terms of value.

Shift to electric vehicles

In order to reduce dependence on crude, the government has drafted policies that may act as catalysts in propelling the acceptance of electric vehicles. Under the *'Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles'* and its *updated (Fame 2) version,* the government has allocated \$1.3 billion in incentives for electric buses, three-wheelers and four-wheelers to be used for commercial purposes till 2022, and earmarked another \$135 million for charging stations. *Besides these incentives, a proposal for a \$4.6 billion subsidy for battery makers has also been proposed by the NITI Aayog. These policies are embedded with the vision to have 30% electric vehicles plying the roads by 2030.* In September 2019, Japanese automobile major Suzuki Motor formed a consortium with Japanese automotive component manufacturer Denso and multinational conglomerate Toshiba to set up a manufacturing unit in Gujarat to venture into the production of lithium-ion batteries and electrodes. *Developing domestic battery manufacturing capacity may fundamentally change India's relationship with resource-rich Latin America as the government plans to buy overseas lithium reserves. Latin America's famous lithium triangle that encompasses lithium deposits under the salt flats of northwest Argentina, northern Chile, and southwest Bolivia holds about 80% of the explored lithium of the world. In Latin America, most of the production comes from Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia.*

Scouting for mineral assets

In 2019, India's National Aluminum Company (NALCO), Hindustan Copper Limited (HCL) and Mineral Exploration Corporation Ltd (MECL) formally signed a joint venture agreement to form Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL) to scout for strategic mineral assets like lithium and cobalt abroad for commercial use and for supplying to meet the domestic requirement for battery manufacturers. At present, India's lithium-ion battery demand is fulfilled by imports from China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong. In the last two years, India has had a growing appetite for lithium-ion batteries, and so, lithium imports have tripled from \$384 mn to \$1.2 bn. Notably, the government has intercepted this growing demand from its incipience. With its policy intervention to support battery manufacturers by supplying lithium and cobalt, this industry is more likely to grow domestically to support India's goal to switch to electric mobility. Interestingly, lithium is also used

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as a drug to treat bipolar disorder and is soon becoming the metal to treat a world polluted by excessive carbon emissions. Currently, *India's biggest trading partners in Latin America are Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, and majority of trade is concentrated on crude oil which includes 14%-20% of India's total crude oil imports.* However, this may soon shift to lithium and cobalt. The Indian government's initiation to take the front seat in electric mobility and preemptive action to send a high-level delegation to have a precise understanding of the availability of lithium and possibilities of joint ventures will supply domestic markets and drive international markets. Most importantly, this will be a long-term solution to clean our cities, build new markets, and skill people for new jobs towards an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'.

ARUNACHAL HARBOURS A VANADIUM SOURCE

Arunachal Pradesh, considered a sleeping hydropower giant, is likely to become India's prime producer of vanadium, a high-value metal used in strengthening steel and titanium. Exploration being carried out by the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has placed the eastern Himalayan State on the vanadium map of the country, and geologists are confident of identifying a deposit soon. *India is a significant consumer of vanadium, but is not a primary producer of the strategic metal. It is recovered as a by-product from the slag collected from the processing of vanadiferous magnetite ores (iron ore),* GSI officials said. According to data provided by the GSI, *India consumed 4% of about 84,000 tonnes of vanadium produced across the globe in 2017. China, which produces 57% of the world's vanadium, consumed 44% of the metal.* "We found promising concentrations of vanadium in the Paleoproterozoic carbonaceous phyllite rocks in the *Depo and Tamang* areas of Papum Pare district in Arunachal Pradesh. This was the first report of a primary deposit of vanadium in India, with an average grade of 0.76% V₂O₅ [vanadium pentoxide]," a GSI specialist said. *Vanadium mineralisation in Arunachal Pradesh is geologically similar to the "stone coal" vanadium deposits of China hosted in carbonaceous shale. This high vanadium content is associated with graphite, with a fixed carbon content of up to 16%. Geologists discovered two bands of about 7-metre thick carbonaceous phyllite for a length of more than 6 km in the Depo area. This prompted the GSI to extend its search to other areas of the State.* "Good prospects" of vanadium for a cumulative length of 15.5 km and an average thickness of 7 m were found in the Deed, Saiya and Phop areas of Lower Subansiri district. Vanadium content was also found in the Pakro area of Pakke-Kesang district, Palin-Sangram in Kra Daadi, Kalamati in West Siang, Kalaktang in West Kameng and Kaying in Siang district. "The expected grade of vanadium mineralisation in Arunachal Pradesh is comparable to the important vanadium deposits of the world. The largest deposits are in China, followed by Russia and South Africa," the specialist said.

TELEGRAM SIGNAL SPIKE SESSION THREEEMA

It has been a confusing January for WhatsApp. The platform celebrated a milestone of 1.4 billion video and audio calls on New Year's Eve 2020, but the celebrations seemed premature given the global backlash to the platform's updated privacy policy, which features a 'take or leave it' clause — if the user refuses to share data with Facebook, they will have to quit WhatsApp. On January 9, WhatsApp Head Will Cathcart tweeted that this policy is purely for business communication, rather than private. Still, before the new terms of service are set to take effect on February 8, WhatsApp and Messenger users alike are flocking to other apps, both out of fear of misuse of their data, and as a virtual protest against Facebook. What are people looking for in these alternative

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apps? Encryption, an important buzzword across communication apps, converts data to an unintelligible form called ciphertext; decrypting the ciphertext converts the data back into its original form, called plaintext. Many of these apps feature AES methods which, according to a National Institute of Standards and Technology report, is the use of “cryptographic keys of 128, 192, and 256 bits to encrypt and decrypt data in blocks of 128 bits.”

Telegram

Fast approaching 500 million users, Telegram observed a growth of more than 2.2 million users in the last week alone due to the WhatsApp purge. Unlike WhatsApp, Telegram is a cloud-based messenger with seamless sync across several devices at once. The messaging app comprises two layers of secure encryption. Server-client encryption is used in Cloud Chats (private and group chats), while the platform’s Secret Chats use an additional layer of client-client encryption. “All data, regardless of type, is encrypted in the same way — be it text, media or files,” says the platform’s official website, adding, “Our encryption is based on 256-bit symmetric AES encryption, 2048-bit RSA encryption, and Diffie–Hellman secure key exchange [a method of securely exchanging cryptographic keys over a public channel].”

Signal

Signal’s privacy policy is not as descriptive as that of Telegram but they do state they undertake end-to-end encryption, as do most communication apps these days. The chat history for the app is stored on the user’s device instead of, as with WhatsApp and Telegram, on an app-specific cloud server. If you are going to use Signal, be vigilant of their third-party sharing policy and which apps you link with this app: “Our third-party Providers send a verification code to your phone number when you register for our services. These providers are bound by their privacy policies to safeguard that information. If you use other Third-Party Services like YouTube, Spotify, Giphy, etc. in connection with our services, their terms and privacy policies govern your use of those services.”

Spike

An under-discussed app more favoured in the West, Spike, is becoming a choice alternative here in India. Like most apps, they emphasise, “We store only the minimum data needed to provide you with the fastest experience possible... We do not rent, sell, distribute or monetise on your data to anyone. There are no ads on Spike either.” However, the personal data they store includes the data shared with the platform when you register for an account including payment information, postal address, date of birth, full name. However, some potential users may not sit well with the fact that Spike “periodically collects your device number or IP address (the location of your device on the Internet), tracks your geographic location, monitors installation and online behavioural information recorded during user sessions and technical data and related information (including but not limited to technical information about your device, applications installed on it, its operating system and your operator).” They also, however, have a strict minors policy, too: “We do not knowingly collect or solicit personal information from anyone under the age of 13. If we learn that we have collected personal information from a child under age 13, we will delete that information as quickly as possible.” This platform comes with a variety of payment plans, the basic one being free with a limit of 15,000 messages.

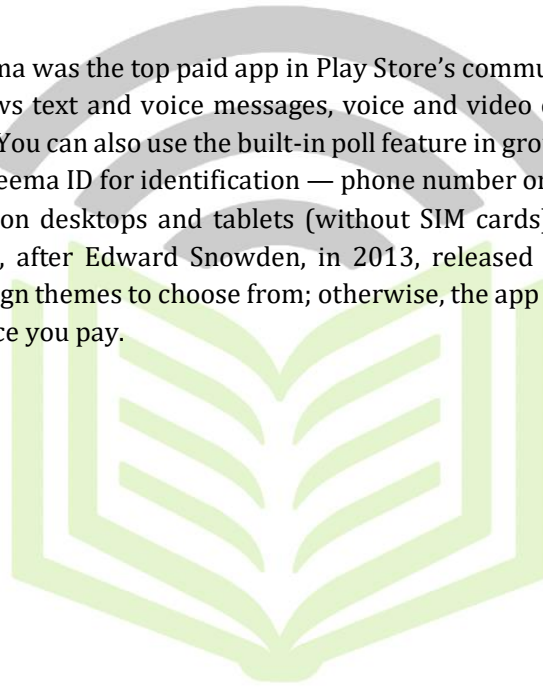


Session

Session does not require your name, phone number or email ID. The makers of the app — Oxen, backed by The Loki Foundation, an Australian non-profit tech group — claim that your messaging activities will leave no digital trail. The app creates a Session ID, which you need to share with the person in the contact to start chatting. Private group chats for up to 20 people are possible. Photos, voice snippets and other files can be shared. Session does not collect any geolocation data, metadata, or any other data about the device or network. It is available for Android phones, iPhones and desktops.

Threema

As of January 9, Threema was the top paid app in Play Store's communication category. Available for ₹270, the app allows text and voice messages, voice and video calls, file-sharing and group chats — all encrypted. You can also use the built-in poll feature in group chats. Each Threema user receives a random Threema ID for identification — phone number or email are not required. You can even use the app on desktops and tablets (without SIM cards). The app became popular, especially in Germany, after Edward Snowden, in 2013, released documents on surveillance. There aren't many design themes to choose from; otherwise, the app promises top-notch security and privacy for the price you pay.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

SEVEN KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM INDIA'S LATEST GDP DATA

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released the First Advance Estimates (FAE) for the current financial year. According to MoSPI, India's gross domestic product (GDP) — the total value of all final goods and services produced within the country in one financial year — will contract by 7.7 per cent in 2020-21.

What are the First Advance Estimates of GDP? What is their significance?

For any financial year, the MoSPI provides regular estimates of GDP. The first such instance is through the FAE. *The FAE for any particular financial year is typically presented on January 7th. Their significance lies in the fact that they are the GDP estimates that the Union Finance Ministry uses to decide the next financial year's Budget allocations.* The FAE will be quickly updated as more information becomes available. *On February 26th, MoSPI will come out with the Second Advance Estimates of GDP for the current year.*

How are the FAE arrived at before the end of the concerned financial year?

The FAE are *derived by extrapolating the available* data. According to the MoSPI, the approach for compiling the Advance Estimates is based on Benchmark-Indicator method. The sector-wise estimates are obtained by extrapolating indicators such as

#Index of Industrial Production (IIP) of first 7 months of the financial year

#Financial performance of listed companies in the private corporate sector available up to quarter ending September, 2020

#The 1st Advance Estimates of crop production,

#The accounts of central & state governments,

#Information on indicators like deposits & credits, passenger and freight earnings of Railways, passengers and cargo handled by civil aviation, cargo handled at major sea ports, sales of commercial vehicles, etc., available for first 8 months of the financial year.

How is the data extrapolated?

In the past, extrapolation for indicators such as the IIP was done by dividing the cumulative value for the first 7 months of the current financial year by average of the ratio of the cumulative value of the first 7 months to the annual value of past years. So if the annual value of a variable was twice that of the value in the first 7 months in the previous years then for the current year as well the annual value is assumed to be double that of the first 7 months. However, *this year, because of the pandemic there were wide fluctuations in the monthly data. Moreover, there was a significant drop, especially in the first quarter, on many counts. That is why the usual projection techniques would not have yielded robust results. As such, MoSPI has tweaked the ratios for most variables.*



What are the key takeaways from the First Advance Estimates for 2020-21?

There are 7 key takeaways.

#1 GDP Growth Rate:

In the context of recent history, the 7.7 per cent contraction in GDP is a sharp one considering that India has registered an average annual GDP growth rate of 6.8 per cent since the start of economic liberalisation in 1992-93. But, a big reason for the contraction this year has been the disruption caused by Covid-induced lockdowns which saw the economy contract by almost 24 per cent in the first quarter (April, May and June) and by 15.7 per cent during the first half (H1) of the year (first two quarters or from April to September). As a result, *the domestic economy had entered a technical recession*. However, in the second half of the current financial year — that is, October to March — the government expects the economy will produce almost exactly the same amount of goods and services that it produced in the second half of the last financial year (2019-20). *In the H1 of 2020-21, India produced goods and services worth Rs 60 lakh crore — much lower than the Rs 71 lakh crore worth of goods produced in H1 of 2019-20. But in H2 of 2020-21, MoSPI expects GDP to be worth Rs 74.4 lakh crore, which is roughly the same as the GDP in H2 of 2019-20 — about Rs 74.7 lakh crore. For the full year of 2020-21 then, India's GDP is likely to be Rs 134.4 lakh crore as against Rs 145.7 lakh crore in 2019-20.*

#2 Absolute level of real GDP:

At Rs 134.4 lakh crore, India's real GDP — that is, GDP without the influence of inflation — in 2020-21 will be lower than the 2018-19 level. In other words, from the start of the next financial year, India would first have to raise its GDP back to the level it was at in 2019-20 (Rs 143.7 lakh crore).

#3 Per Capita GDP:

While the GDP provides an all-India aggregate, per capita GDP is a better variable if one wants to understand how an average India has been impacted. *India's per capita GDP will fall to Rs 99, 155 in 2020-21 — last seen four years ago during 2016-17. In fact, while the overall real GDP will fall by 7.7 per cent, per capita real GDP will fall by 8.7 per cent.*

#4 Absolute level of real Gross Value Added (or GVA):

The Gross Value Added provides a picture of the economy from the supply side. It maps the value-added by different sectors of the economy such as agriculture, industry and services. In other words, GVA provides a proxy for the income earned by people involved in the various sectors. *At Rs 123.4 lakh crore, India's real GVA level, too, will fall below the 2018-19 level.*

#5 Absolute level of Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE):

India's overall GDP can be divided into four main sections. The biggest demand for goods and services comes from private individuals trying to satisfy their consumption needs. Typically this would include all the things — be it a toothpaste or a car — that you and your family members buy in their private individual capacity. This demand is called PFCE and *it constitutes over 56 per cent of the total GDP. PFCE levels will be almost what they were in 2017-18.*



#6 Per capita PFCE:

Just like per capita GDP, the per capita PFCE is also a relevant metric as it shows how much does an average Indian spend in his/her private capacity. Typically, with rising incomes standards, such consumption levels also rise. However, *at Rs 55,609, per capita PFCE will fall below the 2017-18 level.*

#7 Absolute level of Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF):

The second biggest component of GDP is called GFCF and it measures all the expenditures on goods and services that businesses and firms make as they invest in their productive capacity. So if your firm buys computers and software to increase the overall productivity then it will be counted under GFCF. This type of demand accounts for close to 28 per cent of India's GDP. Taken together, private demand and business demand account for almost 85 per cent of all GDP. At Rs 37 lakh crore, GFCF (or the investment demand in the economy) has fallen even below 2016-17 level.

ROLE OF AGRICULTURE: WHY THIS ECONOMIC SLUMP IS DIFFERENT FROM PAST ONES

The 7.2% fall in gross value added (GVA) for 2020-21, as per the National Statistical Office's first advance estimates released on Thursday, would be the sharpest ever recorded in India.

Earlier slumps

There have been four earlier occasions when the country's GVA — which is GDP net of all taxes and subsidies on products and, hence, a more accurate measure of economic activity — has suffered contraction. The extent of negative growth in those years — *1979-80 (minus 5.2%), 1972-73 (minus 0.3%), 1965-66 (minus 3.7%) and 1957-58 (minus 1.2%)* — was lower than the 7.2% being projected for the current fiscal. But it isn't just the bigger decline in GVA/GDP this time that is striking. Equally significant is the fact that *in each of those four previous years, the primary culprit was agriculture.* All four were drought years — and the farm sector (agriculture, forestry and fishing) registered minus 12.8% growth in 1979-80, minus 5% in 1972-73, minus 11% in 1965-66 and minus 4.5% in 1957-58. In effect, the woes of 'Bharat' impacted the rest of the economy.

Different this time

This has not been the case in 2020-21. While overall GVA is expected to shrink 7.2%, *agriculture and allied activities are set to post 3.4% growth.* Far from being a drag, 'Bharat' kept 'India' going during the worst phase of Covid-19 and the nationwide lockdown. Had the farm sector not grown at all, the GVA decline would have worked out to 7.7%, not 7.2%. Incidentally, in 2019-20 as well, agricultural growth at 4% surpassed the 3.9% for the economy as a whole.

Monsoon boost

Agriculture's relatively better performance in the last two years is largely a result of consecutive years of good monsoon (and also post-monsoon) rains. Recharged groundwater tables and reservoirs getting filled to near capacity — besides farming operations being exempted from lockdown restrictions — led to increase in crop acreages and higher production.



Share in economy

If Bharat's doing well hasn't prevented the worst economic slump since independence, the reason is simple. *In 1979-80, agriculture's share in India's GDP at constant prices was 33.9%; in 1957-58, it was 48.2%.* A drought year in those times invariably translated into low/negative growth rates. It is different today. *The share of agriculture in real GVA was only 14.6% in 2019-20. That is estimated to go up to 16.3% this fiscal, but not enough to make a difference even in a bountiful monsoon year.*

WHAT IS A K-SHAPED ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND WHAT ARE ITS IMPLICATIONS?

In his opinion piece in The Indian Express, Sajjid Chinoy, Chief India Economist at JP Morgan, states the prospects of a K-shaped recovery from COVID are increasing both in India and across the world.

What is a K-shaped recovery?

A K-shaped recovery happens when *different sections of an economy recover at starkly different rates.* "Households at the top of the pyramid are likely to have seen their incomes largely protected, and savings rates forced up during the lockdown, increasing 'fuel in the tank' to drive future consumption. Meanwhile, households at the bottom are likely to have witnessed permanent hits to jobs and incomes," he states. These cleavages are *already visible.* *Passenger vehicle registrations (proxying upper-end consumption) have grown about 4 per cent since October while two-wheelers have contracted 15 per cent.*

What are the macro implications of a K-shaped recovery?

Upper-income households have benefitted from higher savings for two quarters. What we are currently witnessing is a sugar rush from those savings being spent. This is, however, a one-time effect. "To the extent that households at the bottom have experienced a permanent loss of income in the forms of jobs and wage cuts, this will be a recurring drag on demand, if the labour market does not heal faster," warns Chinoy. Second, to the extent that COVID has triggered an effective income transfer from the poor to the rich, this will be demand-impeding because the *poor have a higher marginal propensity to consume* (i.e. they tend to spend (instead of saving) a much higher proportion of their income. Third, if COVID-19 reduces competition or increases the inequality of incomes and opportunities, it could impinge on trend growth in developing economies by hurting productivity and tightening political economy constraints. "Policy will, therefore, need to look beyond the next few quarters and anticipate the state of the macroeconomy post the sugar rush," he writes.

WHAT IS THE NEW SINGLE-WINDOW CLEARANCE FOR COAL, AND HOW WILL IT HELP?

The Union government on Monday (January 11) announced a new online single window clearance portal for the coal sector to speed up the operationalisation of coal mines. The announcement was made alongside the signing ceremony for the first tranche of coal blocks to be auctioned for commercial use.



What is a single-window clearance portal?

A single window clearance portal is aimed at allowing successful bidders for coal blocks to be able to obtain all required clearances, including environmental and forest clearances, from a single portal with progress monitoring, instead of having to go to multiple authorities. The portal should allow successful bidders to operationalise coal mines more quickly. “Presently, *about 19 major approvals, or clearances are required before starting the coal mine in the country.* In the absence of unified platform for grant of clearances companies were required to approach different departments, leading to delay in operationalization of the coal mines,” Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi said, adding that the portal would be operationalised in a phased manner.

How will this help?

Industry sources said that the sector has long sought a single window clearance system to help with quicker operationalisation, as obtaining the requisite clearances was taking over 2-3 years for successful bidders in many cases. “*It is definitely a good move as coal blocks which were auctioned off in earlier tranches used to take more than a 2-3 year period to get operationalised,*” said an expert. The expert added that some coal blocks auctioned as far back as 2015 has still not been operationalised due to delays in obtaining required clearances. The expert noted that the Parivesh mechanism for forest and environment related clearances would likely be merged into the single window clearance mechanism which is expected to help with the operationalisation of the coals blocks that are set to be auctioned in the upcoming auctions.

A ROCKY ROAD FOR THE BANKING SECTOR IN 2021

After losses in two consecutive years, India’s scheduled commercial banks turned profitable in 2019-20. State-run banks continued to bleed for the fifth year in a row, but their losses were much more stifled. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) reckons that the first half of 2020-21 saw even greater improvements in banks’ vital statistics, with non-performing assets (NPAs) falling to 7.5% of outstanding loans by September 2020. The RBI attributed this to the resolution of a few large accounts through the introduction of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) in 2016, and fresh slippages in loan accounts dipping to just 0.74%.

When were NPAs at dangerously high levels?

Over the course of 2019-20, India’s banks were on the mend from a precarious position in March 2018, when bad loans on their books peaked to over ₹10 lakh crore — around 11.5% of all loans. What former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian had called *India’s ‘twin balance sheet problem’ in the Economic Survey for 2016-17, had sent banks down a slippery slope, beset by dangerously high levels of non-performing assets. A large part of the problem started in the latter half of 2010s, as assumptions of persistently high economic growth made several large corporates overzealous in their investment ambitions, thus over-leveraging themselves in the process. And lenders, led by public sector banks, fuelled these plans through easy money on credit.* The problem was particularly acute in the infrastructure sector, where *high-stakes bets on several projects unravelled as growth (and demand) fizzled out following the global financial crisis of 2008. The stress from stretched corporate balance sheets infected banks’ own books and underwhelmed their*



capacity for fresh lending. This vicious cycle was interrupted to an extent by the IBC, which, along with tighter recognition norms for bad loans, helped correct the course over time.

A decline in bad loans is good news. But is it the real picture?

The problem is that the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown enforced to curb its spread upended businesses and revenue models across industries, just as it did in the rest of the world. But unlike most of its peers, India's economy had been declining sharply even before the emergence of the virus. The reason bad loans and insolvency proceedings have not surged as multiple businesses went kaput, taking millions of employees with outstanding retail loans down with them, is the series of regulatory forbearance steps taken by authorities to help them tide over this unprecedented crisis. Interest rates were cut after the onset of the pandemic, a moratorium was offered on loan instalments due from borrowers, and liquidity was infused into the system to keep the wheels of the economy moving without a further shock. At the same time, *the invocation of the IBC was suspended for loans that went into default on or after March 25, when the lockdown began. While this suspension has now been stretched till March 31, 2021, a loan restructuring window for borrowers was closed in December 2020.* Despite all this, life support in the form of adequate credit flows to some productive and COVID-19-stressed sectors has been deficient, the central bank has said. More worryingly, *the RBI believes that a real picture of the state of borrowers' accounts (and consequently, the banking system in general, and the economy at large), will emerge once these policy support measures are rolled back.*

What exactly has the RBI said about banks' health?

Roughly translated, the central bank is simply repeating the famous Warren Buffet aphorism — “Only when the tide goes out do you discover who has been swimming naked”. Monetary policy language is more nuanced, of course. *“The modest GNPA ratio of 7.5% at end-September 2020 veils the strong undercurrent of slippage ... The data on gross non-performing assets (GNPA) of banks are yet to reflect the stress, obscured under the asset quality standstill with attendant financial stability implications,”* the central bank has noted in its annual publication on trends and progress of banking in India released this week. Had the central bank's normal loan classification norms been followed instead of the COVID-19 relief measures, bad loans would have been higher, the RBI has argued. “Given the uncertainty induced by COVID-19 and its real economic impact, the asset quality of the banking system may deteriorate sharply, going forward,” the report stated. It has also warned about large-scale loan defaults looming over housing finance companies, which have been hit by delays in completion of housing projects, cost overruns due to reverse migration of labourers, and delayed investments by buyers in the affordable housing sector as incomes shrank and jobs were lost. To make the banking sector healthy in the face of large-scale delinquencies and balance-sheet stress that the ravages of the pandemic leave behind, it is critical to “rewind various relaxations in a timely manner”, rein in loan impairment and ensure adequate capital infusion into banks, the RBI says. *Experts say more taxpayer money may be needed to shore up public sector banks.*

What does this mean for India's hopes for a bounce-back in the economy?

Simply put, banks' ability to lend is critical for businesses and the economy to grow. A deluge of bad loans impairs banks' ability and willingness to lend, as has been evident in bankers' aversion



to risk in recent years. It is safer to park their funds in government securities, and public sector banks, that have seen a surge in deposits after the recent troubles at co-operative and private lenders like the PMC Bank, Yes Bank, and now Lakshmi Vilas Bank, may prefer to do just that. “Currency with public surged in response to the COVID-19 induced dash for cash while solvency issues related to a private sector bank also brought about some reassignment of deposits. *During 2020-21 so far, deposits with PSBs grew at a higher pace than usual, partly reflecting perception of their safe haven status,*” the RBI noted. Latest data for November suggest a slight uptick in bank credit flows, but lending to industry as a whole still shrank 0.7%. While several private lenders have raised buffer capital to offset shocks from potential loan defaults, some large state-run lenders have announced plans to raise resources in a staggered manner, depending on the prevailing market circumstances. *Since public sector lenders still play a huge role in financing economic activity, it is important that they raise additional capital from the market or from their majority-owner — the government — before the stress ‘obscured’ by the COVID-19 relief measures becomes apparent.*

What happens next?

The central bank has said that the Financial Stability Report (FSR) — which should have been released by now in the usual course of business — will be “released shortly”. This report shall present an updated assessment of the gross NPAs and the capital adequacy of banks “under alternate macro stress test scenarios”. Hence, its findings will be critical in determining how gloomy the situation really is. For now, as the central bank has said, *the restoration of the health of banking and non-banking financial sectors depends on the revival of the real economy and how quickly the animal spirits of entrepreneurship return.* The *Union Budget for 2021-22, which is now just four weeks away, would be critical for banks on two fronts — in what it does to revive demand and investments, and how much money it can promise to set aside for recapitalising public sector banks in the coming year.*

RBI FORMS WORKING GROUP ON DIGITAL LENDING

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has constituted a working group on digital lending — including online platforms and mobile apps — to study all aspects of digital lending activities in the regulated financial sector as well as by unregulated players. This is to ensure that an appropriate regulatory approach is put in place. “A balanced approach needs to be followed so that the regulatory framework supports innovation while ensuring data security, privacy, confidentiality and consumer protection,” banking regulator added. The working group consists of both internal and external members. The internal members include Jayant Kumar Dash, Executive Director, RBI (Chairman); Ajay Kumar Choudhary, Chief General Manager in-charge, Department of Supervision, RBI; S.P. Vasudevan, Chief General Manager, Department of Payment and Settlement Systems, RBI; and Manoranjan Mishra, Chief General Manager, Department of Regulation, RBI (Member Secretary). The external members are Vikram Mehta, co-founder, Monexo Fintech; and Rahul Sasi, cyber security expert and founder of CloudSEK. *The working group will evaluate digital lending activities and assess the penetration and standards of outsourced digital lending activities in RBI regulated entities; identify the risks posed by unregulated digital lending to financial stability, regulated entities and consumers; and suggest regulatory changes to promote orderly growth of digital lending.* It will also recommend measures for expansion of specific regulatory or statutory



perimeter and suggest the role of various regulatory and government agencies. It will also recommend a robust fair practices code for digital lending players. The group will submit its report within three months.

INFLATION SLOWS TO 4.59% AS FOOD PRICES EASE

India's retail inflation decelerated appreciably to 4.59% in December, from 6.93% in November, dipping below 6% for the first time since March 2020 as food prices cooled. Other data released by the *National Statistical Office (NSO)* on Tuesday, however, showed that *a nascent industrial recovery, which had begun in September, retreated in November as industrial output shrank 1.9%.* The *lowest consumer price inflation (CPI) print in 14 months was driven by a sharp slowdown in food price inflation, which eased to 3.4% in December, from the preceding month's 9.5%.* India's *index of industrial production (IIP) for November was dragged lower by mining and manufacturing, which both shrank, as per quick estimates.* Mining output contracted 7.3% in the month, while manufacturing declined 1.7%, indicating an unwinding of inventory build-ups with the quenching of pent-up and festive demand. Electricity production grew for the third month in a row, rising 3.5% year-on-year. The NSO also revised upwards the index for the preceding three months by incorporating more production data. As per the final data for August 2020, the IIP had shrunk 7.1% in the month, narrower than the 8% estimated earlier. In September, industrial output had edged up 0.5% — higher than the 0.2% growth estimated earlier — after shrinking for six months. Industrial output grew 4.19% in October, higher than the 3.6% quick estimate. *"The November data once again shows that the uptick witnessed in the month of September and October was due to a combination of festive and pent-up demand and the recovery is still shallow and fragile,"* said Sunil Kumar Sinha, principal economist at India Ratings & Research. *"The unevenness and fragility of the current recovery is evident with only 10 out of 23 industry group showing positive growth in November,"* he pointed out.

HOW MUTUAL FUNDS RISK-O-METER WILL WORK

In a move that will help investors to make a more informed investment decision, capital markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has made it mandatory for mutual funds to assign a risk level to schemes, based on certain parameters. SEBI's decision on the "risk-o-meter", which it announced on October 5, 2020, came into effect on January 1. In its circular issued on October 5, the regulator made it *mandatory for mutual fund houses to characterise the risk level of their schemes on a six-stage scale from "Low" to "Very High".* The risk-o-meter must be *evaluated on a monthly basis.* Fund houses are required to disclose the risk-o-meter risk level along with the portfolio disclosure for all their schemes *on their own websites as well as the website of the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) within 10 days of the close of each month. Any change in the risk-o-meter reading with regard to a scheme shall be communicated to the unit-holders of that scheme,* SEBI has said.

How is this different from the older category risk level?

There has been a kind of risk-o-meter for mutual funds since 2015; however, the schemes simply showed the risk level of the category that they belonged to. They did not reflect the riskiness of individual schemes and their respective portfolios. Therefore, all large cap schemes — or any other



category of schemes — across fund houses, carried the same risk level (one of five risks levels) that was assigned by SEBI to the category to which they belonged. This has changed with effect from January 1 this year. Fund houses must now assign a risk level out of six available levels — the “Very High” category is new — after calculating their risk value from their respective portfolios. *Since the risk value and risk levels would be arrived at after taking into account critical parameters such as credit risk, interest rate risk, and liquidity risk in case of a debt scheme, and parameters such as market capitalisation, volatility, and impact cost in case of an equity scheme, industry experts feel that the risk-o-meter will now provide a more objective assessment of the riskiness of a particular scheme to potential investors. Many feel that the earlier category risk-o-meter was in a way misleading — the category risk-o-meter had no connection with the schemes, and two schemes of two different fund houses in the same category would reflect the same risk level, even though they had very different portfolios and riskiness profiles. Now, if in the same category, one scheme is generating a higher return than others, investors will be able to figure out if it is, in fact, taking a higher risk than others for generating these superior returns. In effect, this adds another layer of information to make an investment decision.*

How will the level of risk be assigned?

Which one of the six risk levels — low, low to moderate, moderate, moderately high, high, and very high — would apply, would depend upon the risk value (less than 1 for low risk to more than 5 for very high risk) calculated for the scheme. So if the risk value of a scheme is less than 1, its risk level would be low, and if it is more the 5, the risk will be very high on the risk-o-meter.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

HARNESSING WHAT EINSTEIN CALLED SPOOKY 'ACTION AT A DISTANCE'

In last year's budget session, the Finance Minister of the Government of India proposed that ₹8,000 crore be set aside to develop quantum science and technology. The detailed project report for a National Mission on Quantum Technology and Applications (NM-QTA) has been drawn out and finalised, and in the next couple of months, this mission might get approval. *Recognising the importance of quantum technology, the Department of Science and Technology of the Government of India had initiated a programme called QuEST at a modest 200-crore-rupee budget to explore the possibilities and engage with the researchers.*

Potential applications

"In the international arena, huge investments, both public and private, are carried out to roll out quantum-based products. *Potential applications include secure communication, fast computers that established quantum supremacy, sensors and quantum inspired devices,*" says Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary DST. "The first mover has the advantage in garnering market share and technology supremacy."

Quantum technology

Knowledge of quantum mechanics is an indivisible part of the electronics industry. However, in the twenty-first century, the term 'quantum technology' refers to something even more disruptive and radical. It involves exploiting the properties of individual, or a few fundamental particles, to achieve revolutionary changes in technology. One example is the property known as entanglement. When two objects, say two particles of light, also called photons, are in an entangled state, any changes made to the state of one, for example, its spin, are reflected in the other particle, however far they move from each other without breaking the entanglement. If developed, this property can be used to transmit a message at a very high level of secrecy from one point to another. In June 2020, China demonstrated quantum communication technology using the satellite Micius, by conducting a secret conference between two ground stations about 1,120 km apart. They used the satellite not to transmit the entire communication, but to simultaneously send a pair of secret keys to the two ground stations. Each secret key is one of two strings of entangled photons.

IDENTICAL TWINS AREN'T PERFECT CLONES, STUDY SHOWS

Identical twins are not exactly genetically the same, new research shows. Scientists in Iceland sequenced DNA from 387 pairs of identical twins – those derived from a single fertilized egg – as well as from their parents, children and spouses. That allowed them to find "early mutations that separate identical twins," said Kari Stefansson, a geneticist at the University of Iceland and the company deCODE genetics, and co-author of the paper published Thursday in the journal Nature Genetics.



Genetic mutations

A mutation means an alteration in a sequence of DNA – a tiny change that is not inherently good or bad, but can influence physical features or susceptibility to certain diseases. They can occur when a cell divides and makes a slight error in replicating DNA.

Identical twins

On average, identical twins have 5.2 of these early genetic differences, the researchers found. But about 15% of identical twin pairs have more genetic differences, some of them up to 100, said Stefansson. These differences represent a tiny portion of each twin's genetic code, but they could influence why one twin is taller or why one twin is at greater risk for certain cancers. Previously, many researchers believed that physical differences between identical twins were related mostly to environmental factors, such as nutrition or lifestyle. Jan Dumanski, a geneticist at Uppsala University in Sweden, who was not involved in the new paper, praised it as “a clear and important contribution” to medical research. “The implication is that we have to be very careful when we are using twins as a model” *for teasing apart the influences of nature and nurture*, he said. *Previous studies, including a 2008 paper in The American Journal of Human Genetics, have identified some genetic differences between identical twins.*

Setting the stage

The new study goes beyond earlier work by including DNA of parents, children and spouses of identical twins. That allowed the researchers to pinpoint when genetic mutations occurred in two different kinds of cells – those present in just one individual and those inherited by that person’s children. They also found mutations that occurred before the developing embryo split into two, setting the stage for twins.

DECODING A METEORITE THAT FELL NEAR JAIPUR IN 2017

On June 6, 2017, at around 5 a.m., residents of Mukundpura village near Jaipur saw a bright trail in the sky followed by a thunderous sound. They spotted a burning object with a sulphur smell on the soft agricultural land. The meteorite broke into several fragments, but a pit of about 15 cm in diameter and 10 cm in depth was formed at the impact site. The local police immediately collected it and handed it over to the Geological Survey of India, Kolkata. Now, a new study has shed light on the mineralogy of the meteorite.

Carbonaceous chondrite

The meteorite named Mukundpura CM2 was classified to be a carbonaceous chondrite. “This is a type of stony meteorite, considered the most primitive meteorite and a remnant of the first solid bodies to accrete in the solar system. The composition of carbonaceous chondrites are also similar to the Sun,” explains Dwijesh Ray from the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad in an email to The Hindu. He is the corresponding author of the work recently published in Geochemistry. He adds that *meteorites are broadly classified into three groups – stony (silicate-rich), iron (Fe-Ni alloy), and stony-iron (mixed silicate-iron alloy). Chondrites are silicate-droplet-bearing meteorites, and this Mukundpura chondrite is the fifth carbonaceous meteorite known to fall in India.*



Degrees of alteration

The study revealed that Mukundpura CM2 had experienced varying degrees of alteration during the impact. Some minerals like forsterite and FeO olivine, calcium aluminium rich inclusion (CAI) minerals escaped alteration. Few magnetites, sulphides and calcites were also found. Detailed spectroscopic studies revealed that the meteorite had very high (about 90%) phyllosilicate minerals comprising both magnesium and iron. Further X-ray studies showed it also had aluminium complexes.

Relevance to asteroids

Dr. Ray adds that the results of the Mukundpura CM2 study are relevant to the surface composition of near-Earth asteroids Ryugu and Bennu. *In October 2020, NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission collected samples from Bennu and is expected to return in September 2023. Last month, Japan's Hayabusa-2 mission landed on Earth with samples from Ryugu.* "Infrared spectroscopy results suggest that spectral properties of the surface of these asteroids are consistent with CM carbonaceous meteorites. Therefore, a better understanding of the nature and evolution of such meteorites that have been aqueously altered will help considerably in the interpretation of results of these missions," he writes.

Early solar system

On being asked why it is important to study meteorites, Dr. Ray explains: *"Meteorites are representative of asteroids. Asteroids are the remnant debris of the inner solar system formation process and thus offer the formation history or the building blocks of the planets. Therefore, by studying meteorites in the laboratory and asteroids by exploration and sample return mission we try to reconstruct the activity of early solar system events. Also, asteroids are often rich in volatiles and other minerals and can be exploited for future planetary exploration."*

WHO EXPERTS TO VISIT CHINA TO TRACE ORIGINS OF COVID-19

Chinese authorities said on Monday a team of experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) will arrive in China on Thursday to study the origins of COVID-19. The trip had been scheduled for last week, but some members of the team were at the last minute told the trip would be delayed. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said last week he was "very disappointed" China had not permitted the trip, in rare criticism of Beijing from the agency.

China's authorities, for their part, have suggested they will control how much access international scientists will have and that its scientists will have a say in how the investigations go forward. Scientists in China, who have been working on tracing the origins, have been told that any studies will have to be vetted by the authorities, while some scientists there have put forward studies suggesting the virus was circulating in other countries, such as Italy, before it came to China. Chinese officials and State media have in recent months backed a narrative suggesting COVID-19 may have originated elsewhere but was first 'detected' in Wuhan.



Focus on Wuhan

That is not the consensus of most scientists, and the WHO team is likely to focus on Wuhan in its origin-tracing mission. In November, Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, said it would be "highly speculative" for WHO "to say the disease did not emerge in China". "It is clear from a public health perspective that you start your investigations where the human cases first emerged," he said.

THE THREAT POSED BY AVIAN INFLUENZA

Avian influenza, popularly known as bird flu, has been reported from Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in recent weeks. During the first week of January, reports of unusual deaths of a large number of birds, including wild ones, started coming in from many States, indicating that the virus is being actively transmitted among various bird groups. The two virus types identified so far in the outbreaks — H5N1 and H5N8 — come under the category of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), which is of major concern to those keeping birds, because it leads to disease and death of fowl and causes economic havoc. H5N1 is a known threat to humans as well.

Does bird flu pose a threat to human beings?

The WHO, in its literature on avian influenza, states that *humans can be infected with virus subtypes H5N1, H7N9 and H9N2*. In a recent instance of human infection, *a one-year-old was confirmed to have H5N1* in Lao PDR, thought to have been acquired from backyard birds kept by the family. Infection in other birds in the region was also confirmed. On the H5N1 virus, the WHO says, "Human cases of H5N1 avian influenza occur occasionally, but *it is difficult to transmit the infection from person to person*. When people do become infected, the *mortality rate is about 60%*." The global health body records that since 2003, there have been 862 laboratory-confirmed cases of human infection with H5N1, and 455 deaths have been reported from 17 countries. *On the H5N8 strain, the consensus is that human infection cannot be ruled out, although the likelihood is low*. However, H5N6 infection, of a related clade (a descendant type) has occurred among humans, the WHO says. *One case of the H9N2 strain, in a three-year old girl*, was reported last October from Guangdong, China. It was mildly symptomatic and was detected during routine surveillance for Influenza-like illness. *All viruses in poultry have a public health dimension because they cause severe disease in humans and "have the potential to mutate to increase transmissibility among humans", the WHO adds*. This calls for pandemic preparedness. *Human-to-human transmission is believed to have taken place in some instances as a result of close or prolonged contact, but "there has been no sustained human-to-human transmission identified"*.

Why does bird flu recur? Did the major outbreaks not help form strategies?

It is impossible to eradicate influenza viruses because they persist in a vast reservoir of aquatic birds. The answer to why there are periodic outbreaks that spread to domestic environments may lie in local bird-keeping conditions. After the unprecedented outbreak in 2006 in Asia, in which as many as 258 cases of bird flu in humans had been reported till November 13 of that year, experts who met at an international conference in New Delhi under the aegis of WHO felt that *continuous growth in poultry farming under poor sanitary conditions was sustaining the virus*, with multiple



susceptible species living in the same area. This underscores the importance of prevention and surveillance. *The Delhi Declaration passed at the summit resolved on a common framework for countries to build local strategies, but it did not lay emphasis on preserving the natural environment, which is key to helping wild birds move safely in an unspoilt habitat and stop transmission of viruses to domestic fowl, which threatens humans with infections and a potential pandemic due to mutating viruses.*

What steps can be taken to minimise risk to domestic birds?

Governments lay down biosecurity measures to keep domestic birds safe from transmission by wild or migratory birds and prevent local spread. The protocol involves active surveillance of bird areas to identify emerging outbreaks. On the other hand, *it is wrong and counterproductive, the FAO cautions, to attempt elimination of wild birds near human settlements through hunting, poisoning, and habitat destruction. Such activity disperses wild birds, and the viruses, to new areas. Moreover, hunting of wild birds and the absence of biosecurity measures bring the viruses directly to domestic fowl.* In the wake of an outbreak in 2020, the U.K. issued advice making it legally necessary for bird-keepers in that country to house them in such a manner that they do not come into contact with wild birds. The measures, which have general relevance to farmers everywhere, include housing or netting all captive birds, cleansing and disinfecting clothing, footwear and vehicles, reduction of people's movement in the farm bird areas to reduce contamination, eliminating or reducing contact between captive and wild birds, particularly through feed and water storage, and cleansing and disinfecting production areas. The U.K. uses a checklist approach to help farmers with best practices. In India, *the Central government requires veterinary staff to conduct inspections periodically under the Prevention and Control of Infectious and Contagious Diseases in Animals Act, 2009, to catch any signs of disease among birds and other animals early. However, aquatic wild birds are often found in close proximity to domestic ones in many locations in India, near lakes, dams and reservoirs, making it difficult to achieve segregation. The waterways of Kerala are a good example of this phenomenon.*

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