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INTERNATIONAL

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

Every year on January 27, the United Nations honours the victims of the Holocaust by reaffirming its unwavering commitment to counter anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of intolerance. The date marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau by Soviet troops in 1945 and calls for a sombre reflection on the real dangers of extreme forms of hatred. *“All of us, dying here amidst the icy, arctic indifference of the nations, are forgotten by the world and by life.”* This poignant statement by a camp inmate engraved on the walls of Yad Vashem should make us all sit up and take note that this is not just a forgotten sentiment in the pages of history books. This is a palpable feeling even today. *Time and again, we have seen how hate speech can prompt ordinary people to feed into prejudices and hostilities. Has the eternal promise to “never forget” already been forgotten?*

Hate speech has intensified

Currently, the anonymity of the Internet and increased screen time during the pandemic have intensified hate speech. Greater exposure to hateful discourses online has allowed anti-Semitism and other variants of racism to fester in our societies. According to researchers at Tel Aviv University, the feelings of uncertainty, alienation and dejection brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have aggravated anti-Semitism worldwide by attributing blame to the Jewish people and using them as a scapegoat. In this crucial time that requires unity, the proliferation of anti-Semitic sentiments on social media has revived prejudices and stereotypes, further dividing society. For this reason, understanding the significance of the Holocaust carries great importance today. *The Holocaust was a watershed moment in history as it illuminates the many manifestations of hate and its impact. Therefore, whilst urging member states to strengthen the resilience of people against hateful ideologies, the UN emphasises the use of education as a potent tool to inculcate a culture of peace.* Within the framework of its programmes on the prevention of violent extremism and Global Citizenship Education, UNESCO continually works towards advancing activities to prevent and address tacit and overt forms of anti-Semitism. *However, education must not be viewed as a panacea to cure intolerance. Lessons on how racist ideologies and hate speech inform the development of tragedies like the Holocaust must go beyond textbook learning. This is because, often times, we have seen highly educated people perpetuating hatred.*

Denial and distortion

Holocaust denial and distortion is flourishing online. This is defined by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance as a virulent expression of contemporary anti-Semitism. According to a previously launched report by the World Jewish Congress, more than 100 posts per day on average denied the Holocaust. This brings to light the increasingly growing dangers of online platforms in distorting reality and stoking hatred. *UNESCO’s recently launched campaign called #ProtectTheFacts, developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the UN, and the European Commission, provides a unique opportunity this year to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust by promoting sound policies and practices that raise awareness about Holocaust denial and distortion.* In today’s polarised world, empowering people to question and engage in critical



reflections about the root causes and repercussions of hate crimes is essential. Individuals always have more power than they realise, for better or for worse. Consequently, equipping them to make the rational choice of acting as active bystanders rather than perpetrators is the only way to create peaceful and sustainable societies.

WHY DOES THE US WANT TO PUT AN END TO PRIVATE PRISONS?

US President Joe Biden Tuesday signed executive orders addressing racial injustice, which included ordering the Justice Department to end its dependence on private prisons, signalling a major departure from the policies of former President Donald Trump. Biden, who has said that the US government has to change “its whole approach” on the topic of racial equality, was elected in November after the country witnessed months of protests against systemic racism, sparked by the killing of George Floyd in May. Biden has described the move as “a first step to stop corporations from profiting off of incarceration”.

Mass incarceration in the US and racial bias

The US imprisons more people than any other country in the world– both in terms of incarceration per capita as well as the total number of people put in prison. According to a 2019 PBS documentary, of the roughly 1 crore people imprisoned worldwide, more than 20 lakh are in the US. The country incarcerates 655 people per 1 lakh residents– higher than El Salvador (590), Turkmenistan (552) and Thailand (541). The US first began to see its prison population soar in the 1980s at the height of the “war on drugs”, the so-called US government initiative aimed at tackling the illicit narcotics trade. These policies, which were continued by both Democratic and Republican administrations in the following years, resulted in significantly harsher sentences for drug offences, and disproportionately targeted African American communities. The country’s prison population, which had remained below 5 lakh for decades until the 1980s, shot up to over 20 lakh in the 2000s. According to The Sentencing Project, more than 60% of people in US prisons today are people of colour, and Black men are six times more likely to be imprisoned as white men, with Hispanic men being 2.7 times as likely.

Private prisons– pros and cons

As the rate of incarceration skyrocketed in the 1980s, state, local and federal governments were unable to manage the burden on their prison facilities. When these governments roped in the private sector to meet the new demands, it led to the expansion of what is today known as the “prison-industrial complex”. Among the major beneficiaries of this phenomenon were private companies that came to own or manage prisons, starting in 1984 when the first such for-profit facility opened at the state level in Tennessee. Private companies argued that compared to the government, they could use newer construction designs and surveillance technologies to operate larger prisons with lesser employees, thus saving taxpayer money. According to a 2018 report in The Week, private prisons went to become a \$5 billion industry, incarcerating about 9% of all US prisoners combined. Two companies today dominate the market– CoreCivic and Geo Group– both of whom have provided monetary support to former President Trump. Critics, however, questioned the benefits of allowing private players to run prison facilities, claiming that the motive of these companies was not to rehabilitate their prisoners, but to ensure higher profits. It has been alleged that because they are answerable to shareholders and not the public, such



companies have a greater incentive at keeping more people locked up in order to get future contracts from the government.

National level politics

In 2016, the US Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General published a scathing report about private prisons, finding that private prisons at the federal level had more security violations per inmate compared to public prisons, with twice as many inmate-on-inmate assaults and 28% more inmate-on-staff assaults. This led the Obama administration to announce that the federal government would be phasing out private prisons, in line with sentencing-reform policies that enjoyed support from both Democrats and Republicans. This changed after the election of Trump, who had campaigned as a self-professed "law and order" candidate. After taking office, his administration reversed the Obama-era policies.

What Biden has done

In his executive order signed on Tuesday, Biden has directed the attorney general to not renew contracts between the Justice Department and privately-run criminal detention facilities, thus returning the Department to the same position it had in 2016 at the end of the Obama administration, when Biden was Vice President. Currently, the US has 1.52 lakh people serving federal sentences (as opposed to those in state and local prisons), of whom 14,000 (around 9%) are placed in privately managed facilities, according to an Associated Press report. Biden's executive order will apply to these inmates, and not to those in state and local privately-run prisons. The order also applies only to prisons, and not to privately-run federal detention centres, which are used to hold up thousands of undocumented immigrants. Biden is now under pressure to put an end to these for-profit immigrant detention facilities. Experts say this could be a tougher decision to enforce, given that these facilities make up the majority of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) detention system.

CAN THE BIDEN-HARRIS TEAM SAVE THE PLANET? (SUJATHA BYRAVAN - SCIENTIST WHO STUDIES SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT. SUDHIR CHELLA RAJAN - AUTHOR OF 'A SOCIAL THEORY OF CORRUPTION')

After four years of egregious anti-environmental policies during the Trump years, climate change activists and the general public can breathe a sigh of relief now that the Biden-Harris team has taken office in the White House. *The new administration has been quick to rejoin the Paris Agreement on its very first day in office. A return to the Obama era, however, would be tragic if that simply means a continuation of the U.S. bullying poor nations to impose harsh restrictions on their carbon emissions without financial and technical support, protecting corporate interests at the expense of the global commons, and failing to acknowledge its own massive contribution to the climate crisis.* Still, the U.S. was once at the forefront of generating widespread awareness on climate change. Its scientists and political leadership were keen to take ambitious strides to address the challenge. What changed in the intervening years?



A brief history

In 1957, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, chaired by MIT scientist Thomas F. Malone, launched its First General Report on Climatology addressed to the Chief of the Weather Bureau, stating: "In consuming our fossil fuels at a prodigious rate, our civilization is conducting a grandiose scientific experiment". The next year, Charles Keeling, along with his mentors Harry Wexler and Roger Revelle, began the now famous measurements of atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide at *Mauna Loa in Hawaii, producing reliable evidence of the relentless rise in anthropogenic greenhouse gases over subsequent decades.* In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson's Science Advisory Committee produced a report entitled "*Restoring the Quality of our Environment*", which pointed to rising concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere, attributed them principally to the burning of fossil fuels, and warned that these levels could increase further by 25% by 2000, leading to a 0.6°C to 4°C rise in average global temperature, depending on the role of other factors. *Global average temperature was already about half a degree warmer than at the end of the 19th century and the evidence was clear that mining vast quantities of fossil fuels from the earth and burning them in engines was responsible.* By the 1970s, human-induced climate change was a widespread area of concern among weather and climate scientists. *In 1979, a report of the National Research Council, commissioned by President Jimmy Carter and chaired by Jule Charney from the University of California, Los Angeles, noted that a doubling of atmospheric CO₂ over pre-industrial levels could lead to global warming of about 3°C.* A year earlier, the U.S. Congress passed the National Climate Program Act "to enable the United States and other nations to understand and respond to natural and man-induced climate processes and their implications". Funding for the programme was ambitious, amounting to over \$120 million for the first two years.

Corporate lobbies

The increased scientific and Congressional interest in addressing climate change was matched by mounting alarm within the fossil fuel industry. Recently exposed documents and internal memos show that major oil companies like Exxon and Shell organised themselves strategically to raise a concerted attack on climate science. The 1970s was characterised by the energy crisis, associated with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries oil embargo, but the roles played by American banks, oil companies and dollar hegemony in precipitating the crisis are only now being unravelled. That crisis resulted in "petro-dollars" consolidating the strength of the fossil fuel industry and financial institutions for at least the next two decades. Much of this clout was used to build a mammoth campaign against environmental action, particularly around climate change. On June 24, 1988, headlines on The New York Times front page read, "Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate." In his testimony, the Director of NASA's Institute for Space Studies, James Hansen, said humans had transformed global climate for decades to come. The same year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established by the United Nations to provide the public scientific information on climate change. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to address climate change was signed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The Second Assessment Report of the IPCC (1995) reaffirmed a "discernible human influence on global climate". Frederick Seitz, past President of the National Academy of Sciences, denounced the report publicly. Seitz was the founding chair of the George C. Marshall Institute, a tobacco industry consultant, and also a prominent "sceptic" on global warming. Other conservative organisations were simultaneously working to muddy the facts, pointing at red herrings in the science. All had



direct or indirect links to the fossil fuel industry. Under intense lobbying by the industry-sponsored Global Climate Information Project, which recruited labour unions of miners and automobile workers, the U.S. Senate passed the Byrd-Hagel Resolution unanimously in July 1997. The Senate resolved that the U.S. should not sign a climate treaty to limit its emissions without developing countries agreeing to the same limits. This effectively prohibited the U.S. from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, which placed limits on the growth of emissions from rich countries.

Various policies

In the subsequent two decades, the Koch Family Foundation alone spent \$125 million to finance nearly 100 groups that attacked climate science and policies. Still, the momentum generated by the growing movement of scientists, activists and youth is beginning to have some effects. The urgency is compelling. Keeling curve emissions are more than 410 ppm in 2020, compared to 313 ppm when measurements began in 1958. The Green New Deal offers a framework that needs further strengthening. If John Kerry, Special Envoy for Climate, integrates U.S. foreign aid or other means of support with climate targets by other countries, including China and India, then the U.S. is merely going back to business as usual. While the U.S.'s re-entry into the Paris Agreement may be by the stroke of a pen, regaining political legitimacy on climate requires the government to take responsibility in causing and aggravating the global climate crisis; commit to technology and funds for poorer countries; take on bigger emission targets; not bend over for the fossil fuel lobby which funds Democrats and Republicans; clean up the role of lobbyists in climate regulatory and policy organisations within the U.S.; and recognise and break up elite networks that have benefited by sustaining climate myths.

U.S. & CLIMATE ACTION

Joe Biden assumed office as President of the United States on January 20, 2021, and among the first orders he signed was one to restore America's participation in the United Nations Paris Agreement on climate change. His decision on America's return will take effect on February 19, which would be 107 days after its withdrawal under the Donald Trump administration became formal on November 4, 2020. Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. played an active role in climate negotiations, although the Copenhagen UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference in 2009 failed to produce a consensus, and member-countries only acknowledged the science, without committing themselves to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions-reduction targets. By 2015, the negotiations progressed with the Obama administration engaging in diplomacy, resulting in the Paris Agreement premised on voluntary targets for national emissions cuts. On the long road to Paris, the U.S., under George W. Bush, had pulled out of the previous pact, the Kyoto Protocol, in 2001.

What changes did the Trump administration make on climate?

The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement meant that the U.S. was no longer bound by its national pledge made under the pact: to achieve an economy-wide reduction of its GHG emissions by 26%-28% below the 2005 level in 2025 and to make best efforts to reduce emissions. America also stopped its contribution to the UN's Green Climate Fund, to which it had pledged \$3 billion, after transferring an estimated \$1 billion. On the contrary, the Trump regime focused on, among other things, relaxing controls on emissions from fossil fuel-based industries, diluting standards on air



quality and vehicular emissions, hydrofluorocarbon leaking and venting from air-conditioning systems, loosening the way the government calculated the social cost of carbon, restraining individual States such as California from setting higher standards, revoking protection for natural habitats, including the Arctic sought by the oil and gas industry, and for individual wildlife species. In all, more than 100 environmental rules were tinkered with by the administration, with some rule reversals remaining in process when the presidential election took place, and others taken to court. The ability of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to enforce the law was weakened, and the scientist leading the production of the National Climate Assessment, Michael Kuperberg, was replaced just after it became clear that Mr. Trump was losing the election. The Clean Power Plan, a major provision from the Obama-era to cut power sector emissions by 32% over 2005 levels by 2030, was initially replaced with the Affordable Clean Energy (ACE) rule, with a reduction effect of only 0.7%, according to an estimate by Harvard Law School. In the final days of the Trump presidency, however, the ACE rule was struck down by a court, giving Mr. Biden the freedom to reformulate a strong rule.

What areas will Mr. Biden focus on to cut emissions?

The U.S. accounts for 15% of global GHG emissions, but it is the biggest legacy contributor of atmosphere-warming gases. Transport (28%) and power (27%) are the two biggest national sectors contributing to GHG emissions, followed by industry (22%) and agriculture (10%), according to data published by the EPA in 2020. Commercial and residential emissions together make up only 13%. Significantly, 10% of U.S. emissions are methane, which has a greater warming effect than CO₂, and 81% is carbon dioxide. The rest is made up of nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases. Mr. Biden, who has formed a high-powered team including special presidential envoy for climate, John Kerry, to lead clean development, has placed climate change front and centre among his priorities. He has promised an “enforcement mechanism to achieve net-zero emissions no later than 2050”, including a target no later than the end of his term in 2025, aided by a planned federal investment that will total \$1.7 trillion over ten years, besides private investments. The plan revolves around 10 million well-paying clean energy jobs with a focus on solar and wind power, close linkages between university research and the private sector modelled on the post-World War II economy, active support for carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and a renaissance in green transport that includes the “second great railroad revolution” in a country that starved the railways to promote cars and road freight.

What does Mr. Biden’s policy mean for other countries?

In his Plan for Climate Change and Environmental Justice released before the election, Mr. Biden says America will strongly support multilateralism again, but also call for accountability from other countries, including the top emitter, China, on GHG emissions. Nations that default could face carbon adjustment fees or quotas. This year’s UN climate conference in Glasgow will see the new administration engaging UNFCCC member-nations to raise global ambition.

WHY JOE BIDEN’S PRESIDENCY COULD BE CRITICAL FOR A 60,000-YEAR-OLD UNDERWATER FOREST

Among the petitions before United States President Joe Biden from environmentalists is one to save a *unique forest off the coast of Alabama. Unique because the entire forest is underwater — 10*

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



fathoms (60 feet) deep — and made up of the remains of cypress trees that grew in the ice age, 60,000 years ago, when prehistoric humans were just starting to move out of Africa. The forest was submerged in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico as sea levels rose, and remained entombed in thick layers of sediment, mud and sand for millennia. The sediments prevented oxygen from decomposing the stumps, barks and other remnants of the forest. The forest was discovered only after Hurricane Ivan hit the Gulf Coast in 2004 and unleashed giant waves that removed the sediments. Divers thereafter saw a perfectly preserved cypress forest that was unlike anything else on earth. “It is a relic of eons past...from a time long before man even dreamt of sailing ships. You can even trace the path of an ancient river that once wove through the forest when it was dry land,” says a 2017 documentary by environmental journalist Ben Raines, titled ‘The Underwater Forest’.

What is the threat

*“The site is at risk from salvage companies seeking to dig up the ancient logs and sell them,” Alabama-based AL.com wrote on Facebook in January 2019 while promoting an online campaign to have the forest declared a marine sanctuary. Bradley Byrne, who served as the US Representative for Alabama’s 1st congressional district from 2014 to 2021, told AL.com that a furniture company had applied for a permit to excavate the forest site for the ancient, preserved timbers. On October 27, 2020, Representative Byrne introduced in Congress *The Alabama Underwater Forest National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act*, which would allow tourists, fisherfolk and research groups to visit the site, but not enterprises interested in harvesting it for peat and timber, or carrying out other disruptive activities. The Bill was referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources. Byrne’s fourth term in Congress ended on January 3, and he has since been replaced in Congress by fellow Republican Jerry Carl. “I am very hopeful the next Congress will (pass the Bill),” Rep. Byrne told NBC.*

Prospects for science

In December 2019, a team of scientists from North eastern University and the University of Utah went on an expedition into the “ancient submarine forest”. The expedition was funded by the Office of Ocean Exploration and Research (OER) at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a scientific agency under the US Department of Commerce. After the dive, the scientists took samples of wood back to the laboratory and found more than 300 animals in them. “The team’s focus is on bacteria found in wood-eating ‘shipworms’, a type of clam (teredinid bivalve). These ‘termites of the sea’ convert wood into animal tissue, forming the base of a food chain that can support a rich diversity of fish, invertebrates, and microorganisms in communities that resemble thriving coral reefs,” an August-December 2020 NOAA report (‘Bioprospecting for Industrial Enzymes and Drug Compounds in an Ancient Submarine Forest’) said. The NOAA report underlined the underwater forest’s massive potential to “harbour new compounds for medicine and biotechnology”. It said: “Within 100-200 prepared culture plates, the team identified approximately 100 strains of bacteria, many of which are novel and 12 of which are already undergoing DNA sequencing for further study of their identity and their biosynthetic potential to make new drugs. Additionally, future analyses on the collected samples will allow researchers to identify any analgesic and antimicrobial compounds and hydrolytic enzymes capable of degrading the components of wood. Such enzymes have broad application in production of pulp, paper, textiles, food, animal feeds, fine chemicals, and renewable fuels.” NOAA added that “the scientists



have so far sampled only a tiny fraction of the ancient forest site”, and some “profound changes” were expected as their work progressed.

Biden and the environment

The new US President has promised to make climate change and the environment priorities for his administration alongside tackling racism, inequality and Covid-19. In Biden’s first acts in office, the US rejoined the Paris climate agreement, and revoked the Keystone XL oil pipeline’s federal permit that environmentalists considered a threat to ecosystems, climate, and drinking water, among others. President Biden has appointed Debra Haaland as head of the Department of the Interior, which is responsible for the land and natural resources of the US. Haaland, the first Native American cabinet secretary in US history (she is an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo, a federally recognised tribe of Native American people), is known for her concerns towards climate change and tribal populations. “I’ll be fierce for all of us, for our planet, and all of our protected land,” she said in her acceptance speech. Advocates of the underwater forest are looking at the new administration now.

ON IRAN, IT IS DECISION TIME FOR BIDEN (MOHAMMED AYOUB - UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY)

U.S. President Joe Biden faces a number of challenges at home and abroad. In the foreign policy arena, relations with China and Russia pose the most intractable problems, as does the estrangement of key European allies who former U.S. President Donald Trump alienated by his isolationist rhetoric and gratuitous insults. However, the most pressing issue facing the Biden administration is America’s relations with Iran given the concern that the present scenario may upend Washington’s non-proliferation strategy and increase tensions in the energy-rich Gulf region. Several of Mr. Biden’s top appointees in the foreign policy and security arenas were involved in the negotiations with Iran that led to the nuclear deal of 2015. They include Wendy Sherman, the original deal’s primary negotiator, who has been nominated Deputy Secretary of State, and William Burns, who was involved in the early stages of forging the Iran nuclear deal, as head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Trump action, Iran reaction

In May 2018, Mr. Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — reached by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany and the European Union with Iran — and re-imposed sanctions, especially on shipment of Iranian oil, to put ‘maximum pressure’ on Tehran to force it to accept America’s maximalist demands that went far beyond the agreement. The Trump administration argued that the 15-year time limit on Iran’s nuclear programme was insufficient and that Tehran must renounce in perpetuity its right to enrich uranium. Washington also demanded that a moratorium be imposed on Iran’s ballistic missile programme and that Tehran withdraws its support to regional allies and proxies opposed to U.S. policies. After waiting a year for the European signatories of the JCPOA to persuade Washington to return to the agreement, Iran decided in 2019 to breach the limit for uranium enrichment imposed by the JCPOA. It also began increasing its stockpile of enriched uranium beyond the amount permitted under the agreement. In a confidential document, the

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International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) estimated that as of November 2, 2020, Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium had reached more than 2,442 kilograms, eight times the limit permitted by the JCPOA. These developments indicated that Mr. Trump's policy of exerting maximum pressure had produced the exact opposite result, bringing Iran closer to weaponisation. This outcome has generated additional pressure on the Biden administration to reverse course and bring Tehran into compliance with the JCPOA by renewing America's commitment to the agreement and lifting sanctions.

Biden strategy, complexities

Mr. Biden's Press Secretary, Jen Psaki, in her very first press conference, clearly stated that the new administration intends to constrain Iran through diplomacy, not sanctions, and reaffirmed Mr. Biden's position that he would be willing to return to the JCPOA if Tehran does the same. On its part, the Iranian regime has signalled that it is willing to honour the agreement and reverse the steps undertaken recently if the U.S. withdraws all sanctions imposed on Tehran by the Trump administration. Hours before Mr. Biden's inauguration, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif reiterated Iran's readiness to return to the JCPOA, but went on to say: "We are not in a hurry...If they lift the sanctions and comply with their obligations, we will also fulfil our obligations." However, a return to the JCPOA is not as simple as it sounds, as there is wide divergence between Washington's expectations and those harboured by Tehran. The U.S. sees a return to the JCPOA as the first step towards curbing Iran's missile programme as well as its regional ambitions that clash with those of the U.S. and its allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Iran considers the JCPOA as a stand-alone agreement covering only Iran's nuclear programme. Mr. Zarif told journalists on the day of Mr. Biden's inauguration that subjects such as Iran's missile programme and its regional policy were extraneous issues and should not be linked to the nuclear deal. Furthermore, opinions in both Washington and Tehran have hardened over the past two years. The consensus in the U.S. has shifted to a much more uncompromising position because of Iran's refusal to change the course of its West Asian policy and its deleterious consequences for U.S. interests. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has trained proxy militias that have played a major role in helping the Assad regime in Syria to turn the tide of war against U.S.-supported opposition forces. Tehran continues to finance and arm the fiercely anti-Israeli Lebanese Hezbollah and is the principal supporter of the Houthis in Yemen who have not only fought Saudi Arabia to a standstill but also attacked major Saudi oil facilities with Iranian-supplied drones and missiles. It also continues to train and arm Shia militias in Iraq and to checkmate American policies in that country.

Boost to hardliners

At the same time, the U.S. decision to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA has played into the hands of the Iranian hardliners and discredited those such as Mr. Zarif and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani who had argued in favour of the JCPOA, and by implication improved relations with the U.S. The Rouhani government signed the JCPOA in 2015 with the reluctant endorsement of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has become far more sceptical now after the unilateral re-imposition of stringent sanctions by the Trump administration. This has reinforced his belief that America's principal goal is regime change in Tehran. Moreover, Mr. Rouhani is a lame duck President. Under Iranian laws he cannot run again when presidential elections are held in June 2021 because he has already served two terms. The recent parliamentary elections have



resulted in the domination of the legislature by the hardline conservative faction known as the 'principlists'. It is almost certain that the next President will belong to the same grouping unless an agreement is reached with the U.S. about lifting economic sanctions and returning to JCPOA, thus vindicating Mr. Rouhani's moderate position. A new radical Iranian dispensation is unlikely to accept a mere return to the original JCPOA and will insist on a foolproof clause that will preclude a repetition of the U.S.'s unilateral withdrawal. Even if the Biden and Rouhani administrations come to an understanding about returning to the JCPOA, the hardliners who dominate the Iranian Parliament are likely to insist that the renewed agreement must include a clause that would preclude a signatory from unilaterally abandoning the JCPOA. This was foreshadowed in the legislation passed by the Iranian Parliament in November and approved by Iran's Guardian Council watchdog body in December 2020 that requires the government to boost uranium enrichment and limit United Nations inspections if sanctions are not removed by February 2021.

Within the U.S.

One can also expect a great deal of opposition in the U.S. Congress, particularly in the delicately balanced Senate, to a return to the JCPOA without the imposition of some restraint on Iran's ballistic missile programme and perceptible indication of a change in its adversarial policy in West Asia. The clearly expressed opposition of America's leading regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, who consider Iran to be their principal antagonist, will add to the constraints on the Biden administration about re-engaging with Iran on the nuclear issue and removing sanctions imposed in 2018. It is decision time for the Biden administration. Unless it is able to overcome the multiple hurdles in its path and reach an agreement with Iran in the next couple of months, it could lead to the installation of a more hardline administration in Tehran in June, thus ensuring that U.S.-Iran relations will be mired in hostility well into the future and will continue contributing hugely to instability in West Asia.

U.S. ANNOUNCES RESTORATION OF RELATIONS WITH PALESTINIANS

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration announced Tuesday it was restoring relations with the Palestinians and renewing aid to Palestinian refugees, a reversal of the Donald Trump administration's cutoff and a key element of its new support for a two-state solution to the decades-old conflict agreed to by Israelis and Palestinians. Acting U.S. Ambassador Richard Mills made the announcement of Mr. Biden's new approach to a high-level Security Council meeting, saying the new U.S. administration believes this "remains the best way to ensure Israel's future as a democratic and Jewish state and the Palestinians' legitimate aspirations for a State of their own and to live with dignity and security." "In order to advance these objectives the Biden administration will restore credible U.S. engagement with Palestinians as well as Israelis," Mr. Mills said. "This will involve renewing U.S. relations with the Palestinian leadership and Palestinian people," he said.

U.S. VOWS SUPPORT TO TAIWAN AS CHINESE INCURSIONS ENTER DAY 2

A total of 15 Chinese aircraft, including 12 fighter jets, entered the southwestern corner of Taiwan's air defence identification zone on Sunday, the island's Defence Ministry said, the second day of incursions by China. *A map provided by the Ministry showed the Chinese aircraft again flew*



in between the southern part of Taiwan and the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands in the South China Sea.

'Intimidation' bid

The U.S. State Department has said it was concerned by China's "pattern of ongoing attempts to intimidate its neighbours, including Taiwan." "We urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically elected representatives," Ned Price, a spokesman for the department, said in the statement. The State Department statement said Washington will continue to deepen ties with Taiwan and ensure its defence from Chinese threats, while supporting a peaceful resolution of issues between the sides. Meanwhile, a U.S. aircraft carrier group led by the USS Theodore Roosevelt has entered the South China Sea "to ensure freedom of the seas, build partnerships that foster maritime security", the U.S. military said on Sunday. Taiwan's Defense Ministry said China on Saturday sent eight bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons and four fighter jets into its air defence identification zone just southwest of the island. The Ministry said China on Sunday sent another 15 military aircraft of various types into the same area.

Missiles deployed

The Ministry said Taiwan responded by scrambling fighters, broadcasting warnings by radio and "deploying air defence missile systems to monitor the activity." There was no immediate Chinese response. The overflights were part of a long-standing pattern of incursions aimed at pressuring the government of President Tsai Ing-wen into caving to Beijing's demand that she recognise Taiwan as a part of Chinese territory. This comes on the heels of U.S. President Joe Biden's inauguration, emphasising the island's enduring position amidst a host of divisive issues between Beijing and Washington that also include human rights, trade disputes and, most recently, questions about China's initial response to the pandemic.

HOW CHINA MIGHT TACKLE THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY (JABIN T. JACOB - ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND GOVERNANCE STUDIES, SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY, UTTAR PRADESH)

With a new administration taking over in the U.S., *how can we expect China to deal with the legacy of hardline China policies left behind by former President Donald Trump?* One, *Beijing may try deflection. It may talk about being misunderstood and of overriding "common interests", as Foreign Minister Wang Yi did in December, or spout vague inanities such as "cooperative competition", as former Chinese diplomat Fu Ying did in November 2020 in The New York Times.* Two, *since the paramount concerns for American leaders have usually been economic ones – jobs, exports and competitiveness, among other things – there could be a degree of appeasement in the form of limited or selective access for American agricultural produce and private enterprises.* Three, *since climate change is a priority for the Democrats – as the appointment of John Kerry as Special Presidential Envoy For Climate suggests – there will be plenty of Chinese 'concessions' on this front too. But these will inevitably be linked to American concessions on other fronts potentially driving a wedge between the principal actors in the U.S. national security establishment on China policy.* Four, *ideological competition is now a feature of Chinese foreign policy and it will be impossible for the Communist Party to not also attack the U.S. directly for faults both real and imagined. On the eve of the Biden*

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inauguration, the Chinese Foreign Ministry repeated the allegation that the U.S. was the source of the novel coronavirus. The announcement of sanctions against senior Trump administration officials later was another sign of an increasingly no-holds-barred approach to the U.S. Five, and related, we can expect China to continue to highlight and exaggerate domestic dynamics in the U.S. as a way of explaining away U.S.-China tensions as well as other American problems around the world. The attempt is to showcase China's own political system in a positive light while criticising American-style democracy as somehow flawed or in decline. As Yuan Peng, head of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, declared, "The United States is sick, China has stabilized, and the world has changed". Six, as China has increasingly done in recent years – from New Zealand to Nepal – it will more confidently interfere in U.S. domestic politics. Last year, U.S. officials claimed that China had attempted to interfere in elections. Seven, China will sustain pressure against American allies and partners everywhere – note, for instance, Beijing's provocations against Japan in the East China Sea and economic coercion against Australia. Elsewhere, China's conclusion of a bilateral investment treaty with the European Union on the eve of the Biden presidency is a classic divide-and-rule tactic against the West. Beijing has been helped along by the unilateralism and walking out of multilateral regimes of the Trump administration, all of which President Joe Biden will be hard pressed to repair. Finally, China will continue to suborn foreign private enterprises to do its will. The inability of American and other foreign enterprises to acknowledge, let alone take a stand against, the oppression of China's Uyghur minority should be a concern for the Biden administration as too the reality that most Western and Japanese enterprises remain reluctant to leave China despite their governments asking them to. Under Mr. Biden, American pressure on China's domestic political and economic system and on its external policies is not going to be particularly unexpected for the Chinese leadership. But he will also face a China that believes increasingly in taking the fight to the opposition.

FOR ONE AND ALL

In 2017, China's President Xi Jinping became the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of China to attend the World Economic Forum at Davos, a gathering synonymous with global capitalism. He delivered a robust defence of globalisation, three days before newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump was set to be sworn in, and six months after the Brexit vote in the U.K. On January 25, Mr. Xi returned to the Davos platform, albeit virtually. His speech carried many of the similar themes from four years ago, calling for global unity, closer coordination on macroeconomic policy, and more equitable growth. It did also carry two messages that appeared to be aimed at Washington, a reflection of four turbulent years of a tariff and technology war between the world's two biggest economies. "Each country is unique with its own history, culture and social system, and none is superior to the other," he said. "Difference in itself is no cause for alarm. What does ring the alarm is arrogance, prejudice and hatred; it is the attempt to impose hierarchy on human civilisation or to force one's own history, culture and social system upon others." He also hit out at attempts "to build small circles or start a new Cold War, to reject, threaten or intimidate others, to wilfully impose decoupling, supply disruption or sanctions" and said a "misguided approach of antagonism and confrontation, be it in the form of cold war, hot war, trade war or tech war, would eventually hurt all countries' interests." If Mr. Xi's first Davos speech found a broadly receptive audience amid a crisis in capitalism, with the rise of populism in the West creating the space for China to try and fill a void in global economic leadership, China will find a harder sell four years on. His message "to stay committed to international law and international rules instead of seeking one's own

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supremacy” and for “*the strong [to] not bully the weak*” will appear especially jarring to those in China’s neighbourhood. Indeed, only the day before the speech, military commanders from India and China spent over 16 hours in talks, the latest unsuccessful attempt to disengage two forces that have been eyeball-to-eyeball for months, after China’s unprecedented military mobilisation across the LAC starting in May. It is not only India that is dealing with a harder Chinese military posture in the midst of a global pandemic.

The Chinese leader also reaffirmed Beijing’s ambitious climate pledges to slash carbon emissions by 65% by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 — both significant commitments as China emits a quarter of the world’s greenhouse gases. “Meeting these targets will require tremendous hard work from China. But we believe that when the interests of the entire humanity are at stake, China must step forward, take action and get the job done,” he said. In virtual format because of the pandemic, this week’s event is headlined: “A Crucial Year to Rebuild Trust.” The big names from Europe will be German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who heads the European Union executive.

Shift to Singapore

U.S. President Joe Biden will not appear at Davos. John Kerry, the special climate envoy, will be attending the virtual event. Following the first virtual session, Davos will move in May to Singapore, far from the luxury Swiss ski resort where it has taken place since it was launched in 1971, the brainchild of German professor Klaus Schwab. The stated reason for the change is health and safety, as the city-state has recorded just 29 COVID-19 deaths. But there is also an economic background to the move underscored by French insurance-credit group Euler Hermes, who said in a study this month that the “*world’s economic centre of gravity*” (WECCG) *has been moving towards Asia since 2002. Booking growth of 2.3% last year while other major economies slumped, China is now on course to equal the size of the U.S. economy in 2030, two years earlier than the analysts predicted before the pandemic. “The COVID-19 crisis could accelerate the shifting global balance towards Asia,” Euler Hermes said.*

WHAT IS THE GREAT RESET AND WHY IS IT CONTROVERSIAL

The Great Reset is an initiative by the World Economic Forum. It has been conceptualised by the founder and executive chairman of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, and has evolved over the last few years. It is based on the assessment that the world economy is in deep trouble. Schwab has argued that the situation has been made a lot worse by many factors, including the pandemic’s devastating effects on global society, the unfolding technological revolution, and the consequences of climate change. *Schwab demands that “the world must act jointly and swiftly to revamp all aspects of our societies and economies, from education to social contracts and working conditions. Every country, from the United States to China, must participate, and every industry, from oil and gas to tech, must be transformed. In short, we need a ‘Great Reset’ of capitalism.”* The agenda of The Great Reset touches on many key issues facing the world, according to C Raja Mohan, director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express. Three of them stand out. First is the *question of reforming capitalism. Davos has been at the forefront of calling for “stakeholder capitalism” that looks beyond the traditional corporate focus on maximising profit for shareholders. Second, Davos is certainly right to focus on the deepening climate crisis. Climate sceptics have been ousted from Washington*

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and President Biden has rejoined the 2015 Paris accord on mitigating climate change. Third is the growing difficulty of global cooperation that Davos wants to promote. The era of great power harmony that accompanied the liberalisation of the global economy at the turn of the 1990s has yielded place to intense contestation. The contestation is not just political but increasingly economic and technological. But whether it is a clever gimmick or a serious attempt to produce structural changes in the organisation of global capitalism, the initiative has set off furious conspiracy theories on the right and contemptuous dismissal from the left. Mohan explains why this is so. "The right sees the WEF arguments about restructuring the global economy as a dangerous attempt to impose 'socialism' and dismantle the traditional society, or what remains of it. The left scoffs at the Davos Man's talk on the crisis of capitalism. It points to the complicity of the Davos forum in promoting policies that have brought the world to the current impasse and question its capacity to produce solutions," writes Mohan.

AS PANDEMIC RAGES ON, ITALY PM CONTE QUILTS

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte resigned on Tuesday in the hope of forming a new government after weeks of turmoil in his ruling coalition, leaving Italy rudderless as it battles the deadly coronavirus pandemic. *He tendered his resignation to President Sergio Mattarella, the ultimate arbiter of Italian political crises, who invited him to stay on in a caretaker capacity pending discussions on what happens next.* The uneasy coalition that has led Italy since September 2019 was fatally weakened earlier this month by the withdrawal of former premier Matteo Renzi's small but crucial Italia Viva party. *Ahead of a key vote in Parliament this week that he looked set to lose, Mr. Conte informed his Cabinet on Tuesday that he would quit in what supporters said was a move to form a new government.* After the meeting with Mr. Mattarella, a spokesman for the President said he *"reserves the right to decide (what to do next) and invited the government to stay in office in a caretaker capacity"*. Mr. Mattarella will open discussions with party leaders on Wednesday afternoon. Italy was the first European country to face the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic and has since suffered badly, with the economy plunged into recession and deaths still rising by around 400 a day. Parts of the country remain under partial lockdown, the vaccination programme has slowed and a deadline is looming to agree plans to spend billions of euros in European Union recovery funds.

Seeking a new mandate

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, one of the leaders of the populist Five Star Movement (M5S), the largest in Parliament, earlier said it was time to rally around Mr. Conte. "The country is going through one of its worst ever periods due to the pandemic," he tweeted. "Now we need unity, we all have to gather around Giuseppe Conte." Mr. Conte's government had been on the verge of collapse since Mr. Renzi pulled out on January 13 in a row over the premier's handling of the pandemic. The Prime Minister survived a vote of confidence in Parliament last week but failed to secure an overall majority in the upper house, the Senate. "Conte's calculation is that by moving early, and thereby avoiding a humiliating defeat in the Senate later this week, he would increase his chances of securing a mandate from Mattarella to form a new government," noted Wolfango Piccoli of the Teneo consultancy. Democratic Party (PD), the other main partner in the coalition, is so far is backing Mr. Conte.



A CHINK IN KREMLIN'S ARMOUR (GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM - DIRECTOR - STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, AGNOSHIN TECCHNOLOGIES)

The violent demonstrations last weekend in more than 100 cities across Russia in support of opposition politician Alexei Navalny were unlike any of the protests in the country under President Vladimir Putin's rule, say commentators. The rallies, in which thousands have been detained, have been compared with several weekends of public demonstrations since August in neighbouring Belarus calling for the president to resign. There is also a growing sense that the unrest in Russia represents as much support for the 44-year-old anti-corruption crusader as it does opposition to the ruling regime, stemming from falling living standards, compounded by the pandemic. Mr. Navalny himself has been held in detention since his return from Germany on January 17 after recovering from a nerve agent attack that took place last August. If the charges against him are confirmed by the Kremlin-backed judiciary, he could be incarcerated for years.

Reactions from the West

Western governments, which are at pains to formulate a unified position under the new U.S. administration, something that had proved elusive during the Trump presidency, have called for tough measures against Moscow. The U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, is to probe the chemical weapon attack on Mr. Navalny. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has termed Moscow's crackdown on Mr. Navalny and the protesters as "a violation of human rights". The European Union (EU)'s stance vis-à-vis Russia continues to reflect deep divisions that characterised its response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Ukraine. Polish President Andrzej Duda deployed tough language as he called for sanctions against Russia's state-owned gas giant Gazprom. He even said that the visit of EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, to the country next month would be a "mistake". Such a hard stance would be viewed in EU capitals as no more than echoing Warsaw's historic animosity with Moscow. On the contrary, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's approach has reflected a concern for stability on the bloc's eastern flanks arising from Russia's regional ambitions, without jeopardising its energy dependence on Moscow. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is doing everything to appear not unduly concerned over the unrest. Moscow was unfazed when there was large-scale opposition to Mr. Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, and when opposition candidates were banned from the 2019 elections for the Moscow City Duma.

A stronger opposition

The crackdown on the opposition is likely to intensify at least until parliamentary elections later this year. President Putin's ratings have steadily dipped in opinion polls, as has support for his United Russia party. This risks his present supermajority in the Duma. The regime has aptly picked another target, namely Mr. Navalny's so-called 'smart voting' initiative, which encourages the electorate to exercise their right to vote strategically to favour the opposition. The method yielded impressive gains for the opposition in the 2019 municipal polls across Russia, and also in the local elections in Siberia in September where Mr. Navalny was campaigning before he was poisoned. The government has expanded the designation of "foreign agents," a label introduced in 2012 and aimed to stigmatise NGOs that received funding from overseas. The label now covers foreign-backed media houses, with stringent monitoring of their finances and other activities, and



could include dissident contestants. Irrespective of what happens to Mr. Navalny, his courage has galvanised opposition to the Kremlin, prompting a large band of activists to stake their lives to restore the rule of law and basic freedoms for all. Coinciding with his detention was another exposé linking Mr. Putin to an opulent £1 billion development on the Black Sea coast. An end to the uncertainty gripping Russia seems elusive.

SCOTTISH LEADER SEEKS 'LEGAL REFERENDUM'

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she planned to hold a legal referendum on independence from Britain despite Westminster's opposition, as an opinion poll showed a majority would vote yes. If her Scottish National Party (SNP) wins a strong showing in regional elections in May, Ms. Sturgeon said she would seek a fresh referendum even though Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said such a vote should only be held once in a generation. "I want to have a legal referendum, that is what I am going to seek the authority of the Scottish people for in May and if they give me that authority, that's what I intend to do," she told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show. Mr. Johnson "will flatly refuse the demand," The Sunday Times quoted senior government sources as saying. Ms. Sturgeon cited the fact that "the polls now show that a majority of people in Scotland want independence". A Sunday Times poll found 50% of Scottish voters wanted another referendum in the next five years and 49% would vote for independence, while 44% would reject it. A 2014 referendum saw 55% vote "no."

Victory projected

The newspaper quoted a forecast that the SNP will win a "landslide" in May polls for the Scottish Parliament, giving Ms. Sturgeon a basis to call for the vote. She spoke as the Scottish National Party (SNP) was due to discuss its "roadmap to a referendum" at a policy forum on Sunday. The SNP says it will request a Section 30 order from the British government allowing the holding of another referendum. If this is refused it intends to push through its own legislation to prepare for a referendum and "vigorously" oppose a legal challenge from London. "Scotland could hold a preliminary referendum, calling for negotiations on independence," Alan Trench of University College's constitutional unit said. The newspaper poll found 50% of Scottish voters wanted another independence referendum in the next five years, despite the fact that only 22% thought an independent country would be better off economically. "Brexit and the coronavirus crisis... appear to be driving Scottish voters away from England," the newspaper wrote. According to the poll, 22% thought Mr. Johnson had done a good job in tackling the pandemic, versus 61% for Ms. Sturgeon. The poll also found 53% in Scotland would vote to rejoin the European Union.

AUSTRALIA DAY, AND THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING IT

January 26 is observed as Australia Day in the country to commemorate the arrival of the "First Fleet" of ships at Sydney from Britain in 1788. Some critics, however, call it "Invasion Day" or "Survival Day" as it marks the beginning of dispossession of the continent's indigenous people. In recent years, the celebration has become controversial because of a "change the date" campaign, the supporters of which demand the date of Australia Day be changed from January 26 to May 9.



Australia Day: What is the controversy around it?

On May 9 in 1901, Australia's first parliament was opened and the six British colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. Significantly, the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander people see January 26 as the day when colonists took over their lands and they maintain that their people continue to suffer the effects of colonisation and racism. The "First Australians"—a term used to refer to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of Australia—associate the day as the beginning of the time when they suffered massacres, land theft, stolen children and oppression. Writing in The Guardian, Nakkiah Lui, a Gamillaroi and Torres Strait Islander woman said the refusal to celebrate *Australia Day is a part of the fight for the recognition of the abuse of indigenous people's rights. The Aboriginal-led organisation Common Ground says, "The purpose of changing the date is to recognise that many people value having a special day to celebrate the place they call home, while also acknowledging the traumatic context and history that 26 January in particular represents."* Alternatively, there is the idea that Australia Day should be abolished as a national holiday, arguing that there is nothing to celebrate until more work is done towards bringing social justice for the indigenous people and acknowledging that the values the day celebrates, which includes equality, freedom and opportunity is not what many Australians experience.

So, what happened in 1788?

The purpose of this was to find a convict settlement colony. According to the Museum of Sydney, at the time, there were about 12,000 British commercial and naval ships plying the world's oceans, but the First Fleet convoy consisted of two naval ships, six convict transports and three storeships. The fleet of ships arrived at Botany Bay on Australia's east coast on January 18, 1788, bringing in the first European settlers to Australia. The commander of this fleet was Captain Arthur Phillip who rejected Botany Bay and decided to take the fleet further ahead to Port Jackson (present-day Sydney), which was chosen as the site for the new colony after the fleet arrived there a few days later, on January 26, 1788.

What are the arguments against change of date?

As per information available with the Library of Congress, many Australians are proud of their convict ancestry and being a descendant of a "First Fleeter" (a convict, officer or sailor) is especially significant for some of them. An article published in The Sydney Morning Herald says that, *"There was a time, only a generation or so ago when such matters wouldn't be discussed in polite society, if at all. Convict shame, however, has become convict chic."* Referring to an academic paper from 2003, it goes on to say that *since the 1988 bicentenary, ancestors who were first arrivals to Australia, especially those associated with the First Fleet, were one of the most sought-after prizes of genealogical inquiry.* Among the convicts, one named Mary Bryant was the first one who successfully escaped the colony and returned to Britain. She was sentenced for seven years for assault and robbery and escaped the colony on March 28, 1791. Her story inspired many in England and she was pardoned in May 1793. Another convict James Ruse became the first person from the colony to get a land grant when governor Phillip gave him 30 acres at Parramatta in April 1791. Ruse was sentenced to seven years for breaking and entering and remained in the colony until his death in September 1837. The First Fleet monument is located in the state of New South Wales and is engraved with the names of all the new arrivals. Last week, Australian prime minister



Scott Morrison was criticised for saying that January 26 “wasn’t a flash day for those on first fleet vessels either”. Morrison has been critical of those supporting the change-the-date campaign and has said that the day should be acknowledged as the time when Australia began its journey as a modern nation. Several people have been arrested in Sydney for breaking COVID-19 restrictions while they took part in rallies calling for the date of the day to be changed.

YEMEN’S REBELS AND REVIVALISTS

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when anti-Americanism was at its peak in the Muslim world, several Islamist organisations had tried to mobilise supporters riding the public sentiments. For the Houthis in northern Yemen, it was a tipping point. What started as a religious revivalist movement aimed at restoring the fading glory of the *Zaydi sect of Islam, the Houthis, under the leadership of Hussein al-Houthi, were turning political*. When the second intifada broke out in the Palestinian territories in 2000, the Houthis staged solidarity protests. They mobilised supporters against the U.S.’s war on Afghanistan in 2001. After the Iraq war, they adopted a new slogan, “*Death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam*”. *Not many had foreseen back then that this tiny group of tribesmen from the Marran Mountains of the northern province Sa’dah would grow into the most powerful rebel war machine in Yemen and, within little over a decade, capture the capital Sana’a and establish their rule over much of the country*. For the past six years, the Houthis have been controlling Sana’a, while attempts to dislodge them, including a Saudi-led military intervention, failed to meet their goals. The success story of the Houthis is also the story of one of the worst humanitarian crises of our times. *The Saudi military intervention, the Houthi resistance and a separatist movement in the south have collectively turned Yemen into a humanitarian catastrophe. And then, there is Al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, exploiting the lawlessness and expanding its operations. Making matters worse, the administration of Donald Trump in the U.S. designated the Houthis a ‘terrorist organisation’ in its final days in office*. This is expected to make providing aid to the Houthi-held territories and finding an eventual political solution to the crisis difficult. The ball is now in U.S. President Joe Biden’s court.

The origins

The roots of the Houthi movement can be traced to “Believing Youth” (Muntada al-Shahabal-Mu’min), a Zaydi revivalist group founded by Hussein al-Houthi and his father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, in the early 1990s. Badr al-Din was an influential Zaydi cleric in northern Yemen. Inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in the 1980s, Badr al-Din and his sons started building vast social and religious networks among the Zaydis of Yemen, who make up roughly one-third of the Sunni-majority country population. The Zaydis are named after Zayd Bin Ali, the great grandson of Imam Ali. Zayd Bin Ali had led a revolt against the Umayyad Caliphate in the eighth century. He was killed, but his martyrdom led to the rise of the Zaydi sect. For centuries, the Zaydis were a powerful sect within Yemen. In the 16th century, they established an imamate and in the 17th, they ousted the Ottomans from Yemen. The imamate went into decline and got fractured in the 19th century, faced with challenges from repeated attacks from the Ottomans and the rising influence of Wahhabism in Arabia. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Zaydis, once again, consolidated power in northern Yemen and established the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. This lasted till 1962 when the Egypt-backed republicans overthrew the monarchy. When Badr al-Din al-Houthi and his son Hussein launched Believing Youth, the plan was to reorganise the



Zaydi minority. But when the movement turned political and started attacking the “corrupt” regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his support for the U.S.’s war on terror, it became a thorn on Saleh’s side. They called themselves Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), mobilised tribesmen in the north against the government and chanted the “Death to America” slogans. In 2004, Saleh’s government issued an arrest warrant against Hussein al-Houthi. He resisted the arrest, starting an insurgency. In September, the government troops attacked the rebels and killed Hussein. Since then, the government launched multiple military campaigns in Sa’dah, the Zaydi stronghold, to end the resistance, which was locally called the Houthis movement, after their “martyred” leader. But the government’s heavy hand backfired. It only strengthened the Houthis, who, by 2010 when a ceasefire was reached, had captured Sa’dah from the government troops.

March to Sana’a

When protests broke out in Yemen in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring protests, the Houthis backed the agitation. President Saleh, a Zaydi who was in power for 33 years, resigned in November, handing the reins to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, a Saudi-backed Sunni. Yemen, under the tutelage of the Saudis and the Emiratis, started a national dialogue to resolve internal differences. The Houthis were part of the dialogue. But they fell out with the transition government of Mr. Hadi, claiming that the proposed federal solution, which sought to divide the Zaydi-dominated north into two land-locked provinces, was intended to weaken the movement. *They soon got back to insurgency. Saleh, who was sidelined by the interim government and its backers, joined hands with his former rivals and launched a joint military operation.* By January 2015, the Houthi-Saleh alliance had captured Sana’a and much of northern Yemen, including the vital Red Sea coast. (Later the Houthis turned against Saleh and the latter was killed in December 2017). The rapid rise of the Houthis in Yemen set off alarm bells in Riyadh which saw them as Iranian proxies. Saudi Arabia, under the new, young Defence Minister, Mohammed Bin Salman, started a military campaign in March 2015, hoping for a quick victory against the Houthis. But the Houthis had dug in, refusing to leave despite Saudi Arabia’s aerial blitzkrieg. With no effective allies on the ground and no way-out plan, the Saudi-led campaign lost its steam over the years. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia accuse Iran of backing the Houthis. In Saudi Arabia, both the Houthis and Iran found a common foe. In the past six years, the Houthis have launched multiple attacks on Saudi cities from northern Yemen in retaliation for Saudi air strikes. In 2019, the Houthis claimed the attack on two Saudi oil installations that knocked out, briefly, half of the kingdom’s oil output. The Houthis have established a government in the north. The Supreme Political Council, headed by its President, Mahdi al-Mashat, is the executive branch of their rule. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, Hussein’s brother, leads the movement. There are serious allegations against both the Saudis and the Houthis in the war. While the Saudi bombings caused a large number of civilian deaths, the Houthis were accused, by rights groups and governments, of preventing aid, deploying forces in densely populated areas and using excessive force against civilians and peaceful protesters. The conflict appears to have entered a stalemate. Yemen, often dubbed the poorest Arab country, is now divided into three parts — the Houthi-controlled northern territories, the Southern Transition Council-controlled areas in the south (which has the backing of the UAE) and the rest held by the internationally recognised government of President Hadi. All sides are trying to maximise their interests with attempts to find a political solution reaching nowhere. In the meantime, Yemen’s suffering is mounting.



INDONESIA MAKES ROOM FOR AN INDIAN HERO

Tucked away inside the Indonesian Embassy in New Delhi is a special room — one that has been built in recognition of the nation’s freedom struggle from Dutch colonialism 74 years ago, and named, unusually, for an Indian leader, Biju Patnaik. The former Chief Minister of Odisha, who was a skilled pilot, flew several missions in 1947 to transport Indonesian leaders, including the nation’s tallest leader, President Sukarno, Vice-President Hatta and Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir out of Indonesia, at grave risk to himself. “We wanted to build a living memorial that would not just be a museum, so we decided that our meeting and videoconference room would be named the Biju Patnaik Room,” says Hanafi, the Cultural and Social Counsellor at the Embassy, who helped execute the project that was completed by Indonesian Ambassador Sidhartha Suryodipuro this month, before he ended his tenure in Delhi. On the walls of the Biju Patnaik room are photographs, newspaper clippings and letters that document Mr. Patnaik’s secret assignments to fly out the Indonesian leaders, as well as his relations with the Indonesian leadership. Eventually, Indonesia won back its freedom. *In 1950, President Sukarno was the chief guest at India’s first Republic Day, and India-Indonesia ties remained strong for the next decade. A letter in the Patnaik room also tells the tale of how relations between the two countries soured after Indonesia didn’t support India in the 1962 war with China. Hoping to sway President Sukarno, Mr. Patnaik wrote to him in November 1962, “Today, through an irony of fate, our freedom is in danger. I do hope and pray that Sukarno, the man of destiny of Indonesia, would not forget his brothers-in-arms in India, in their hour of darkness.” Relations were revived only decades later, when in 2005, India and Indonesia signed a Strategic Partnership agreement; military exchanges and trade ties have grown since.* The newly-inaugurated Patnaik room, is a reminder not only of the historical bonds between the two countries, but the imperative of keeping ties strong in the present as well, diplomats at the Embassy say.

WHY ARE THERE FEARS OF AN IMPENDING COUP IN MYANMAR?

Fears of a military coup are roiling Myanmar three days ahead of the scheduled opening of its newly elected Lower House of Parliament. The reason: the military says the November 2020 general election was full of “irregularities”, and has maintained that the results are therefore not valid. It is questioning the authenticity of some 9 million votes cast in the election. *The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the election. The military has demanded that the United Elections Commission (UEC) of Myanmar which oversees elections, or the government, or outgoing parliamentarians prove at a special session before the new parliament convenes on February 1, that the elections were free and fair.*

Speech of the army chief

According to ‘The Irrawaddy’ news website, Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said the Tatmadaw, or the Myanmar military, “needs to abide by the Constitution”, which is the “mother of the law”. The military, he told officers at the National Defence College via video conference, would respect all existing laws that are “not beyond the 2008 Constitution”, but “if one does not follow the law, such a law must be revoked. I mean if it is the Constitution, it is necessary to revoke the Constitution. If one does not follow the law, the Constitution must be revoked”.



The military's Constitution

It was the military that drafted the 2008 Constitution, and put it to a questionable referendum in April that year. The NLD had boycotted the referendum, as well as the 2010 elections that were held under the Constitution. The Constitution was the military's "roadmap to democracy", which it had been forced to adopt under increasing pressure from the west, and its own realisation that opening up Myanmar to the outside world was now no longer an option but a dire economic necessity. But the military made sure to safeguard in the Constitution its own role and supremacy in national affairs. Under its provisions, the military reserves for itself 25 per cent of seats in both Houses of Parliament, to which it appoints serving military officials. Also, a political party which is a proxy for the military contests elections. Its share of seats fell further this time because of the NLD's sweep.

The army's allegation

A military spokesman said earlier in the week that the Tatmadaw had found 8.6 million irregularities in 314 areas across all states and regions, and that this indicated the possibility that people had voted "more than once", or had engaged in some other "voting malpractice". The UEC has said it had found no evidence of any voting malpractice or fraud. It has said that each vote was "counted transparently and witnessed by election candidates, election staff, the media, observers and other civil society organizations". The army chief called the 2008 Constitution "effective". Each section of the law has a purpose and meaning, he said, and no one should take it upon themselves to interpret it as they pleased. *"Applying the law based on one's own ideas may cause harm rather than being effective,"* he was quoted as saying by 'The Irrawaddy'. He also spoke about how the military had revoked two previous constitutions in Myanmar.

Fears of a coup

The speech and the army's assertion has prompted the United States embassy and diplomatic missions of 15 other countries and the European Union in Yangon to issue a joint statement "oppos[ing] any attempt to alter the outcome of the elections or impede Myanmar's democratic transition". Myanmar's democratic transition is a work in progress. The results of the 2020 election, held during the pandemic, are being seen by the NLD as a mandate for its plan of constitutional reform, through which it aims to do away with the military's role in politics and governance. This will not be easy given the tight constitutional restrictions for amendments. But the hybrid system that exists now is a huge shift away from what it was until 2011, the year the military decided to release Suu Kyi from her nearly two-decade-long house arrest, thus inaugurating its "road map to democracy" on which there has been slow progress. *Suu Kyi has been more reconciliatory towards the Army than was expected even by her own supporters, to the extent of defending the Tatmadaw at the International Court of Justice against accusations of atrocities on the Rohingya.* The stand-off over the elections is the first serious face-off she has had with the military since her release. The world will be watching the military to see if it sends its representatives for the Assembly on Monday.

Text of the statement by diplomatic missions

Following is the text of the statement jointly issued by the diplomatic missions of Australia; Canada; the Delegation of the EU and European Union Member States with presence in Myanmar:

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Denmark, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden; as well as Switzerland; the United Kingdom; the United States; Norway; and New Zealand. India and China are not among the signatories. *"We affirm our support for Myanmar's democratic transition and efforts to promote peace, human rights, and development in the country. We look forward to the peaceful convening of the Parliament on February 1 and the election of the President and speakers. Once again, we congratulate the people of Myanmar on their historic participation in the country's recent general election.* We urge the military, and all other parties in the country, to adhere to democratic norms, and we oppose any attempt to alter the outcome of the elections or impede Myanmar's democratic transition. We support all those who work toward greater democratic freedoms, lasting peace, and inclusive prosperity for the people of Myanmar."

SPLIT IN THE MIDDLE

The political crisis triggered by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve Nepal's Parliament and call fresh elections led to a vertical split in the ruling party, with the rival faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' sacking Mr. Oli from its general membership. The Prachanda faction of the Nepal Communist Party had removed Mr. Oli as the party's chairman earlier. It had issued a notice to him seeking an explanation for his decision to recommend Parliament's dissolution, to which he did not respond. Following this, the central committee of the Prachanda bloc met on Sunday and decided to expel Mr. Oli. His aides have rejected this, saying their leader remains the PM. This puts Nepal and its fractious communist movement in limbo. Mr. Oli has claimed that he represents the party, while Mr. Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal, a former PM and leader of Mr. Oli's erstwhile Communist Party of Nepal (UML), have ruled out any future compromise with the PM. *The constitutional validity of the decision to dissolve Parliament is being reviewed by the Supreme Court. Also, the Election Commission will decide which faction could retain the party's name and symbol, the Sun.*

The ruling Nepal Communist Party, led by rebel leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' and former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal expelled Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli from the party on Sunday. The decision divided the party into two groups and sparked a dispute over the party symbol but the Election Commission declined to recognise either faction as the official party.

Crisis deepens

The deepening crisis emerged weeks after Mr. Oli dissolved the Lower House, Pratinidhi Sabha, of Parliament on December 20, which was strongly opposed by Mr. Prachanda and Mr. Nepal who wanted the House to be restored. Soon after the dissolution of the Pratinidhi Sabha, Mr. Oli created a committee of his supporters, which indicated that he would launch a take over of the party in case of an adversarial action by the rebel leaders.

Dictatorial behaviour

Mr. Nepal and Mr. Prachanda have in recent weeks alleged that Mr. Oli acted in a dictatorial manner and that he has "gone too far". *The main faction led by the rebels had gone to the Election Commissioner immediately after the dissolution of the Pratinidhi Sabha, seeking recognition as the official party. However, following Sunday's developments, both factions reached out to Chief Election Commissioner Dinesh Kumar Thapaliya. The Hindu has learnt reliably that Mr. Thapaliya will not*



accord the status to either faction. The situation is being described as an intense constitutional crisis as the Caretaker Prime Minister is left without any party affiliation because of the EC's decision. Mr. Oli had declared that elections would be held in April-May, but in the current situation a lot will depend on the Election Commission and the Supreme Court which is examining the writ petitions filed against the dissolution of the Lower House.

WE'RE NOT ALL IN THE SAME BOAT (AMITABH BEHAR - THE CEO OF OXFAM INDIA)

One of the most incisive and hard-hitting comments on the real import of the COVID-19 crisis came from none other than the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres. He said: "COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: *The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat.* While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris." Oxfam International's annual report on inequality for 2021, aptly titled '*The Inequality Virus*', puts the uncomfortable but imperative spotlight on the obscene inequality between the few in "super yachts" and the overwhelming majority "clinging to the drifting debris". The report was published on the opening day of the World Economic Forum's 'Davos Dialogues'. Over the decades, India has faced mammoth challenges including wars and hunger. But the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a migrant crisis, lockdowns, and serious contraction of the economy, and highlighted a crumbling health system, is an unprecedented test of the republic. This is the moment to use the 'COVID x-ray' to recognise the deep fissures caused by the growing inequality in the country; and for post-pandemic recovery, resolve to plan a fundamentally different economic model for ensuring an equal, just and sustainable future for all.

Uncomfortable truths

The Oxfam report highlights deeply uncomfortable truths of how the virus has exposed, fed off, and increased existing inequalities of wealth, gender and race. Over two million people have died, and hundreds of millions of people are being forced into poverty while many of the richest, both individuals and corporations, are thriving. Worldwide, billionaires saw their wealth increase by a staggering \$3.9 trillion between March 18 and December 31, 2020. The pandemic, which is the greatest economic shock since the Great Depression, saw hundreds of millions of people lose their jobs and face destitution and hunger. This shock is set to reverse the decline in global poverty we have witnessed over the past two decades. It is estimated that the total number of people living in poverty could have increased by between 200 million and 500 million in 2020. Globally, women are over-represented in the sectors of the economy that are hardest hit by the pandemic. If women were represented at the same rate as men in those sectors, 112 million women would no longer be at high risk of losing their incomes or jobs. *The unequal impact of the pandemic, in addition to this gender dimension, also has a race dimension. In Brazil, for example, people of Afro-descent have been 40% more likely to die of COVID-19 than white people. The virus has also led to an explosion in the amount of underpaid and unpaid care work, done predominantly by women, and in particular women from groups facing racial and ethnic marginalisation.*



The rich and poor in India

Sadly, India is a case in point. The country introduced one of the earliest and most stringent lockdowns in the face of the pandemic, whose enforcement brought its economy to a standstill *triggering unemployment, hunger, distress migration and untold hardship*. The rich have been able to escape the pandemic's worst impact. White-collar workers have easily isolated themselves and have been working from home. The wealth of Indian billionaires increased by 35% during the lockdown and by 90% since 2009. This is despite the fact that most of India has faced a loss of livelihood and the economy has dipped into recession. *The increase in the wealth of the top 11 billionaires during the pandemic can easily sustain the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or the Health Ministry for the next 10 years. We have read astonishing stories of how Mukesh Ambani was making ₹90 crore per hour during the lockdown when 24% of the population was earning under ₹3,000 per month. According to the International Labour Organization, with almost 90% working in the informal economy in India, about 40 crore workers in the informal economy are at risk of falling deeper into poverty.* The Oxfam report undertook a survey of 295 economists from 79 countries. They included leading global economists such as Jayati Ghosh, Jeffrey Sachs and Gabriel Zucman. Of the respondents, 87% expected that income inequality in their country was going to significantly increase as a result of the pandemic. These levels of inequality are not viable and will have a deeply harmful impact. *This concern is shared by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The IMF Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva, said, "The impact will be profound [...] with increased inequality leading to economic and social upheaval."*

Troubling Trends

The world economy is slowly recovering from the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but that is only partial solace. The recovery is uneven among countries, and within countries, but the emerging universal truth is that economic inequality is rising sharply in all countries. A new report by Oxfam has revealed that the 1,000 richest people worldwide recovered their losses from the pandemic within nine months as opposed to the world's poorest who might take a decade to limp back to their pre-pandemic standing. Inequality was alarmingly high and destabilising social and political order in much of the world even before the pandemic struck. It is set to further aggravate, fear 295 economists from 79 countries, commissioned by Oxfam. Inequality in India has risen to levels last seen when it was colonised. *The additional wealth acquired by India's 100 billionaires since March when the lockdown was imposed is enough to give every one of the 138 million poorest ₹94,045, according to the report. An unskilled worker in India would take three years to earn what the country's richest person earned in one second last year, the report calculates. The worsening inequality in income and opportunities impacts some sections disproportionately due to discrimination based on gender, caste and other factors.* The poorer people were worst affected by the disease itself. The focus on growth had led politicians and policy makers to accept rising inequality as inevitable for decades. Inequality came to be seen as a benign outcome of economic growth that led to reduction of absolute poverty. Concerns about inequality could also be easily dismissed as being informed by socialism. Any criticism of capitalism was viewed with scepticism in the mainstream of development debates, until the crisis of capitalism could no longer be ignored. *The literature on capitalism and its linkage with democracy is now growing fast. There is now universal agreement among economists that the distribution of new wealth between capital and*



labour has become so one-sided that workers are constantly being pushed to penury while the rich are getting richer. This has social and political consequences as upheavals in democratic societies around the world show. The environmental costs of a development model that hinges on higher and higher growth are also obvious. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgment of the crisis among capitalist moghuls. *The theme of the World Economic Forum at Davos this week is 'the Great Reset' which it says is a "commitment to jointly and urgently build the foundations of our economic and social system for a more fair, sustainable and resilient future".* On the other, measures that favour capital at the cost of labour continue; for instance, changes in labour laws in several States during the pandemic. Lip service is not enough to tackle inequality.

Fighting inequality

India just celebrated its 72nd Republic Day. *We must recognise that a radical and sustained reduction in inequality is the indispensable foundation for a just India, as envisioned in the Constitution. The government must set concrete, time-bound targets to reduce inequality. We must move beyond the focus on GDP and start to value what really matters. Fighting inequality must be at the heart of economic rescue and recovery efforts. This must include gender and caste equality.* Countries like South Korea, Sierra Leone and New Zealand have committed to reducing inequality as a national priority, showing what can be done. *Four things could be done on priority. One, invest in free universal healthcare, education, and other public services. Universal public services are the foundation of free and fair societies and have unparalleled power to reduce inequality, including gender and caste inequality. An immediate step could be delivering a free 'people's vaccine' to all citizens to tackle the pandemic. Two, the virus has shown us that guaranteed income security is essential. For this to happen we need not just living wages but also far greater job security, with labour rights, sick pay, paid parental leave and unemployment benefits if people lose their jobs. Three, reintroduce wealth taxes and ensure financial transaction taxes while putting an end to tax dodging. Progressive taxation is the cornerstone of any equitable recovery, as it will enable investment in a green, equitable future. Argentina showed the way by adopting a temporary solidarity wealth tax on the extremely wealthy that could generate over \$3 billion. Four, we need to invest in a green economy that prevents further degradation of our planet and preserves it for our children. The fight against inequality and the fight for climate justice are the same fight.*

DreamIAS

**NATION****CHINA SLAMS APPS BAN, URGES INDIA TO 'CORRECT DISCRIMINATORY MEASURES'**

China on Wednesday called on India “to immediately correct its discriminatory measures” over the decision to extend a ban on 59 Chinese apps. The Indian government recently sent notices to Chinese firms, informing them that the ban, announced in June, would continue. India had banned the 59 Chinese apps including TikTok, WeChat and UC Browser, citing national security concerns in the wake of the stand-off in Ladakh. Another 118 apps were banned in September and 43 more in November. The recent notice was sent after reviewing the responses from the Chinese firms, which had been given a chance to respond to the June move. The Ministry of Electronics and IT had said in its order last year that it had received “credible inputs that such apps pose [a] threat to sovereignty and integrity of India” and that it had taken the measure “in view of information available they are engaged in activities which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order.” “Since last year, the Indian side has repeatedly used national security as an excuse to prohibit some mobile apps with Chinese background,” the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi said in a statement. “These moves [are] in violation of WTO’s non-discriminatory principles and fair competition principles of a market economy and severely damage the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies,” said Ji Rong, a spokesperson for the Embassy. “The Chinese side firmly opposes them.

‘Comply with local laws’

“The Chinese government always asks Chinese companies to observe international rules and local laws and regulations when doing business overseas,” the Embassy said. *“The Indian government has the responsibility to follow WTO rules and market principles and protect the legitimate rights and interests of international investors including Chinese companies.”* The moves had “hindered the improvement of the Indian business environment and the innovative development of related Indian industries,” the Chinese Embassy said. “China-India economic and trade cooperation is mutually beneficial by nature,” it said. “We urge the Indian side to immediately correct its discriminatory measures and avoid causing further damage to bilateral cooperation.”

TROUBLED WATERS

The tragic death of four fishermen from Tamil Nadu — one of them a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee living in India — allegedly when the Sri Lankan Navy was about to arrest them last week, is yet another instance of the unresolved fisheries conflict in the Palk Bay taking an unacceptable toll of lives. While fishermen in Tamil Nadu say the four were killed in an attack by the Sri Lankan Navy, the latter maintains that they died when their trawler collided with a naval vessel while trying to avoid being apprehended. India has lodged a strong protest with the Sri Lankan authorities, who have set up a committee to find a permanent solution to the incursions by Indian fishermen. It was less than a month ago that the two countries resumed discussions through their Joint Working Group on fisheries after a three-year gap. *India sought the early release of fishermen arrested in Sri Lankan waters, as well as the boats in Sri Lankan custody. Sri Lanka underscored the need to curb the illegal fishing, which adversely affects the livelihood of its war-affected fishermen.* When the two sides decided to create a joint working group some years ago, they had agreed that there would



be no violence or loss of life in the handling of the fishermen and that a hotline would be established between the respective Coast Guards. It is unfortunate that the hotline is yet to be operationalised, and deaths continue to occur. The humanitarian approach that has been expected to be the cornerstone of the approach to this conflict has not always been discernible. *The plan to wean away Tamil Nadu fishermen from the tendency to exploit the remaining fishery resources on the Sri Lankan side by replacing their trawlers with deep sea fishing vessels has not really taken off.* Attempts to forge a negotiated settlement through direct talks involving fishermen from both sides have also reached a stalemate. *Sri Lanka favours joint patrolling by both countries, and a ban on unsustainable fishing practices by Tamil Nadu fishermen — such as bottom trawling — but the latter want a lengthy phase-out period. Political leaders in Tamil Nadu rarely acknowledge that the State's fishermen contribute immensely to the problem by crossing territorial waters. Nor is there sufficient recognition that the incursion into Sri Lankan waters is driven by trawler owners who force their poor employees to do so, who then get killed or arrested, leading to the festering conflict. So far there has not been enough political resolve to end this conflict.* A comprehensive solution, one that would severely curtail unauthorised fishing and help in an orderly sharing of and sustainable use of resources by fishermen from both sides, is long overdue.

SC FLAYS CENTRE FOR AFFIDAVIT ON UPSC EXAMS

The Supreme Court on Thursday said an affidavit filed by the government did not specify the level of authority at which the decision was taken to not give UPSC aspirants, including “last-attempters” who claimed their preparations for the October 4 prelims were severely restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, another chance to take the elite civil services exams. A Bench led by Justice A.M. Khanwilkar also noted that the affidavit seemed to be a “routine” one filed by an Under Secretary. The court said the decision should have been taken at the highest level. “It is a policy decision and a one-time decision. This is a routine affidavit. Is this the way to do this?” the Bench asked Additional Solicitor-General S.V. Raju. Mr. Raju agreed to file another affidavit. The court scheduled the case for hearing on January 29. Senior advocate C.U. Singh, for the aspirants, said there was a lack of clarity on the issue from the government. A 13-page affidavit filed by an Under Secretary with the Department of Personnel and Training recently said it was “curious to note that the petitioners, who participated in the examination with open eyes, only approached the Supreme Court after the results of the examination were declared”. Giving an additional attempt or relaxation in age for some candidates would amount to extending differential treatment. It would lead to an “un-levelling of the playing field,” it said.

SC ASKS FOR TIMELINE ON APPOINTMENTS

The Supreme Court on Wednesday questioned the government about the delay in clearing Collegium recommendations for judicial appointments to various High Courts. A Bench of Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde and Justices Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Surya Kant asked the Centre if there was a timeline for government clearance of such recommendations. “If you don’t give comments for five months on Collegium recommendations, it is a matter of great concern,” Justice Kaul said. The Bench noted how recommendations from the High Courts of Bombay and Allahabad dated back to May or June last year. It said 189 proposals for judicial appointments were still pending. “What is your timeline to respond to these recommendations of judges’ appointment? The government has taken more than a year to respond... You say something is pending with Intelligence Bureau and some Chief

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Minister has not responded. We want to know your timeline,” the court addressed Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal. The Bench served notice on the High Courts which were not party to the petition filed by Lok Prahari, an NGO, seeking the appointment of additional judges. “We expect the High Courts to express their views in the present matter. The High Courts that are not impleaded shall be impleaded as party respondents in the instant matter,” the court said. *In February last year, the Supreme Court had conveyed its alarm at the rising number of judicial vacancies in various High Courts. Some of them were functioning only with half their sanctioned strength. Mr. Venugopal, at the time, explained that the Collegium had also delayed the appointment process. The government’s delay was largely because it thoroughly combed through the antecedents of the candidate. The process, on an average, takes at least 127 days. On the other hand, the judiciary takes 119 days on an average merely to forward the file to the government, he said.*

IN BOMBAY HC VERDICT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT, THE ISSUE OF MANDATORY MINIMUM SENTENCING

The Bombay High Court has acquitted a man of sexual assault charges under the Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act for groping a child, and instead convicted him under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for a lesser offence. Justice Pushpa V Ganediwala said the allegation was not serious enough for the greater punishment prescribed under the law. The ruling, which drew criticism for its restricted interpretation of the offence, spotlights the concept of mandatory minimum sentencing in legislation, including POCSO.

What was this case about?

The Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court reversed the decision of a sessions court which had convicted 39-year-old Bandu Ragde under Section 8 of the POCSO Act, and sentenced him to three years in jail. Section 8 prescribes the punishment for the offence of sexual assault defined in Section 7 of the Act. *The convict was accused of luring the 12-year old prosecutrix to his house on the pretext of giving her a guava, and pressing her breast and attempting to remove her salwar.* The High Court upheld the conviction under sections that carry a lesser minimum sentence of one year under the Indian Penal Code, including *outraging the modesty of a woman.*

Why did the High Court acquit the man of charges under the POSCO Act?

The court reasoned that since the offence under POCSO carried a higher punishment, a conviction would require a higher standard of proof, and allegations that were more serious. Section 7 of the Act says “Whoever, with sexual intent touches the vagina, penis, anus or breast of the child or makes the child touch the vagina, penis, anus or breast of such person or any other person or does any other act with sexual intent...” The court said that since the convict groped the prosecutrix over her clothes, this indirect contact would not constitute sexual assault.

Is such a reading of the law unusual?

Such restrictive reading is not uncommon, especially in POCSO cases. In *State v Bijender* (2014), a Delhi court acquitted a man under the POCSO Act and instead convicted him of IPC offences. A seven-year-old girl had testified that the convict took her into the bathroom by force, slapped her, and tore her jeans. The Special Court held that the act of tearing the clothes of the victim did not



constitute physical contact even if sexual intent was present. This was despite the recognition of “any other act with sexual intent which involves physical contact without penetration” to be sexual assault under Section 7 of POCSO. The judge reasoned that since the accused did not touch the vagina, anus or breasts of the child, the latter part of the section could not be invoked. The court restrictively interpreted the lack of physical contact with sexual organs to mean that there was no physical contact.

What is a mandatory minimum sentence?

Section 8 of the POCSO Act carries a sentence of rigorous imprisonment of three to five years. However, imposing the minimum sentence is mandatory. Where a statute has prescribed a minimum sentence, courts do not have the discretion to pass lighter sentences irrespective of any specific circumstances that the case or the convict might present. Minimum sentences have been prescribed for all sexual offences under the POCSO Act barring the offence of sexual harassment. In a 2001 ruling, the Supreme Court held that where the mandate of the law is clear and unambiguous, the court has no option but to pass the sentence upon conviction as provided under the statute. “The mitigating circumstances in a case, if established, would authorise the court to pass such sentence of imprisonment or fine which may be deemed to be reasonable but not less than the minimum prescribed under an enactment,” the court said in *State of J&K v Vinay Nanda*.

Why do some legislation prescribe a mandatory minimum sentence?

A mandatory sentence is prescribed to underline the seriousness of the offence, and is often claimed to act as a deterrent to crime. In 2013, criminal law reforms introduced in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gangrape prescribed mandatory minimum sentences for criminal use of force and outraging the modesty of a woman, among other charges. *Mandatory minimum sentences are also prescribed in some cases to remove the scope for arbitrariness by judges using their discretion.* For example, the punishment for a crime under IPC Section 124A (Sedition) is “imprisonment for life, to which fine may be added, or...imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or...fine”, which leaves room for vast discretion with judges.

What are the criticisms of mandatory sentencing?

Studies have shown that mandatory sentencing in laws lead to fewer convictions, because when judges perceive that the punishment for the offence is harsh, they might prefer to acquit the accused instead. After conviction, a separate hearing is conducted to award sentence, in which aspects such as the accused being a first-time offender with potential for reformation or being the sole breadwinner of the family, or the accused’s age and social background, or the seriousness of the offence, etc., are considered. The absence of the opportunity to consider such factors, and instead prescribe a mandatory sentence, pushes judges in some cases towards acquitting the accused. A 2016 report on the ‘Study on the Working of Special Courts under the POCSO Act in Delhi’ by the Centre for Child Law at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, has highlighted the reluctance of courts in convicting under sections that carry a mandatory minimum sentence. The study noted: “Some within the legal fraternity were of the view that minimum sentences under the POCSO Act are very high. As an example, one respondent shared that the minimum punishment for sexual assault and aggravated sexual assault is high. “Should a 21 year-old be imprisoned for three years for forcibly kissing a girl? He will become a criminal in jail. No point in



packing our jail with adolescents.” Another respondent was of the view that probation should be used in cases of statutory rape where the accused is between 18-22 years. One respondent also felt that the Act should provide sentencing discretion to judges.” In his 2016 book *Discretion, Discrimination and the Rule of Law: Reforming Rape Sentencing in India*, Mrinal Satish, professor of Law at NLSIU, argued that when mandatory sentencing regimes are put in place to remove judicial discretion, the discretion merely shifts within the system to the police, but is not removed.

So what is the way forward?

Legal experts have argued that mandatory sentences are counterproductive to the aim of reducing crime or acting as a deterrent. Instead of harsher punishment, they recommend judicial reform that makes the sentencing process more accountable and transparent. This would include holding transparent proceedings for sentencing, recording specific reasons for punishment in rulings, etc.

The Supreme Court stayed a controversial Bombay High Court verdict, which acquitted a man found guilty of assault under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act on the grounds that he groped his victim over her clothes and there was no “skin to skin” contact between them. A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sharad A. Bobde, on Wednesday took cognisance instantaneously after Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal made a special mention in court, saying the *single-judge verdict would set a “very dangerous precedent”* and cripple the intention of the POCSO Act to punish sexual offenders.

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights had asked the State government to urgently appeal the High Court judgment. Meanwhile, several organisations, including the Youth Bar Association of India, represented by advocate Manju Jetley, also moved the top court against the High Court judgment. The petitioners said they were “badly perturbed” to note that the January 19 verdict contained several observations about the victim child’s modesty, which were both “derogatory and defamatory”. The child was even named in the judgment, the petition said. “Abuse and outraging the modesty of a child has been a matter of great concern. The POCSO Act was enacted to deal with evil and to impart speedy justice. Special courts were formed. The observations [in the January 19 judgment of the HC] have badly shaken the belief of the petitioners and like-minded people,” the petition said.

ALLAHABAD HIGH COURT ORDERS PROTECTION FOR SAME-SEX COUPLE

Noting that it was duty-bound to monitor the rights of the citizens under threat on account of their sexual orientation, the Allahabad High Court has directed police protection for a same-sex woman couple in Uttar Pradesh’s Saharanpur. The two women, aged 23 and 22, have been in a live-in relationship for a couple of years and are voluntarily living with each other on account of their sexual orientation, the court said. They are, however, facing resistance from their family members and had approached the court seeking directions to their families to not interfere in their relationship. *“The petition highlights the stark reality of the society where the citizens are facing discrimination at the hands of the society only on account of their sexual orientation despite it being well settled that sexual orientation is innate to human being,”* the court said in an order dated January 21. A Division Bench of Justices Mahesh Chandra Tripathi and Sanjay Kumar Pachori directed the Senior Superintendent of Police, Saharanpur to extend suitable protection to the



petitioners in the event they approach the officer for necessary protection and ensure that no harassment is caused to them.

SC verdict

Counsel for the petitioners contended that *despite legitimacy being accorded to such relations by the Supreme Court in the case of Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India, (2018) 10 SCC 1, the petitioners are being threatened with violation of their rights enshrined under Article 21 of the Constitution only on the ground of their sexual orientation.* "... this Court being a constitutional Court is duty bound to monitor and observe the Constitutional morality as well as the rights of the citizens which are under threat only on account of the sexual orientation," the High Court said.

NO PROTECTION FROM ARREST FOR TANDAV TEAM

The Supreme Court on Wednesday declined to pass an order to protect the makers and artists of the web series Tandav on Amazon Prime from arrest, even as it agreed to examine their plea to club the FIRs registered against them in various States on the charge of hurting Hindu religious sentiments. A three-judge Bench led by Justice Ashok Bhushan asked them to approach the lower courts concerned for interim relief, including bail. The court also rejected their plea to quash the FIRs. The court did not appear convinced when the makers and artists said the web series was a "political satire". They urged the court to protect their freedom of artistic speech and expression. But Justice M.R. Shah, on the Bench, said free speech is not absolute and is subject to reasonable restrictions. One of the actors, Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub, told the court that he had enacted a character whose dialogues in the series had no connection whatsoever to his own individual beliefs. "I was contracted to play a character. What I said or did in the series has nothing to do with me as an individual," his lawyer argued for him. "You cannot play the role of a character which hurts the religious sentiments of others," Justice Shah replied. Senior advocate Siddharth Luthra, one of the lawyers appearing for the makers, said signing on to an OTT platform to watch a series was unlike public viewing on Doordarshan. "I have to pay and view. I consent to watch it. I want to see a political satire, so I watch it," Mr. Luthra submitted. Senior advocate Fali Nariman, also for the makers, said FIRs have been filed in multiple States merely as a source of harassment. "We have already deleted one or two scenes, still FIRs are being filed," he submitted. Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi reminded the court of how it had, several years ago, protected painter M.F. Husain from arrest after FIRs were filed against him by people across the country, similarly for hurting religious sentiments. He said the makers have come directly to the SC following the precedent of the Arnab Goswami case where multiple FIRs were filed in different States and the court agreed to club them. The FIRs were registered on the basis of complaints filed against director Ali Abbas Zafar; Amazon Prime India head Aparna Purohit; producer Himanshu Mehra; show's writer Gaurav Solanki and actor Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub.

Transit pre-arrest bail

Earlier, the Bombay High Court had granted a transit pre-arrest bail to Mr. Zafar, Ms. Purohit, Mr. Mehra and Mr. Solanki against whom a case was registered in Lucknow for allegedly hurting religious sentiments. The four have been booked under Sections 153 A, 295, and 501 (1)(B) of the IPC and under relevant Sections of the IT Act.



FIR LODGED AGAINST WEB SERIES MIRZAPUR

An FIR has been lodged in Uttar Pradesh against the makers of web series Mirzapur on charges of outraging religious feelings and portraying a particular community as linked to crime. The FIR was lodged at Mirzapur's Kotwali Dehat police station on a complaint of Arvind Chaturvedi, a local journalist who has also written a book on the life of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In his police complaint, Mr. Chaturvedi says the plot and dialogues of the web series have hurt his "religious, social and regional sentiments" and that it has provided a wrong portrayal of Mirzapur city. The FIR names executive producers of the series Ritesh Sidhwani, Farhan Akhtar and Bhaumik Gondaliya and Amazon Prime Video platform, where the series has been running. In the FIR, Mr. Chaturvedi alleges that the web series portrays a specific community as linked to crime, shows illicit relationships and caste discord. The series also projects the judicial system as "false and polluted", he said, demanding that the name Mirzapur be changed.

NBA SEEKS REPUBLIC TV'S OUSTER FROM IBF

The News Broadcasters Association (NBA) on Monday said the WhatsApp chats of Arnab Goswami were shocking. In a statement, the NBA said Republic TV be expelled from the Indian Broadcasting Foundation. The NBA Board called for Republic TV to be left out of the BARC rating system till the final court order in the matter. These WhatsApp messages not only reflect manipulation of ratings but is also about power play, it said. The messages exchanged go on to refer to the appointment of Secretaries, Cabinet reshuffle, access to the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) and the workings of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. "This only confirms the many and continuous allegations made by NBA in the last four years that ratings were being manipulated by a non-NBA member broadcaster in connivance with BARC's top management officials," the statement said.

IMRAN ATTACKS MODI GOVT. OVER ARNAB GOSWAMI'S CHATS

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan waded into the controversy over leaked conversations between a television channel head and the chief of television ratings agency Broadcast Audience Research Council (Barc), saying that they proved that the Modi government had planned the Balakot air strikes in February 2019 to "win general elections", and to "push our nuclearised region to the brink of a conflict it cannot afford". Mr. Khan's statement, which followed a similar statement by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Sunday, raised a response from the Editor-in-Chief of the "Republic media network". He claimed that there was a "Pakistani hand" in the case against Republic and Barc's former CEO Partho Dasgupta, currently in police custody. Mr. Khan said the communications revealed the "unholy nexus between the Modi govt & Indian media", and accused the government of "dangerous military adventurism to win an election".

'Plot against Republic'

Mr. Goswami said the comments by Mr. Khan made it clear that Pakistan had a role in what he claimed was a "conspiracy against Republic". "If the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Pakistan have come out in support of the malicious police action against the Republic, then nothing much is left to be said," Mr. Goswami added. He also alleged that there was evidence of "calibration" between the Congress party and Indian media which, he said, were "anti-Republic"



in order to “assist the Pakistani narrative”. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) did not comment on the exchange. “We dismiss the allegation with the contempt it deserves,” Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala told The Hindu when asked about the remarks, and accused Mr. Goswami of “hiding his misdeeds behind Imran Khan”. As The Hindu reported some days ago, transcripts of the conversations between Mr. Goswami and Mr. Dasgupta that have been released into the public domain are understood to be part of the Maharashtra Police’s chargesheet in the case on fixing of TRPs (Television Rating Points) by Barc and Republic TV.

Advanced knowledge

According to the messages purportedly exchanged on WhatsApp, three days before Indian Air Force jets bombed a building believed to be Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist training camp in the Pakistani town of Balakot on February 23, 2019, Mr. Goswami told Mr. Dasgupta that India would carry out something “bigger than a normal strike” on Pakistan. Mr. Goswami allegedly celebrated his TV channel’s rating’s bump after the Pulwama terror attack on February 14 by the JeM, in which 40 CRPF personnel were killed, saying “this attack we have won like crazy”.

MANY VULNERABILITIES

The much discussed and debated Electronic Voting Machine in India has survived intense scrutiny over its use largely because of one strong reason — the fact that this standalone single-chip device is not connected to any network. This is besides several technological and administrative safeguards to ensure that the machine is not tampered with. With the addition of the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) to the EVM, “audit-ability” was added to the process even as the machine has suffered glitches, which the Election Commission of India (ECI) has managed to tackle reasonably well. The ECI should definitely seek solutions to make the EVM more robust even as it must reject calls for a return to paper balloting — which experienced malpractices such as ballot stuffing and booth capturing. That being said, the announcement by Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora that *the ECI is commencing trials of a “remote voting project” is sure to bring back scrutiny*. ECI officials have not elaborated or released any detailed document, but have mentioned that the system, being developed by IIT-Madras, *uses the blockchain method for “two-way remote voting” at designated centres*. Remote voting, as an option, has gained some priority during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to address social distancing. In the U.S., the mail-in ballot system, where registered voters received ballots and returned it via post or dropped it off at secure “drop boxes” or voting centres, was widely used, but this was entirely paper based. The blockchain method implements an online public bulletin board that allows for a linear ordering of data to which a user can only further append data. The board itself is public and available for anyone to read and verify. The technology has been put in use for cryptocurrencies — the Bitcoin blockchain records a list of transactions that can be read to find out who owns which bitcoins without any centralised authority. In the case of a blockchain-based voting system, the voting authority will have to authenticate this bulletin board in which users sign in using cryptographic signatures to register their votes in a ledger. *While this system, with its cryptographic features, promises data security and verifiability, the fact that it will depend upon a network and devices could introduce vulnerabilities that are present in any Internet-based system*. A draft paper by MIT and Harvard researchers, in November 2020, has raised concerns about the designs of a remote blockchain-based voting system and pointed to serious vulnerabilities in some instances where it was



tried out. The paper also points out that beyond the vulnerabilities faced by any Internet-based system, blockchains also introduce issues related to complexity and their management. The ECI would do well to exercise caution before deploying this method in elections, besides subjecting it to a rigorous public appraisal.

Digital move

In another development, *electors will be able to download electronic versions of the elector photo ID card, or e-EPIC*, from Monday with the Election Commission launching it during the National Voter Day celebration. The EC said in a statement on Sunday that Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad would hand out the e-EPICs to five new voters at the function. The digital version of EPICs would be available for download from the voter helpline app, voterportal.eci.gov.in and nvsp.in, the EC said. The e-EPIC would be a non-editable PDF version of the EPIC that can be downloaded on the phone and stored on the DigiLocker app or printed from a computer. All general voters who have valid EPIC numbers would be able to do so from February 1 and those who applied in November and December will be able to download it from Monday till January 31.

IN SEARCH OF MALICE

The registration of cases against some senior journalists and Congress MP Shashi Tharoor for their “misleading” social media posts on the Republic Day violence during the farmers’ protests in Delhi, by the U.P. and M.P. police is an instance of fishing for malice where there is none. The Gautama Buddha Nagar police have clearly gone overboard in their response to tweets that reflected an early, and factually incorrect, piece of information that a farmer who had died during the tractor rally in Delhi had fallen to a police bullet. Later reports said he had died when a tractor overturned during the protests. *The police have invoked the offences of sedition, conspiracy, promotion of enmity between different sections, and breach of harmony between groups. Besides, they have sought to portray it as a threat to national security and an attempt to instigate violence.* A similar FIR has been filed on the basis of a complaint in Bhopal, but it invokes only sections relating to promotion of enmity and ill-will. It is apparent, and also strange, that the complainants and the police have sought to link the violence on January 26 with the circulation of a piece of misleading information for a short period. For one thing, the clashes between some of the protesters and the police had already started when the lone death among the protesters occurred; and, second, the position was clarified in a short while. As the Editors’ Guild of India has pointed out, it was natural for journalists to report emerging details on a day of protest and action at a time when several reports were coming from eyewitnesses on the ground and the police. It is a matter of concern that there is an attempt to portray these early versions as intentionally malicious. There is little surprise in the attempt by the police to invoke Section 124A of the IPC (sedition) at the slightest pretext. *It is part of the now-familiar practice of weaving a narrative of an imagined threat to national security whenever some sections of the police get an opportunity to slap criminal cases against journalists and dissenters seen as critical of the current establishment.* The violence that marred the protests that day provided them with the opportune backdrop necessary to file a sedition case. An exasperating part of this narrative is that all those who had put out similar information through their social media handles have been deemed to be acting in concert, and even participating in the same conspiracy. Hence, the inclusion of Section 120B, the conspiracy provision in the penal code. There is little doubt that the registration of cases in two States different from the place where the



farmer-protester's death occurred indicates an attempt to build a narrative that media misreporting led to some of the violence that day. It also shows a tendency not to miss an opportunity to harass and intimidate journalists.

IN AGRI-CREDIT, SMALL FARMERS ARE STILL OUTSIDE THE FENCE (A.S. MITTAL - VICE CHAIRMAN (CABINET MINISTER RANK), PUNJAB STATE PLANNING BOARD AND SONALIKA GROUP, AND CHAIRMAN-ASSOCHAM (NORTHERN COUNCIL). THE USE OF VARIOUS MEDIA REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS IS ACKNOWLEDGED)

Farmers on the warpath would mean that agriculture reforms have again occupied centre stage not just in the minds of the politicians but also policymakers. To enable small farmers to diversify their crops or improve their income they must have access to credit at reasonable rates of interest. This has been an agenda of the triad of the Centre, the States and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for decades. Unfortunately, while the volume of credit has improved over the decades, its quality and impact on agriculture has only deteriorated. Agricultural credit has become less efficient in delivering agricultural growth. Otherwise, why should over 85% of farmers' income remain stagnant over the years? Any other sector which has access to a low rate of interest credit has always boomed and ballooned so much so it has created a bubble of its own. Every year, the central government announces an increase in the target of subsidised agriculture credit limit and banks surpass the target. On February 1, Budget day, the Union Finance Minister will again set a new agricultural credit target for 2021-22. *In 2011-12, the target was ₹4.75-lakh crore; now, agri-credit has reached the target of ₹15-lakh crore in 2020-21 with an allocated subsidy of ₹21,175 crore.* The question is: where is the credit and subsidy going and are they really benefiting the farmers?

Most small farmers left out

*In the last 10 years, agriculture credit increased by 500% but has not reached even 20% of the 12.56 crore small and marginal farmers. Despite an increase in agri-credit, even today, 95% of tractors and other agri-implements sold in the country are being financed by non-banking financial companies, or NBFCs, at 18% rate of interest; the banks' long-term loans rate of interest for purchasing of the same is 11%. The central bank, the RBI, has also questioned agricultural households with the lowest land holding (up to two hectares) getting only about 15% of the subsidised outstanding loan from institutional sources (bank, co-operative society). The share is 79% for households belonging to the highest size class of land possessed (above two hectares), beneficiaries of subsidised institutional credit at 4% to 7% rate of interest. As in the Agriculture Census, 2015-16, the total number of small and marginal farmers' households in the country stood at 12.56 crore. These small and marginal holdings make up 86.1% of the total holdings. As in the Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the share of institutional loans rises with an increase in land possessed — showing that *the bulk of subsidised agri-credit is grabbed by big farmers and agri-business companies. A loose definition of agri-credit has led to the leakage of loans at subsidised rates to large companies in agri-business. Though the RBI had set a cap that out of a bank's overall adjusted net bank credit, 18% must go to the agriculture sector, and within this, 8% must go to small and marginal farmers and 4.5% for indirect loans, bank advances routinely breach the limit.* In 2017, 53% of the agriculture credit that the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) provided to Maharashtra was allocated to Mumbai*



city and suburbs, where there are no agriculturists, only agri-business. It made indirect loans to dealers and sellers of fertilizers, pesticides, seeds and agricultural implements undertaking work for farmers.

Many irregularities

A review by the RBI's internal working group in 2019 found various inconsistencies. It found that in some States, credit disbursal to the farm sector was higher than their agriculture gross domestic product (GDP) and the ratio of crop loans disbursed to input requirement was very unevenly distributed. Examples are in Kerala (326%), Andhra Pradesh (254%), Tamil Nadu (245%), Punjab (231%) and Telangana (210%). This shows the diversion of credit for non-agriculture purposes. One reason for this diversion is that *subsidised credit disbursed at a 4%-7% rate of interest is being refinanced to small farmers, and in the open market at a rate of interest of up to 36%*. Subsidised credit should be the 'cause for viable agriculture but, unfortunately, the agriculture sector's performance has not been commensurate with the subsidised credit that it has received'. Even new farm laws have not addressed the reform in the agriculture credit system. *The way forward is to empower small and marginal farmers by 'giving them direct income support on a per hectare basis rather than hugely subsidising credit*. Streamlining the agri-credit system to facilitate higher crop loans to farmer producer organisations, or the FPOs of small farmers against commodity stocks can be a win-win model to spur agriculture growth'.

THE FEMME HANDS (BHANUPRIYA - THE FOUNDER-EDITOR OF BEHANBOX, A PLATFORM FOR GENDER JOURNALISM. SANSKRITI - NEW DELHI-BASED INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST)

The Chief Justice of India, while hearing a bunch of petitions on the new farm laws, asked, "Why are women and elders kept in the protest?" He was referring to their presence in the agitations against the new farm laws and he went on to ask them to leave the protest sites. This paternalistic outlook not only denies women the agency to protest, it also erases the crucial role of women in the agriculture workforce, an erasure that is mirrored in official recognition, data and policies. Women farmers in the protests are not an inconvenient appendix to be removed. They have been an integral part of the movement since it started. Cutting across class and caste, they have actively mobilised public opinion in villages and towns of Punjab since last July. "We held special meetings across villages to educate women on how these laws would impact them," says Harinder Kaur Bindu, general secretary of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrahan), the largest farmer's union in Punjab. Many farm unions have active women's wings. From the villages, markets and gurudwaras, these women have taken the agitation to corporate sites like Vedanta's thermal plant, the malls and warehouses owned by the Adani and Ambani groups, the petrol pumps run by Reliance and to toll plazas.

CORE VALUES BEING SUBVERTED: ANSARI

Former Vice-President Hamid Ansari has said a subversion of core values is under way and the word secularism has "almost disappeared" from the government's official vocabulary. Mr. Ansari wrote in his autobiography, *By Many A Happy Accident*, that this subversion was "compounded by the abdication or failure of other social and political forces to comprehend its true nature and the urgency to counter it". According to him, *constitutional values such as a composite culture*,



fraternity and scientific temper had also seemingly disappeared from the political discourse and replaced by "promotion of beliefs and practices of the contrary". Mr. Ansari, who had a distinguished career in the foreign service before becoming Vice-President, argued that the commitment to the rule of law appeared to be under serious threat. This, he said, *arose out of a noticeable decline in the efficacy of state institutions, lapses into arbitrary decision-making and even mob rule. He said the success of populism, depicted not as an ideology but a strategy to obtain and retain power and thriving on conspiracy, criminalisation of all Opposition and playing up external threats, "proved itself" in the 2019 general election.* "It was assisted by authoritarianism, nationalism and majoritarianism. This ideological potion, premised simplistically on the desirability of oneness of language, ethnicity, religion, territory and culture was administered successfully to a little over a third of the electorate," he wrote.

Unscheduled visit by PM

Mr. Ansari revealed that one day Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an unscheduled visit to his Rajya Sabha office. "After I got over my surprise, I made the customary gestures of hospitality. He said that 'there are expectations of higher responsibilities for you but you are not helping me'." "I said that my work in the Rajya Sabha, and outside, is public knowledge. 'Why are Bills not being passed in the din?' he asked. I replied that the Leader of the House and his colleagues, when in Opposition, had appreciated the ruling that no Bills will be passed in the din and that normal procedures of obtaining consent will be observed." "He [Mr. Modi] then said that Rajya Sabha TV was not favourable to the government. My response was that while I had a role in the establishment of the channel, I had no control over the editorial content..."

THE GENDER FIREWALL

The pandemic's amplifying effect on gender inequalities has been felt in matters of income, employment, sexual violence and education — and now on intimate digital lives as well. As a report in this newspaper reveals, *dating apps have seen an unexpected growth of users in Tier-II cities in the past year, perhaps partly explained by a reverse exodus of students and working professionals from metropolises to hometowns as work and education shifted online.* But, like the rest of Indian internet, this surge in online dating has a problem: Too many men. *Sixty-seven per cent of the 31 million Indian dating app users in 2020 were men. For women on dating apps, this does not always equal to a luxury of choice.* In a patriarchal society that struggles to understand the idea of a woman's sexual consent, it makes them the objects of unwanted attention and ardour that can shade into stalking and harassment. The internet is not firewalled from the real world. Just as public spaces in India, whether they are village squares or bus terminals or assemblies and Parliament, tend to be overwhelmingly male, women are vastly outnumbered on the web as well. *A Harvard University study in 2018 found a 33 per cent gender gap in mobile ownership in India. When it came to social media use and smartphone ownership, the gap was above 60 per cent. Access improves with education and the gap narrows in urban areas.* But the familial need to control unmarried women's friendships and sexuality stands in the way. In an increasingly digitised world, this degree of inequitable access has implications for economic opportunity and income — all of which stand to be exacerbated by the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of women skews the cyberspace in ways that tend to make them even more vulnerable to abuse and harassment. It is a problem that online dating apps have sought to address in the past as they



expand in the country. In 2018, Tinder rolled out a feature for its Indian market that, once enabled, gave women users the exclusive right to initiate conversations. The Bumble dating app in India offers another shield of privacy by allowing a woman to be represented by the initial letter of her first name. The quest for love via the swipe of an app is an ongoing experiment of Indian modern identity, with the possibility of freeing young people from constraints of family diktat, gender, sexual orientation — and the puritanism about sex. As it finds new converts in new geographies, however, it will come up against the oldest opposition known to the love story — the unfreedom of women.

OVERZEALOUS THREAT

The warning by the Bihar police of legal action being taken against users of social media for “offensive” posts targeting the government, its Ministers and officials, betrays both hypersensitivity and ignorance of the law. It represents an unacceptable combination of low tolerance for criticism and a zeal to cow down the public. The Economic Offences Wing, which also deals with cyber-crime, has sent a circular to the department secretaries that they could inform the wing about such “offensive posts” so that it could act against them, terming such actions as “against prescribed law”. Presumably, the action contemplated is for an alleged cyber-crime. Even though the letter from the Inspector General of Police concerned makes no mention of any specific penal provision, it is a possible reference to Section 66A of the IT Act, as there is no other section that deals with “offensive” remarks. *Section 66A, which dealt with “Punishment for sending offensive messages through communication service, etc.” was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015, as being too broadly defined. The Act’s remaining penal provisions pertain only to other offences — sending obscene or prurient messages, hacking, stealing computer resources, identity theft, personation, and violation of privacy. There is nothing specific in the law that would render strong, even offensive and intemperate, criticism of the government a cyber-offence.* The tenor of the warning suggests that the cyber-crime wing may initiate proceedings against those who post offensive messages. However, it ought to be remembered that the police cannot register FIRs for defamation, as the offence can only be dealt with by way of criminal complaints before magistrates, and cannot be the subject of a police investigation. The government, indeed, has the power to institute criminal defamation cases through public prosecutors, if the alleged defamation is in respect of the official duties of public servants, but such measures do not exactly shore up a regime’s popularity. In response to criticism, the State government has clarified that the proposed action would only be against rumour-mongering and insulting language. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has reacted by daring the government to jail him for exposing its wrongdoing. *CM Nitish Kumar has not helped his cause by claiming that the government’s good work is not reaching the people because of criticism on social media.* There is much on social media that can be seen as crimes (hate speech, inflammatory and insulting remarks or defamation), but it ill-behoves an elected government to take note of these, unless the offenders are influential enough to cause major social divisions and foment violence. The government would do well not to act on the police circular, lest it be seen as an attempt to suppress its critics and those who make allegations of corruption.

TAXING CLUNKERS

The Centre’s proposed policy to raise road tax on vehicles of a certain age from April 1 next year has the potential to renew a big part of India’s vehicular fleet, reducing air pollution, raising fuel

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efficiency, and improving safety standards. It has taken the government years to finalise a “tax on clunkers” proposal, under which commercial transport vehicles will have to pay 10%-25% extra on road tax after eight years when renewing the fitness certificate, and, similarly, personal vehicles after 15 years; public transport is given concessions, while hybrids, electrics and farm vehicles are exempt. A higher tax in the most polluted cities, and on diesel engines is also on the cards. States, which enforce motor vehicles law, now have to weigh in on the proposed changes. Unlike similar programmes, such as the post-2008 recession CARS rebate plan in the U.S., India’s scheme relies on penal taxation to persuade owners to scrap their old vehicles, with no cash-for-trade-in arrangement. *For this approach to work efficiently, the additional tax proposed should exceed the resale value of the polluting motor, making its disposal more attractive, with enough safeguards to ensure that it is indeed scrapped and recycled under a monitored system.* Equity features can be built into the scheme, offering a discount to income-vetted marginal operators such as autorickshaw drivers, on the lines of the 2009 stimulus given under the JNNURM scheme for buses. This should ideally be part of a green post-pandemic recovery plan, with an emphasis on electric vehicles. *When the scrappage policy was on the drawing board last year, Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari envisioned a reduction in automobile prices of 20% to 30%, driven by recovery of scrap steel, aluminium and plastic, all of which would be recycled.* Now that he has a better-scoped plan, the focus must be on building capacities in the organised sector to manage the task of efficient materials recovery. Provisions will have to be built in to see that the sudden demand stimulus available to the auto industry does not disadvantage consumers, particularly those selling junk vehicles. The vehicle registration database for all States also requires updating, to reflect true numbers of old vehicles on the road, eliminating those scrapped; a significant number, more than 15 years old, still run. Such data will help target scrappage policy benefits better. Moreover, many transport vehicles are operated by small entrepreneurs who lack the resources to transition to newer ones and need help as loans and grants. *India’s policy to eliminate polluting fuel guzzlers has had a long gestation, and States should see the value of operationalising it as planned. New vehicles and cleaner fuels should help clear the toxic air in cities and towns and make roads safer.*

TRUE EMPOWERMENT OF THE ELECTRICITY CONSUMER (MANABIKA MANDAL AND SREEKUMAR NHALUR ARE FROM PRAYAS (ENERGY GROUP). THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THE INPUTS OF GROUP MEMBERS, ESPECIALLY FROM ANN JOSEY)

Did electricity consumers truly get “empowered” this December? This was the claim of the Union Power Ministry as the “Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020 was promulgated in December, almost two years since the declaration of universal electrification.

Issue of supply quality

Many States have not been able to provide quality supply, especially to rural and small electricity consumers. The enactment of consumer-centric rules does spark public debate that brings the rights of consumers to the fore. In this vein, *the Rules lay an emphasis on national minimum standards for the performance parameters of electricity distribution companies (DISCOMs), without urban-rural distinction, especially for new connections, metering and billing. They also reiterate the need for automatically compensating consumers.* But will these rules really lead to better supply quality? What are the limitations of the Rules? It needs to be recognised that providing quality



supply is primarily the responsibility of States and DISCOMs. Similar (or better) provisions by various State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs) already exist in the Standards of Performance (SoP) regulations. Such regulations have been in place for two decades in most States.

Lack of accountability

It is not because of a lack of rules or regulations that quality supply is not provided; rather, it is on account of a lack of accountability systems to enforce them. Unfortunately, neither these rules nor past efforts, be it through the draft National Tariff Policy, the proposed Electricity Act amendments, or various committee processes, address these accountability concerns. Guarantee of round the clock supply is a provision that the Rules emphasise, which might be missing in State regulations. But there are doubts on the efficacy of automatic compensation payments towards such a guarantee. This is because the availability of power supply is inadequately monitored, even at 11 kV feeders, let alone at the consumer location. Hence, it is not clear how the failure of power supply is going to be recorded. Moreover, such compensation will require serious commitment. For example, according to government reports, rural areas received about 20 hours of supply, in August 2020. Following existing regulations, this would entail compensation of hundreds of crores, but the actual amount paid adds up to just a few lakhs in each State for the entire year; even here it involves the resourceful few who could escalate their complaints to higher levels. This highlights not only the need for implementation of existing provisions in letter and spirit but also amending them with strong accountability provisions.

Weakening provisions

Further, *the Rules, in few cases, dilute progressive mechanisms that exist in State regulations. Consider the case of electricity meter-related complaints. The Rules say that faulty meters should be tested within 30 days of receipt of a complaint. Compared to this, regulations that were published as early as 2004, 2007 and 2012 in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, respectively, say that such testing needs to be conducted within seven days.* A similar observation can be drawn from the suggested composition of the Consumer Grievance Redressal Forum. *The Rules say that the forum — constituted to remedy complaints against DISCOMs as per existing laws and regulations — should be headed by a senior officer of the company. This is a regressive provision that would reduce the number of cases that are decided in favour of consumers, thereby eroding its credibility. State regulations in Delhi have different eligibility criteria, strictly mentioning that a DISCOM employee, who was in service in the last two years, cannot be appointed as a forum member. Maharashtra, Telangana and Bihar, among others, have the option of appointing a retired senior judicial officer or other independent members as the chairperson. It would be unfortunate if States now started amending their regulations to be in line with the Rules.* The Rules are not forward looking either, given the government's intent to promote rooftop solar systems. *They guarantee net metering for a solar rooftop unit less than 10 kW, but there is no clarity if those above 10 kW can also avail net metering.* This could lead to a change in regulations in many States based on their own interpretations. Instead of providing clarity, it is likely that this provision will lead to more confusion. The possible litigation that follows would be detrimental to investments in rooftop solar units, and would discourage medium and large consumers to opt for an environment-friendly, cost-effective option.



Need for commitment

A useful way to protect consumers would be to nudge SERCs to assess the SoP reports of DISCOMs and revise their regulations more frequently. The central government could disburse funds for financial assistance programmes based on audited SoP reports. With a focused one-time effort, electrification drives could provide connections across the country. But ensuring round the clock supply will require continuous efforts. We noted that without accountability, consumer compensation is meagre. The official response to this is the many 'ifs and buts' in the implementation of regulations. The enactment of the new Rules will not change this status quo. Reducing the 'ifs and buts' that delay or deny justice is what governments, DISCOMs and regulators need to jointly work on. They should demonstrate the commitment and the will power to implement existing regulations. It is not yet late to recognise this and initiate concerted efforts to truly empower consumers.

KARNATAKA TOPS IN INNOVATION, SHOWS INDEX

Karnataka retained its leadership position in the major States category in the second edition of India Innovation Index released by NITI Aayog on Wednesday. It was followed by Maharashtra, which moved past Tamil Nadu to occupy the second place. Other States in the top 10 are Telangana, Kerala, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Barring Maharashtra, all other States in the top five are in the south. Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar scored the lowest on the index, which put them at the bottom in the "major States" category. "Karnataka's rank is attributable to its substantive number of venture capital deals, registered Geographical Indications and information and communications technology exports. Its high Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflow has also enhanced the innovation capabilities of the State," the government think-tank said. Delhi topped among Union Territories, and Himachal Pradesh among North-Eastern and Hill States. The India Innovation Index, Niti Aayog said, aims to create an extensive framework for a continual evaluation of India's innovation environment. The index aims to rank States and UTs based on their scores, recognise opportunities and challenges, and assist in tailoring government policies to foster innovation. "The India Innovation Index will create synergies between different stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem, thus enabling India to shift to competitive good governance," Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Rajiv Kumar said.

WHY IS TRIPURA CM PROMOTING THE RISA?

Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb has of late made it his style statement to sport the Risa, a customary handwoven cloth used by Tripura's indigenous tribal communities. The trend has picked up on social media with people posting their photos with the Risa.

What is a Risa, and why is it important?

Risa is one of the three parts of a customary Tripuri female attire, the other two being the Rignai and Rikutu. The Risa, which is essentially a customary handwoven cloth, is used as a head gear, stole, female upper cloth or presented to honour a distinguished recipient. The Rignai is primarily used to cover lower part of the body and literally translates into 'to wear'. The Rikutu covers the upper half of the body, wrapping it all around. However, it is also used like a 'chunri' or a 'pallu' of the Indian saree. It is also used to cover the head of newly married Tripuri women. Apart from its beautiful

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



designs, the Risa plays a host of crucial social utilities. Adolescent Tripuri girls are first given risa to wear when she reaches 12-14 years in an event called Risa Sormani. The event involves *prayers to a Lampra god*, where her elder women pray for her wellbeing throughout her life. Risa is primarily used as a breastcloth and is wove in different colourful designs. However, it is also used in religious festivals like the Garia Puja, a customary festival of the tribal communities, or as a head turban by male folks during weddings and festivals, as a cummerbund over dhoti, head scarf by young girls and boys, muffler during winters. The cloth is even used as a makeshift baby carrier on the mother's back.

History

The complete Tripuri attire is claimed to have originated even before the Manikya kings' rule. In the ancient days, they used to judge a woman's intelligence in these communities by her woven Rignai and Risa designs. Though the history is contested, Maharaj Trilochana, aka Subhrai Raja — one of the early Manikya kings — is said to have invented nearly 250 designs of Rignai during his time for his 250 wives. Hundreds of years down the line, the fabric is undergoing rapid changes now, especially due to the fierce competition with power-loom manufactured products available at cheaper rates in the market. Risa comes in vivid, multi-coloured designs and the skill is handed down through generations as visual lessons. However, most of the designs were lost with the passage of time and only a few remain now.

Risa for a modern world

While Risa has been around for hundreds of years, Tripura's incumbent BJP-IPFT government claims it was not promoted as much as it should have been by the erstwhile Left Front government. They claim due to apathy from the previous governments, skilled Tripuri craftsmen and weavers were cash strapped for not being able to sell their exotic products internationally. The Biplab Deb government is now eyeing to promote Risa as the signature textile of Tripura nationally. "This will lead to greater fulfillment of Prime Minister Modi's 'vocal for Local' slogan", Deb tweeted on the eve of Kokborok Day, a state sponsored event to celebrate the Tripuri tribal language. Tripura's efforts to promote risa has received applause from most of the tribal populace. Royal scion Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma has welcomed the move to promote tribal handloom products.

AMU BURIES 'TIME CAPSULE' TO MARK ITS CENTENARY YEAR

A 1.5-ton 'time capsule', encapsulating the history of Aligarh Muslim University spanning over a century, was buried 30 feet deep on Tuesday in the park opposite the Victoria Gate to mark the Republic Day celebrations and the eventful centenary year of the university. The historic cache of information built with high-tempered steel for the communication with future generations included a copy of Sir Syed Album (by Khaliq Ahmad Nizami); essays and speeches relating to the Mohammanan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh from 1875 to 1919 (compiled by Nawab Mohsin ul Mulk) and History of MAO College, Aligarh (by Theodore Morrison). It also included the speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Centenary celebrations on December 22, 2020. A committee has been constituted to sort out the modalities for excavating a capsule buried on January 8, 1877, by Lord Lytton (the then Viceroy and Governor-General of India) during the foundation stone ceremony of the MAO College.

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



PALLBEARERS OF 'COW SCIENCE' (ANIKET SULE - ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HOMI BHABHA CENTRE FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION, MUMBAI)

The Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog (RKA), constituted in February 2019, has always been in the news for the wrong reasons. The RKA's website has posts with numerous pseudoscientific claims about cows. In October 2020, its chairperson, Dr. Vallabhkhair Kathiria, claimed that scientific experiments have proven that a "chip made of cow dung" will block harmful radiation from mobile phones. Recently, the RKA announced plans to hold a free online examination on "cow science". It published a 54-page supposed syllabus/preparation notes for this exam. Through all this, RKA has firmly established its reputation as an organisation which has no connection to real science. The blame for these foolhardy statements/decisions lies squarely at the leadership of the RKA. *The RKA's anti-science stance should have been apparent to any well-trained medical professional.* The fact that the leadership still chooses to believe in these fantasies makes their positions untenable and problematic.

Strategic silence

In any other modern country, if a government commission consistently indulged in such nonsense, the government would be obliged to put that commission on notice. However, in this case, despite repeated pseudoscientific statements by RKA heads, the parent Ministry of this commission as well as higher functionaries of the government have been turning a blind eye to the RKA or egging it on with their strategic silence. These two horsemen of the apocalypse are preponderant, but their existence is hardly surprising. *It is an open secret that in our education system, one can score well in exams and obtain higher education degrees through rote learning, and all those graduates have no real understanding of the discipline they are supposed to be trained in.* Similarly, *each political dispensation has its own share of whims and fancies — sometimes based on twisted interpretations of religion, sometimes on unhealthy loyalty to the top leadership, and sometimes on extreme views of economic principles.* The third pallbearer, however, is more disconcerting. The pseudoscientific rhetoric of the RKA is trussed by shoddy research by pliant academics. Take the example of the "cow dung chip". *To prove its claim, the RKA has produced a letter from the Department of Physics of Saurashtra University which talks about an experiment conducted in its lab. This study is not published in any research journal, but on the RKA's request, the head of the department has issued a letter detailing the experiment.* According to the letter, *radiation count from a radioactive source gets halved when you introduce a cow dung chip between the source and the Geiger-Muller counter. The experiment lacks comparisons with control. The researchers did not test if the same effect is seen if the cow dung is replaced by any other substance such as wet mud.* Without such comparison, they are not in position to claim that cow dung possesses any special property; still they do. They have written that cow dung chips of different shapes and sizes have yielded nearly the same fall in the radiation count, yet they are keen to accord significance to minor variations they observe within the readings. This is a classic example of what happens when researchers decide the conclusions first and then start designing experiments to cherry-pick the data and justify the conclusions.



Bending intellectual honesty

This is just the tip of the iceberg. If you dig deeper, you will unearth many more of their ilk, including a few from the best Indian research institutes, who are happy to bend their intellectual honesty and produce carefully crafted research papers which are all but declarations of subjection to the ruling ideology. Why? It is true that some of these academics are ideologically driven and their religious bias clouds their scientific judgment. Unfortunately, some of them are truly unaware how cheesy their research appears to the wider scientific community. *At the other end of the spectrum, there are also many who see publication of trashy but docile research as a short-cut to power and money.* In our university sector, where all appointments are politicised and research grants are extremely hard to come by, this short-cut appears even more attractive. Last, *some blame must fall on those who believe such claims. If the majority of the educated class makes its displeasure towards anti-science rhetoric clear, there will be corrective measures from the government.* Or have we descended to the level where the party matters more than truth? I hope not.

SUNDERBANS IS HOME TO 428 SPECIES OF BIRDS, SAYS ZSI

The Indian Sunderbans, which is part of the largest mangrove forest in the world, is home to 428 species of birds, a recent publication of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) states. The publication, Birds of the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve, released earlier this month by the ZSI, not only documents the avifauna of the Sunderbans, but also serves as a comprehensive photographic field guide, with detailed distribution and locality data for all the species from the region. Authors of the publication said the book, with photographs of the males and females of various species, is aimed to kindle interest and spread knowledge about birds among people from all walks of life — from forest staff to tourists to amateur birdwatchers. *The Indian Sunderbans, which covers 4,200 sq. km, also includes the Sunderban Tiger Reserve of 2,585 sq. km — home to about 96 royal Bengal tigers (as per the last census in 2020). It is a world heritage site and a Ramsar site (a wetland site designated to be of international importance).* The publication has been compiled by three scientists — Kaliash Chandra, Director, ZSI, Gopinathan Maheshwaran, head of the bird section of the ZSI, and Amitava Majumdar. *The scientists said of the 428 birds listed, some, like the masked finfoot and the Buffy fish owl, are recorded only from the Sunderbans.* The area is home to nine out of 12 species of kingfishers found in the country as well rare species such as the Goliath heron and the spoon-billed sandpiper. Highlighting the significance of the publication, Dr. Chandra said *India has over 1,300 species of birds and if 428 species of birds are from the Sunderbans, it means that one in every three birds in the country is found in the unique ecosystem.* “The publication not only highlights the ecological and conservation aspect of the Sunderbans, but through detailed description of bird species and localities where they are found we want to encourage birdwatching,” Dr. Chandra said. Pointing out that scientists and nature lovers are observing the 125th birth anniversary year of Salim Ali, the Birdman of India, the ZSI Director said birdwatching not only brings people closer to nature, but also creates awareness and livelihood opportunities for the locals. Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Head of Forest Force, West Bengal, Ravi Kant Sinha said the *Sunderbans are the most diverse of natural landscapes and accounts for 60% of all mangrove forests in the country.* “The mudflats exposed in the low tides, rich in microorganism deposited during tidal activity, are ideal feeding for migratory birds. The mudflats and wetlands



of the Sunderbans act as a stopover site for migratory flight south [southwards] and back,” Mr. Sinha added.

NEW MONSOON FORECAST MODELS ON THE ANVIL

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) may introduce new monsoon models this year to better forecast changes in rainfall. The monsoon that concluded in 2020 was unique, in that with monsoon 2019, it was only the third time in a century that India saw back-to-back years of above normal rainfall. In both years — and monsoon 2019 was a 25-year high — the IMD failed to forecast the magnitude of the excess and only indicated that the monsoon would be “above normal”. D.S. Pai, who heads the IMD’s Climate Research Services, Pune, said in his talk there were three different models that could be tested this year. Two of them were dynamical models and one a statistical model.

Computer simulation

In the former, the climate on any particular day is simulated on supercomputers and meteorologists observe the changing daily output. The other is the traditional statistical model that equates relationships of physical parameters, such as for instance sea surface temperatures, snowfall, the temperature of landmass etc, with the actual observed rainfall in the past. *The three models under consideration are: 12 global circulation models (dynamical) whose outputs would be combined into a single one; a model that gauges rainfall based on the sea surface temperature in the tropics (developed by Professor Sumant Nigam, University of Maryland, U.S.) and the statistical model based on climate variables observed during the pre-monsoon.* All of them are ‘ensembles’ meaning smaller models are combined to arrive at an average value. M. Mohapatra, Director General, IMD, told The Hindu that the traditional statistical model would continue to be used this year. “However, we will continue to have discussions and will decide later on what new approach can be added.”

NIKHIL SRIVASTAVA IS JOINT WINNER OF MATHS PRIZE

Indian mathematician Nikhil Srivastava, has been named winner of the prestigious 2021 Michael and Sheila Held Prize along with two others for solving long-standing questions on the Kadison–Singer problem and on Ramanujan graphs. Srivastava from the University of California, Berkeley, Adam Marcus, from the Ecole polytechnique federale de Lausanne (EPFL) and Daniel Alan Spielman from Yale University will receive the 2021 Michael and Sheila Held Prize, the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S. said in the statement. The prize consists of a medal and \$100,000. Srivastava, Marcus and Spielman solved long-standing questions on the Kadison–Singer problem and on Ramanujan graphs, and in the process uncovered a deep new connection between linear algebra, geometry of polynomials and graph theory it said. The decades-old Kadison–Singer problem asks whether unique information can be gleaned from a system in which only some features can be observed or measured, according to the Yale news.

NETAJI’S BIRTH ANNIVERSARY TO BE CELEBRATED AS ‘PARAKRAM DIVAS’



The Union Culture Ministry on Tuesday announced that January 23, birth anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose, would be celebrated as "Parakram Divas", day of courage, every year. In a notification, the Ministry said the government had decided to celebrate the 125th birth anniversary year starting from January 23, 2021 in a "befitting manner at national and international level". Later, at a press conference, Culture Minister Prahlad Singh Patel said Prime Minister Narendra Modi would preside over the inauguration of the celebrations in Kolkata, where a permanent exhibition on Netaji would be opened at the Victoria Memorial. A programme would be held in Cuttack, birthplace of Netaji. *The Trinamool Congress and the All India Forward Bloc demanded that the day be observed as 'Desh Prem Divas'. 'January 23 should be announced as a national holiday. It is our long-standing demand. As he was a national leader and head of the Azad Hind Fauj, these two aspects are not reflected through 'Parakram Divas',*" Trinamool leader Saugata Roy said. All India Forward Bloc State secretary Naren Chatterjee said the party had been demanding observation of Desh Prem Diwas.

WHAT IS MAHARASHTRA'S JAIL TOURISM INITIATIVE LAUNCHED FROM PUNE'S YERAWADA JAIL?

On Republic Day, the Prison Department of Maharashtra launched its jail tourism initiative starting with more than 150-year-old Yerawada Central Prison in Pune. A look at the historic importance of the prison, especially in the freedom struggle, what does jail tourism entail and how have security concerns been addressed?

What is the historical significance of Yerawada Prison and other jails in Maharashtra

Constructed in 1866, Yerawada Central Prison is the largest jail in Maharashtra and one of the largest maximum security prisons in the country. Many leaders of the Indian independence movement were incarcerated in this prison, which now has an inmate population of close to 5,000. Spread over 500 acres, the prison complex also has a minimum security open jail and a women's jail on its premises. In Maharashtra, there are 16 functioning prisons that were built in the 19th century, the oldest being Byculla District Prison in Mumbai which started in 1840. The number of prisons built in the pre-independence era is 26, which includes Swatantrapur Open Jail Colony set up in 1939, where some scenes of V Shantaram classic Do Aankhen Bara Haath (1957) were filmed. Many of these prisons in Maharashtra housed leaders of the independence struggle and countless freedom fighters. Notable among those — along with the Yerawada Prison — are the Thane, Nashik, Dhule and Ratnagiri jails — which will be added to jail tourism initiative in subsequent phases, according to officials. *Mahatma Gandhi was imprisoned at Yerawada jail three times — from March 1922 to February 1924, from January 1932 to May 1933, and for three days in August 1933, according to prison records. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak was jailed here between January 1898 and February 1899, Pandit Motilal Nehru between August 1930 and December 1930, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru between August 1930 and October 1930, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel twice, between August 1930 and November 1930, and January 1932 and August 1933, Sarojini Naidu for 12 days in December 1940 and Subhas Chandra Bose between April and May 1936.* The barracks where these leaders were housed during their terms have now been preserved. *The cell where Mahatma Gandhi was lodged is called the Gandhi Yard, which is also the place where the historic Poona Pact between Gandhi and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was signed. The mango tree under which the two leaders held talks, stands in the Gandhi Yard even today.*



What will the jail tourism entail?

Yerawada Jail has two historic yards, which are groups of cells, named after Gandhi and Tilak, which will be part of the tour for the visitors. These yards do not house inmates. The visitors will also get to see the faasi yard, the area where the death sentence is executed. This is the place where Chapekar brothers were executed in 1899 for assassination of British Plague Commissioner of Pune WC Rand. The last execution that the faasi yard witnessed was in November 2012 of Ajmal Kasab, a convict of 26/11 attacks, who was buried inside the prison premises. Considering the security and COVID-related safety concerns, initially only 50 persons will be allowed to visit the prison everyday. Currently, only groups from school, colleges or registered organisations will be allowed following an application made to Yerawada Prison superintendent, one week in advance. The prison administration has prohibited researchers working on prison or related issues to visit the premises under the scheme. People will be allowed to visit these areas following all the stringent formalities of identity verification. They will not be allowed to carry any electronic equipment or eatables. A standard operating procedure (SOP) has been put in place for these visits, which has been published on the official website of Maharashtra prison department along with the required contact details. The visits will be held between 12 noon and 3 pm, following all COVID norms. Currently, there is no entry fee but a nominal fee will be charged subsequently, an official said. The visitors will not be allowed in any other part of the jail or interact with any inmate. An official will guide the tour which will be accompanied by three to four jail guards. Photography and videography of the tour will be done by the prison staff and images from select spots will be provided to the visitors.

The Gandhi Yard, Tilak Yard and faasi yard are located close to the entry gate of the prison and cells, barracks and high-security areas are located at a distance.

WHAT UPCOMING EXPEDITION TO RAM SETU COULD REVEAL ABOUT STRUCTURES OF HISTORY, MYTH

In possibly a first, Indian scientists will undertake a scientific expedition to date the chain of corals and sediments forming the Ram Setu. Also known as Adam's bridge, this 48-km long bridge-like structure between India and Sri Lanka finds mention in the Ramayana but little about its formation is known or proven, scientifically. Recently, a central advisory board on archaeology, functioning under the Archaeological Survey of India, approved the project proposal submitted by CSIR – National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), Goa to study the sediments and determine its origin.

What is the underwater archaeological project at Ram Setu?

CSIR-NIO will undertake a three-year scientific project. “The idea is to see whether Ram Setu is a man-made structure or not. The most important aspect of the project is to establish its age, scientifically. Once it is known, the information can be verified and co-related with its mention in the Ramayana and similar scriptures,” said Prof Sunil Kumar Singh, director, NIO. Carbon dating techniques, which are now available in India, will be primarily used to determine the age of the sediments. Broadly, the explorers will apply a number of scientific techniques while attempting to date the Ram Setu, study its material composition, outline the sub-surface structure along with attempting to excavate remnants or artifacts, if any, from the site.



How is the project planned?

The project is expected to formally commence by the end of March. An initial survey will make use of underwater photographs to check if any habitation remains inundated in the area. A geophysical survey will be performed to understand the structure. "Over the years, several kinds of depositions, including sand, have covered the actual structure. Initially, only physical observation, and no drilling, will be done. A scientific survey will be performed to understand the sub-surface structure," said Singh. Once this is fully understood, the scientists plan to drill into the structure, gather samples and later perform laboratory-based studies. The NIO director added, "Some scriptures mention wooden slabs along the Setu. If so, they should have fossilised by now, which we will try to locate. Using high-end techniques, we will look for corals and date the gathered samples. NIO is equipped with the latest technology. Most of the scientific analysis will be done at NIO or within laboratories in India."

What scientific tests will be performed and which specialised teams will be part of the project?

The team will mainly comprise seasoned archaeologists, trained in diving, along with scientists to perform bathymetry – the study of ocean floors – and seismic surveys. As the locality around Ram Setu is shallow, with depth not more than 3 to 4 meters beneath water, the scientists will use local boats to ferry along the Setu. This is because large vessels or ships cannot sail at such shallow depths. *NIO operates two oceanographic vessels – RV Sindhu Sankalp (ability to go up to and remain 56 metres underwater) and RV Sindhu Sadhana (ability to go up to and remain 80 metres underwater).* For collecting core samples at greater depths and for bathymetry purposes, Sindhu Sadhana will be deployed for the Ram Setu project.

Two of the planned tests:

* *Side scan SONAR* — Will provide bathymetry which is similar to studying topography of a structure on land. Soundwaves signals will be sent to the structure which will provide an outline of the physical structure of the Ram Setu.

* *Silo seismic survey* – Mild earthquake-like tremor shocks will be sent at shallow depths close to the structure. These energised shockwaves are capable of penetrating into the structure. The reflected or refracted signals will be captured by instruments that will provide sub-surface structure.

Has India undertaken underwater archaeological explorations?

A part of Dwarka, along the coastal Gujarat, is underwater, confirming the sea-level rise. The NIO has been studying this site, and so far, traced large amounts of scattered stones which were retrieved at the depth between three to six metres beneath. Stone anchors, too, were found at the site, suggesting it to be part of an ancient harbour. In the past, NIO had initiated studies to trace the missing shore temples of Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu. Presently, several ship wreckage studies, including the one off the Odisha coast, are going on. Scientists have identified and are considering a port located close to Goa for similar scientific study.



CANCER CARE PIONEER NO MORE

A pioneer in cancer care in the country, and the chairperson of the Adyar Cancer Institute, V. Shanta breathed her last in Chennai early on Tuesday morning. She was admitted to Apollo Hospitals after she complained of chest pain on Monday night. She was 93. A crusader for cancer research and making cancer care affordable for all, Dr. Shanta and her mentor S. Krishnamurthi built the Cancer Institute from a cottage hospital into a 500-plus bedded institution, offering state-of-the-art care to people across the income spectrum. *Only 40% are paying beds and the remaining are general beds where patients are boarded and lodged free of cost. Dr. Shanta was the recipient of several honours and awards through her life, recognising her devotion to oncology care and research.* The Padma Vibhushan and Ramon Magasaysay awards were among them. Dr. Shanta encouraged research into cancer care, even as she stressed building awareness in the community, to prevent cancer. She was laid to rest with State-accorded police honours in the evening, with thousands participating in the funeral procession.

THE LEARNED EMPEROR

Babur's memoir did not have a name but is referred to as Baburnama or Tuzuk-e-Baburi. It is the first autobiography from the subcontinent and one of the first in the world. Babur came from two different cultures, of which one was literate and aspired to high culture. This was his father's ancestral family, which was Timurid. His mother came from the nomadic Mongols, who weren't literate. Babur describes his maternal uncles in his memoir. *The Timurids had a tradition of poetry, hawking, music, and, of course, war. Babur was from a family of minor nobles who had inherited the governorship of Ferghana.* His autobiography begins with a description of the geography and tells us that his father, Umar Shaikh Mirza, died in an accident when he was 39 and Babur 12. The young Babur struggled to hold on to his inheritance, losing several battles, including one in Ferghana, which he had to give up to the victor. Babur describes these decades of his life in an unemotional and direct way: he hardly valorises his own achievements.

Keen naturalist

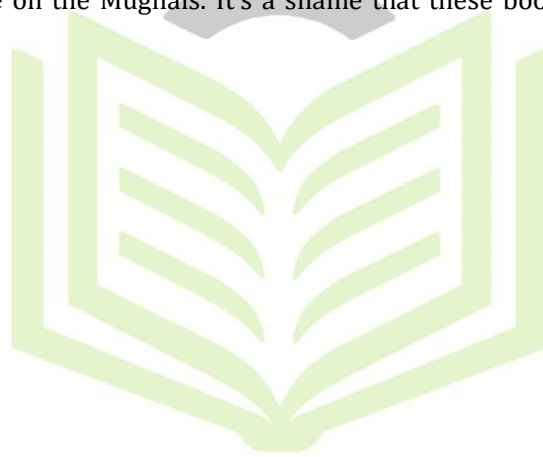
Babur's life turns when he is found to be the only living heir to the throne of Kabul. He takes it and turns his eyes to India. For 20 years, he campaigns against India, being held back at the borders each time. Then, as we know, he defeated the Lodi dynasty (introducing firearms to the subcontinent for the first time) and captured north India in 1526 after a decisive battle at Panipat. Babur died five years later, spending much of this time travelling across India and writing his memoir in the afternoons. These paragraphs show how much of a keen naturalist he was. "The elephant, which the Hindustanis call hathi, is one of the wild animals peculiar to Hindustan. It inhabits the western borders of the Kalpi country... the elephant is an immense animal and very sagacious. If people speak to it, it understands. If they command anything from it, it does it. Its value is according to its size — the larger it is, the higher the price. On some islands an elephant is rumoured to be as tall as 20 or 30 feet, but here it is not more than 10 feet. It eats and drinks entirely with its trunk. If it loses the trunk, it cannot live. It has two great teeth (tusks) in its upper jaw, one on each side of the trunk. By setting these against trees and walls, it is able to bring them down; with these it fights and does whatever hard tasks fall to it. These teeth are called ivory and are highly valued by Hindustanis.' 'Like a goat, the elephant has no skin hair. It is relied on to



accompany every troop of their armies. It crosses rivers with great ease, carrying a mass of baggage, and three or four can drag without trouble a special piece of artillery that takes four or five hundred men to haul. But its stomach is large. One elephant eats as much as a dozen camels.

Elegant and clean

Babur's book was not freely available till a British amateur linguist named Annette Susannah Beveridge translated it. She taught herself the particular version of Turkish that Babur wrote in (later Mughals wrote in Farsi) and published it in four volumes from 1912 to 1922. At the time of the first British census a century and a quarter ago, India was 4% literate. Most Indians even today don't have four generations of literacy: in fact, the proportion of those of us who can claim to have had great-grandparents who could write is tiny. Babur came from a tradition that already had centuries of literacy. His is elegant and clean writing of the sort that one would expect from a very literate and sensitive person. *Babur's daughter, Gulbadan Begum, sister of Humayun and aunt of Akbar, also wrote a lovely memoir in which she describes her father's attention to detail which he passed on to his family.* These two works, along with Jahangir's autobiography, are some of the best material available on the Mughals. It's a shame that these books are not taught in India's schools today.



DreamIAS

**BUSINESS & ECONOMICS****INDIA SET TO GROW 11.5% IN 2021: IMF**

The IMF on Tuesday projected an 11.5% growth rate for India in 2021, making the country the only major economy to register double-digit growth this year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Monetary Fund's growth projections for India reflected a rebound in the economy, which is estimated to have contracted by 8% in 2020 due to the pandemic. China is next with 8.1% growth in 2021 followed by Spain (5.9%) and France (5.5%). The IMF said that in 2020 China is the only major country which registered a positive growth rate of 2.3%. India's economy, the IMF said, is projected to grow 6.8% in 2022 and that of China by 5.6%. IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath, during a virtual press conference to release the update, said that India had a somewhat faster pace of recovery, but cumulatively by the end of 2022, its GDP is expected to be 9% below its pre-pandemic projected level.

AFTER THE STORM

The RBI has proposed a significant shift in its regulatory approach towards India's non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), from a general approach of light touch regulation to one that monitors larger players almost as closely as it does banks. If implemented, this could be the biggest overhaul of the regulatory framework for such finance companies (or shadow banks) in over two decades. *After multitudes of investors were left high and dry as CRB group firms reneged on high-interest fixed deposits in 1997, Parliament bestowed greater powers over such firms to the central bank to fix the mess. The trigger now is similar though the scale of the problem has changed. The size of NBFC balance sheets is now more than a quarter of that of banks' balance sheets, from just about 12% in 2010.* In absolute terms, their balance sheets have more than doubled, from ₹20.7-lakh crore in 2015 to ₹49.2-lakh crore in 2020. While this growth is a reflection of how lighter regulations have given them the flexibility to meet a range of financing needs, from home loans to micro-finance and large infrastructure projects, it also manifested into a systemic risk. And that risk was apparent when one of the largest infrastructure investment-focused NBFC players, IL&FS, unravelled in 2018, with its payment defaults catalysing a crisis for the entire sector. The collateral damage meant NBFCs could not raise funds easily, and faced liquidity pressures that escalated to solvency concerns in some instances. The descent of one such player, Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Limited (DHFL), began around the same time — its creditors approved a resolution plan for the firm last week. The RBI's proposed regulatory reaction to such large NBFC failures that have had a systemic impact on the sector, could not have come sooner. It has sought to strike a balance between the need to be nimble and mitigate systemic risks, with a four-tiered regulatory structure. *This entails a largely laissez-faire approach for smaller NBFCs, plugging some of the arbitrages available to mid-sized NBFCs vis-à-vis banks, and imposing tougher 'bank-like' capitalisation, governance and monitoring norms for the largest players and those which could pose a systemic risk due to the nature of their operations. A top tier has been envisaged with even more scrutiny, but the RBI wants to ideally use this approach only when a certain large player poses 'extreme risks'.* Given the banking sector's own woes over the past two years (PMC Bank, Yes Bank, Lakshmi Vilas Bank), a holistic reboot of the oversight mechanism for NBFCs and banks is critical to retain confidence and maintain financial stability which central bank Governor Shaktikanta Das



has termed a 'public good'. It is hoped that the blueprint for the regulation of NBFCs which can lend for activities banks often do not support, be it micro-loans or infrastructure projects, is formalised soon. This would ensure the fledgling economic recovery is not hampered by funding constraints.

WHY GOVT BORROWS OFF-BUDGET, AND HOW

One of the most sought after details in any Union Budget is the level of fiscal deficit. It is essentially the gap between what the central government spends and what it earns. In other words, it is the level of borrowings by the Union government. This number is the most important metric to understand the financial health of any government's finances. As such, it is keenly watched by rating agencies — both inside and outside the country. That is why most governments want to restrict their fiscal deficit to a respectable number. *One of the ways to do this is by resorting to "off-budget borrowings". Such borrowings are a way for the Centre to finance its expenditures while keeping the debt off the books — so that it is not counted in the calculation of fiscal deficit.*

What are off-budget borrowings?

According to the last Budget documents, in the current financial year the Centre was set to borrow Rs 5.36 lakh crore. However, *this figure did not include the loans that public sector undertakings were supposed to take on their behalf or the deferred payments of bills and loans by the Centre. These items constitute the "off-budget borrowings" because these loans and deferred payments are not part of the fiscal deficit calculation.* This year was no exception. Every year, the Finance Minister announces the quantum of funds that will be raised by the government by borrowing from the market. This amount and the interest due on it is reflected in the government debt. *Off-budget borrowings are loans that are taken not by the Centre directly, but by another public institution which borrows on the directions of the central government. Such borrowings are used to fulfil the government's expenditure needs. But since the liability of the loan is not formally on the Centre, the loan is not included in the national fiscal deficit. This helps keep the country's fiscal deficit within acceptable limits.* As a result, as a Comptroller and Auditor General report of 2019 points out, *this route of financing puts major sources of funds outside the control of Parliament.* "Such off-budget financing is not part of the calculation of the fiscal indicators despite fiscal implications," said the report.

How are off-budget borrowings raised?

The government can ask an implementing agency to raise the required funds from the market through loans or by issuing bonds. For example, food subsidy is one of the major expenditures of the Centre. *In the Budget presentation for 2020-21, the government paid only half the amount budgeted for the food subsidy bill to the Food Corporation of India. The shortfall was met through a loan from the National Small Savings Fund.* This allowed the Centre to halve its food subsidy bill from Rs 1,51,000 crore to Rs 77,892 crore in 2020-21. Other public sector undertakings have also borrowed for the government. For instance, *public sector oil marketing companies were asked to pay for subsidised gas cylinders for Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries in the past.* Public sector banks are also used to fund off-budget expenses. For example, loans from PSU banks were used to make up for the shortfall in the release of fertiliser subsidy.



If these numbers were included, what would the government fiscal deficit look like?

“If we consider the amount borrowed from the NSSF only for this year, the fiscal deficit will go up by Rs 40,000 to Rs 50,000 crore in absolute terms,” said Professor N R Bhanumurthy, Vice-Chancellor of B R Ambedkar School of Economics, Bengaluru. In addition to the borrowings by PSUs, the actual liabilities of the government would include loans taken for the recapitalisation of banks and capital expenditures of the Ministries of Railways and Power. Given the various sources of off-budget borrowing, the true debt is difficult to calculate. For instance, it was widely reported that in July 2019, just three days after the presentation of the Budget, the CAG pegged the actual fiscal deficit for 2017-18 at 5.85% of GDP instead of the government version of 3.46%.

HOW CSR EXPENDITURE RULES HAVE CHANGED FOR INDIAN COMPANIES

The Corporate Affairs Ministry has amended the rules for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) expenditure by India Inc to allow companies to undertake multi-year projects, and also require that all CSR implementing agencies be registered with the government. We look at some of the key changes.

How do the new rules enable corporations to undertake multi-year CSR projects?

All companies with a net worth of Rs 500 crore or more, a turnover of Rs 1,000 crore or more, or net profit of Rs 5 crore or more, are required to spend 2 per cent of their average profits of the previous three years on CSR activities every year. The amended CSR rules allow companies to set off CSR expenditure above the required 2 per cent expenditure in any fiscal year against required expenditure for up to three financial years. Experts do, however, note that there was ambiguity whether the rule would apply for expenditure undertaken prior to the amendment. *“The government may consider allowing corporates which have in good faith incurred excess CSR expenditure in the past to set it off against future CSR expenditure requirements,”* said Harish Kumar, partner at law firm L&L partners.

What are the changes required for implementing agencies?

A large number of companies conduct CSR expenditure through implementing agencies, but the new amendment restricts companies from authorising either a Section 8 company or a registered public charitable trust to conduct CSR projects on their behalf. A Section 8 company is a company registered with the purpose of promoting charitable causes, applies profits to promoting its objectives and is prohibited from distributing dividends to shareholders. Further, *all such entities will have to be registered with the government by April 1.* Experts note that the change would impact CSR programmes of a number of large Indian companies that conduct projects through private trusts. Kumar said the change would mean such private trusts would either have to be converted to registered public trusts, or stop acting as CSR implementing agencies “given that a sizeable amount of CSR is being contributed through their private trusts by many companies, including blue-chip companies.” An expert who did not wish to be quoted said private trusts such as the Reliance Foundation, Bharti Foundation and DLF Foundation, which handle a majority of CSR expenditure for affiliated companies, would be impacted by this change.



What are other key changes?

The amended rules require that *any corporation with a CSR obligation of Rs 10 crore or more for the three preceding financial years would be required to hire an independent agency to conduct impact assessment of all of their project with outlays of Rs 1 crore or more. Companies will be allowed to count 5 per cent of the CSR expenditure for the year up to Rs 50 lakh on impact assessment towards CSR expenditure.*



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LIFE & SCIENCE

THREE MEN ARE PAYING \$50MN EACH TO TRAVEL TO THE ISS. ALL ABOUT THE MISSION

A former Israeli fighter pilot, an American technology entrepreneur and a Canadian investor will be part of the crew of the first entirely-private orbital space mission. *The three men are paying a whopping \$55 million each to fly aboard a SpaceX rocket for an eight-day visit to the International Space Station, organised by Houston-based spaceflight firm Axiom.*

What do we know about the mission?

The Axiom Mission 1 (AX 1) flight is being arranged under a commercial agreement with NASA. While private citizens have travelled to space before, the AX 1 mission will be the first to use a commercially built spacecraft, the SpaceX Dragon 2, best known for flying its first two crews to the ISS late last year. Elon Musks' SpaceX is scheduled to launch the all-private crew no earlier than in January next year. After lifting off from Cape Canaveral in Florida, the crew will take about a day or two to arrive at the ISS and will then proceed to spend eight days there, AP reported. But Axiom insists that the mission is by no means a vacation. The three men will participate in research and philanthropic projects alongside the astronauts from all over the world who are already stationed at the ISS.

What training will the crew receive?

Axiom chief executive Suffredini told AP that the private astronauts will have to pass medical tests and also undergo 15 weeks of rigorous training before their trip to space.

Is this the first time civilians have been launched into space?

No, private civilians have travelled to the space station before. Since 2001, Russia has been selling rides to the ISS to wealthy businessmen around the world. They travelled onboard the Russian Soyuz aircraft along with professional cosmonauts and NASA astronauts. Until 2019, NASA did not permit ordinary citizens to be launched into space from American soil. It finally reversed its stance, stating that the missions would help spur growth in the commercial space industry, the Washington Post reported. Several other space companies, including Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, also plan to take paying customers to space in the near future. But these up-and-down flights will last mere minutes, AP reported.

TECH GIANTS V REGULATORS

Parliament in Australia is debating legislation that would require Google and Facebook to enter into payment negotiations with media companies for using their content, with an arbiter mandated to adjudicate in the event an agreement cannot be reached. The Internet companies have pushed back against the legislation — and the fight is being watched around the world, given the impact the outcome could have across geographies, including in India. There is also renewed focus on a template that has been rolled out with some success in South Korea. Nearly four years previously, Naver, South Korea's most popular news site and biggest search engine, had thrashed out an unusual model for working with Korean news publishers — designating some 125 outlets



as “Naver News in-link partners”, and paying them for published stories on Naver. Another 500 odd news outlets are unpaid “search partners”. The total payout was over \$40 million in 2017. While this may not be the perfect model — news outlets have generally been unsatisfied with their share; also, there has been controversy recently over allegations that Naver manipulated the ranking of articles critical of South Korea’s top football association on the latter’s request — the template remains operational in a nation where nearly 85 per cent of the population accesses news online.

The fight in Australia

Google last week threatened to remove its search engine from Australia. Facebook said it could block Australian users from posting or sharing news links if the proposed norms on royalty payments were put into operation. Representatives of the tech majors appeared at a Senate hearing in Canberra last Friday. They argued that the media industry was already benefiting from traffic routed to them by the digital platforms, and that the proposed rules would expose them to “unmanageable levels of financial and operational risk”.

WHAT IS ANTIFREEZE THAT HAS MADE US SOLDIERS FALL ILL?

Eleven US soldiers fell sick on Thursday after accidentally drinking *ethylene glycol*, a chemical found in antifreeze. According to a Reuters report, the soldiers from Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas were completing a 10-day field training exercise when the incident occurred. The soldiers who consumed it thought that they were drinking an alcoholic beverage as per reports. The matter is now under investigation by the US Army Criminal Investigation Command, commonly known as the CID.

What is antifreeze?

Ethylene glycol is an industrial compound found in consumer products including automotive antifreeze, hydraulic brake fluids, some stamp pad inks, ballpoint pens, solvents, paints, plastics, films, and cosmetics and is also used as a pharmaceutical vehicle. *It is a synthetic liquid, which is odourless and is used to make antifreeze and de-icing solutions for cars, airplanes and boats.* According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ethylene glycol has a sweet taste and is often accidentally or intentionally ingested. *Once ingested, ethylene glycol is chemically broken down into toxic compounds. These byproducts then affect the central nervous system (CNS), the heart and then the kidneys.* CDC says that the ingestion of sufficient amounts can be fatal. Ethylene glycol can be disseminated through indoor air, water, food, outdoor air and agricultural products. Depending on the quantity of ethylene glycol consumed, death can occur within the first 24 hours and permanent damage to the nervous system may also occur, which can cause blindness and decreased mental functioning. As per a report in The New York Times, out of the 11 soldiers who fell sick, one is a warrant officer, two are noncommissioned officers and eight are enlisted soldiers.

TESTING THE EFFICACY OF A NASAL SARS-COV-2 VACCINE

Recently, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation recommended granting permission for phase 1 human clinical trials for Bharat Biotech’s nasal COVID-19 vaccine, BBV154. On its website,

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



Bharat Biotech said “the nasal route has excellent potential for vaccination due to the organised immune systems of the nasal mucosa”. Effectively, intranasal candidates have shown good potential for protection in animal studies conducted thus far.

What is a nasal vaccine?

An intranasal vaccine does exactly what it says it does — deliver a vaccine through a spritz through the nostrils. The advantages of this method of vaccine delivery over the injection and oral forms are quite apparent. The method comes with the guarantee of better compliance and the advantage of lower costs. But only clinical trials can determine whether such a vaccine with an easy delivery mechanism can be efficacious too. In August 2020, scientists at Washington University School of Medicine said they had developed a nasal vaccine that targets the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Science Daily reported the study published in Cell, a journal, specifying that the vaccine could be given in one dose via the nose and was effective in preventing infection in mice susceptible to the novel coronavirus. The investigators then revealed their plan to test the vaccine further on non-human primates and humans.

Is the vaccine suitable for COVID-19?

The Washington University study, while doing a comparison, found that *while a COVID-19 vaccine injection (at that stage) induced an immune response that prevented pneumonia, it did not prevent infection in the nose and lungs*. Such a vaccine might reduce the severity of COVID-19, but it could not prevent infected individuals from spreading the virus, said the study. A study published in Science Direct in December 2020 showed the pre-clinical efficacy of a lentiviral vector, delivered nasally, as a COVID-19 vaccine. The authors said targeting the immune response to the upper respiratory tract provides critical protection, and intranasal vaccination induces protective mucosal immunity against the SARS-CoV-2 in rodents. *Given that the SARS-CoV-2 virus shows a proclivity to dwell in the upper respiratory tract for a prolonged period of time, a safe and efficacious nasal vaccine is well-placed to target the literal entry point of the virus into the body*. Earlier this month, researchers at Lancaster University working with the Biomedical Research Institute in Texas claimed they had administered two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine via a nasal spray in animals, and this had elicited robust antibodies and T-cell responses that were enough to be able to neutralise SARS-CoV-2.

Are there other such nasal vaccines?

So far, intranasal vaccination is being used only for influenza. However, it cannot be used on certain groups of people, particularly those who have compromised immune systems. Science Daily reports that “the new COVID-19 intranasal vaccine in the Washington University study does not use a live virus capable of replication, presumably making it safer”. The Bharat Biotech vaccine also rides on an adenovirus vector.

Will it be a game changer?

Dr. V.K. Paul, a neonatologist and member of the NITI Aayog, said, “It looks like an exciting development because potentially, yes, this route can be used to deliver the safe antigen against which an immunological response would happen. If it does work, it can be a game-changer because it is so easy to use and we look forward to this development.” AIIMS director Randeep



Guleria recently commented in an interaction that if the nasal vaccine was approved, it will be easier to give. "In half-an-hour, you can vaccinate an entire class," he said. The injectable vaccine being used now is not recommended for children.



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