




CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

Current Affairs, 7th to 13th February, 2021

DREAMIAS





INTERNATIONAL

BIDEN TO ALLOW ASYLUM SEEKERS INTO U.S.

The U.S. government next week will begin to gradually process asylum seekers forced to wait in Mexico under a controversial programme put in place by former President Donald Trump, officials said. The moves are part of a plan by the administration of President Joe Biden to end the programme, known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), an effort complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and concerns over illegal immigration. The Trump administration launched the programme in 2019 as part of a wide-ranging crackdown on the ability to seek asylum in the U.S., which Trump officials depicted as rife with fraud and meritless claims. The initiative forced more than 65,000 non-Mexican asylum seekers back across the border to wait for their U.S. court hearings, although far fewer are believed to still be in Mexico. The Biden administration will begin by working to process about 25,000 migrants with active claims in the program, officials said on Thursday. Mr. Biden *vowed on the campaign trail to roll back restrictive Trump-era immigration policies, including MPP, which is informally known as "remain in Mexico". His administration suspended new entries into the program when he took office on January 20, but did not immediately put forward a plan to bring those already in the program into the United States. Republicans embracing Mr. Trump's hardline immigration views have criticised the ending of MPP and could use it as fuel for political attacks if illegal immigration increases on Mr. Biden's watch.* Top Biden officials have stressed in recent weeks that migrants should not attempt to enter the United States, saying they need more time to build up the capacity to process more asylum seekers. "Individuals who are not eligible under this initial phase should wait for further instructions and not travel to the border," Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, said in a statement. "Due to the current pandemic, restrictions at the border remain in place and will be enforced."

Phase 1 from February 19

During a call with reporters on Thursday evening, three Biden administration officials described the plans to reverse the programme, with the first phase beginning on February 19. Under the plan, migrants will need to register with international organisations over the Internet or by phone and await instructions. An international organisation will test migrants for COVID-19 while they are in Mexico. Biden officials declined to identify the organisations on Thursday, saying they would be inundated with inquiries.

IN BIDEN'S POLICY PURSUIT, THE WORLD ORDER CHALLENGE (TALMIZ AHMAD - FORMER DIPLOMAT)

Some of the remarks by Joe Biden, now the United States President, during the U.S. presidential election campaign have come to haunt him. *He had, in August 2019, been a strident critic of the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He had then promised that, subject to Iran's compliance with its obligations, the U.S. would re-enter the agreement. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a recent Foreign Affairs article (<https://fam.ag/2Nhz80U>), has reminded Mr. Biden of his commitment and called on him to end the "failed policies" of the earlier administration that had made West Asia "the most militarised region in the world".* He also warned that "containment" of Iran would not work. Israel has given

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the opposite message: its armed forces commander, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, in a belligerent speech on January 26, said that the nuclear agreement was “*bad and must not be allowed*”. *He added that Israel had operational plans to take “decisive action”. Israel and the U.S.’s Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have also insisted that they be involved with the discussions with Iran on the revival of the agreement.*

Regional concerns

In office, Mr. Biden has shown little urgency on the JCPOA matter. Clearly, there are some serious issues at stake here. Despite the sanctions, *Iran’s regional influence remains significant, based on the backing of Shia militia in such diverse locales as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. The Iranian ability to mobilise militants across the region is viewed by Israel and some the Gulf Arab states as threatening their security, the latter being concerned about Iran’s influence with their Shia populations as well. The capabilities of Iran’s precision missiles and drones are also a matter of regional anxiety. Iran has focused on the domestic development of missiles due to international sanctions on defence supplies.* Iran views them as defensive assets that give it a deterrence capability. Given the advanced air and missile power available with Israel, Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states, there is no prospect of Iran curtailing its missiles and drone programmes. Mr. Biden in office has already revealed that despite some differences in policy content and diplomatic style, his term is likely to show more continuity than change where the U.S.’s core interests are concerned, specifically in its ties with Russia, China and Iran. For instance, in his CBS interview on February 7, Mr. Biden said he had not spoken to the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, who “*doesn’t have a democratic bone in his body*”, and anticipated “extreme competition” on global economic issues. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, was tough with his counterpart in their telephonic conversation, and raised “*human rights and democratic values*” in the context of *Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong.*

Biden’s policy approaches

Again, Mr. Biden *is likely to reverse his predecessor Donald Trump’s personal accommodative approach towards Russia and adopt the U.S.’s traditional confrontational posture.* The White House said that, in his conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on January 26, he made it clear that the U.S. “*will act firmly in defence of our national interests in response to actions by Russia*” and *brought up Ukraine, the cyber attacks and the poisoning of Russian Opposition leader Alexei Navalny.* Mr. Biden’s Iran policy is likely to match Mr. Trump’s hardline approach on substantive matters, but without the bravado and crude brinkmanship of the former President. On January 29, the *Pentagon spokesperson described Iran as a “malign actor” in the region, referred to Iran’s “active ballistic missiles” programmes, the fact that it is still “re-spinning centrifuges”, and highlighted the need to protect the U.S.’s regional partners from Iran’s “acts of terrorism” — these issues and the accompanying rhetoric are the same as those of the Trump administration.* This approach also panders to Iran’s regional rivals who wish to see the Islamic republic emasculated and isolated. There will thus be no dramatic change in the U.S.’s approach to Iran on the nuclear question. *The appointment of a Special Envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, suggests that the U.S. is looking at a long-term diplomatic engagement not just on nuclear issues but on all matters that have security implications for the U.S. and its regional partners. To encourage this dialogue, the U.S. could offer some palliatives to Iran, such as International Monetary Fund providing funds to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic, but with no early easing of sanctions on oil sales.* Iran may quickly find that



it has to largely depend on its own resources to manage its interests at home and in the region. Its elections in June could thus put in place leaders who see no benefits in working cooperatively with western powers.

The international lines

Battle lines will thus remain in place in the region — Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will be in a face-off with Iran and its allies, Iraq, Syria and its Shia militia — in a prolonged war of attrition that does not resolve any issue, but continues to wreak death and destruction. *Alternatively, we could see a genuine regional effort to ease tensions and promote regional confidence, spearheaded by Qatar, working with Russia and, possibly, China. Qatar's Foreign Minister has already proposed direct engagement with Iran. Perhaps, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, already facing heat from the Biden administration, will see the value of this approach as they had done during heightened tensions in the Gulf waters in 2019: the UAE had then discussed maritime security with Iran, while Saudi Arabia had encouraged mediation efforts by regional states. As Mr. Biden pursues policies of an earlier era, he will find that much has changed in West Asia and the world since he was last in office.* Not only is Russia now an influential player in the region, China, too, with its Belt and Road Initiative, has high stakes in regional stability. *The Sino-Iran 25 years agreement, which was leaked last year, envisages their substantial and long-term cooperation in political, security, military, economic, energy and logistical connectivity areas. Its formal finalisation was deliberately postponed by both sides to see what the U.S. elections would throw up. With Mr. Biden being confrontational, they are likely to pursue this partnership more openly and robustly. Mr. Biden will thus witness a new world order, shaped by a coalition of Russia, China and Iran, in which the U.S. is no longer the most significant role-player. This tectonic change will define international affairs in coming decades.*

SETTING THE TONE

U.S. President Joe Biden has sounded the starting bell for the great game of bilateral give-and-take between Washington and major world powers, including India and China, when he made his first calls, as President, to key allies and partner nations. Already, it is evident that the issues and tensions that will define the cadence of U.S.-India ties and U.S.-China ties are variegated and embrace the complexity of today's multi-dimensionally interconnected world. While some analysts complained that Mr. Biden took “too long” to call Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on February 8, it is noteworthy that the call was shortly after the White House had reached out to immediate neighbours and treaty allies, thereby indicating that Washington's engagement with India will continue to be a priority. Mr. Biden's call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, which came two days later, reflected a sharper, even strident, exchange of views, with palpable diplomatic choke points, including China's actions towards Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Uighur minority community in Xinjiang, making their presence felt in the call readouts. What is clear is that the Biden administration will seek to retain a few elements of the Trump White House paradigm — such as persisting with trade tariffs — while pursuing foreign policy objectives that resonate far more closely with core Democratic Party values, including fighting for the integrity of democratic institutions abroad. Indeed, the Biden White House's insistence on keeping respect for democratic institutions front and centre amidst the gamut of bilateral issues might be causing South Block some discomfort. Given the State Department's comments so far on the farmers' protest in the NCR, including statements that could be interpreted as pushback against Internet outages



imposed at the protest locations, Mr. Biden's flagging "his desire to defend democratic institutions and norms around the world", and a "shared commitment to democratic values" as the "bedrock for the U.S.-India relationship", might not be the solace Mr. Modi's foreign policy team was looking for. But Mr. Biden has adopted a softer approach with New Delhi than he did with Beijing — he had "fundamental concerns about Beijing's coercive and unfair economic practices", in addition to the points of diplomatic tension regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. In their core message, Mr. Biden's calls to Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi hint that unlike the transactional approach of the "America First" dogma, the thread of the U.S.'s foreign policy paradigm now will comprise progressive values, a commitment to internationalism, and reliance on regional cooperation on global governance subjects including climate change. Indeed, this could put the brakes on the accelerating global trend toward nationalism in foreign policy across the world.

U.S. TO REJOIN UN HUMAN RIGHTS FORUM

The U.S. announced plans on Monday to reengage with the much-maligned UN Human Rights Council that former President Donald Trump withdrew from almost three years ago, as President Joe Biden's administration reverses another Trump-era move away from multilateral organisations and agreements. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the pullout in June 2018 "did nothing to encourage meaningful change, *but instead created a vacuum of U.S. leadership, which countries with authoritarian agendas have used to their advantage.*" Mr. Blinken said Mr. Biden had instructed the State Department to "reengage immediately and robustly" with the council, but he acknowledged it still needs work. "We recognise that the Human Rights Council is a flawed body, in need of reform to its agenda, membership, and focus, including its disproportionate focus on Israel," he said.

WHY THE NORD STREAM 2 PIPELINE BETWEEN GERMANY AND RUSSIA IS CONTROVERSIAL

In a development that could ratchet up tensions between the United States and Germany, the consortium building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has said that it has resumed work on the controversial project. On Saturday, Russian energy major Gazprom said that it had resumed laying pipes in Danish waters, defying US sanctions. "All works are performed in line with the relevant permits. We will provide further information about the construction works and further planning in due time," the consortium said about the project, which will double the amount of natural gas exported from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline

In 2015, Gazprom and 5 other European energy firms decided to build Nord Stream 2, valued at around \$11 billion. The 1,200 km pipeline will run from Ust-Luga in Russia to Greifswald in Germany, and will carry 55 billion cubic metres of gas per year. The under-construction pipeline will run along the already-completed Nord Stream 1 system, and the two together will supply an aggregate of 110 billion cubic metres of gas to Germany per year. The pipeline falls in German and Danish territory, and all but 150 km of pipes for the project have already been laid.



Why the pipeline is controversial

Since it was first planned, *Nord Stream 2* has drawn criticism from the US, where both the Democratic and Republican parties believe that the project would increase Europe's dependence on Russia for natural gas, thus boldening its President Vladimir Putin. Currently, EU countries already rely on Russia for 40% of their gas needs. The project has also irked Ukraine, whose ties with Russia have seriously deteriorated in the aftermath of the Crimean conflict in 2014. There is an existing land pipeline between Russia and Europe that runs through Ukraine, which feels that once Nord Storm 2 is completed, Russia could bypass the Ukrainian pipeline, and deprive the country of lucrative transit fees. France has also expressed its opposition to the project, as have some others in Eastern Europe. Germany, however, has solidly stood behind the Nord Stream 2, despite opposition from allies, with Chancellor Angela Merkel's government insisting that it is a commercial project. Critics of the US position say that Washington is forcing Europe to buy its sea-borne liquified natural gas.

Avoiding America's wrath

In December 2019, work on the project was suspended due the threat of US sanctions. Then in January this year, the US carried out its threat for the first time, imposing sanctions on a Russian ship tasked with laying pipes for the project. Although work on the project has resumed, experts believe that US sanctions could still end it. According to The Economist, a possible way to salvage the project and allay Washington's fears would be by imposing automatic sanctions on Russia should it decide to stop using the land pipelines through Ukraine and deprive it of transit fees.

WHY HAS COLUMBIA GRANTED TEMPORARY LEGAL STATUS TO VENEZUELAN?

Columbian President Iván Duque announced that Venezuelans will have temporary protected status for the next ten years in what is being called a "historic" decision. The decision covers more than 1.7 million Venezuelans who have fled to Columbia in the last few years. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi said on Twitter, "Today Colombia gave an extraordinary example to the region and the world by granting temporary protection status for 10 years to all Venezuelans on its territory. My gratitude to President @IvanDuque, and to the Colombian people and government, for this historic, generous act."

What is the move and what has been the response to it?

According to a report in the New York Times, under this programme, those Venezuelans who entered Columbia without permission before January 31 will be eligible for legalisation and those who already have legal status will have a decade to reapply for permission to stay in the country. Duque said that the temporary protection statute is for those Venezuelan migrants who are fleeing dictatorship in their country. "This mechanism allows us to have information to grant them immigration status and, in 10 years, the possibility of a resident visa," Duque said on Twitter. According to Columbian newspaper El Espectador, the government's move has been welcomed by multiple sectors including the opposition. *One Senator, however, Gustavo Bolívar has criticised the move and has said that Duque took this decision to win the upcoming elections. However, as per Columbian law, foreigners cannot vote in electoral processes for the presidency and senate and can only participate in electoral processes for the mayor's office and the governor's office, the report in El Espectador says.*



Why are Venezuelans fleeing their country?

Venezuela is currently under the authoritarian rule of President Maduro, who belongs to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela and took his position in 2013 after the death of former president Chávez. After completing his first term, Maduro began his second term in January 2019, which is seen by many Venezuelans and members of the international community as illegitimate. But the country has been facing problems since the mid-2010s when the global boom in commodities ended. As a result of this, the country slipped into an economic crisis and entered recession in 2014. Among Latin America's poorest countries, its oil-dependent economy had grown significantly during the boom, and massive investments in social spending during that time by President Hugo Chávez – Nicolás Maduro's predecessor and mentor– ensured the popularity of the “chavistas”, as the socialists are called. After the economic collapse, the crime rate in the country doubled and inflation multiplied in a situation that was made worse by Western sanctions. For instance, Maduro has blamed the US sanctions on Venezuela's state oil company and government for the economic problems that the country is currently riddled with, which include hyperinflation, food and medicine shortages and electricity blackouts. Maduro has also accused the US of trying to rule the country from afar. Meanwhile, in order to increase pressure on Maduro officials, the US government also coordinates diplomatic efforts in support of Juan Guaidó—the opposition leader—some of which include visa revocations and targeted sanctions. In December 2020, Maduro consolidated his grip on power, with candidates favouring his rule declared to have won the National Assembly -- the only bastion that had so far remained out of his Socialist Party's control. Western nations, however, have already discredited the election as a fraud by Maduro, and continue to recognise Guaidó as the country's legitimate leader. According to UN estimates, over 90 per cent of the country was living in poverty in April 2019 and an estimated 4.8 million Venezuelans have fled the country for other places in Latin America and for the Caribbean countries as of February 2020.

AN INDIA-EU TRADE PACT MAY STILL REMAIN ELUSIVE (KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN - FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY)

After its invitation to British Prime Minister and arch-Brexiteer Boris Johnson to visit India, New Delhi plans to start negotiations on investment and trade agreements with the European Union (EU). These are likely to run into the same problems as the discussions that began on a comprehensive free trade agreement in 2007 but were aborted due to differences on movement of professionals, labour, human rights and environmental issues and India's high tariffs, inconsistent tax regime and non-payment of arbitral awards. Before COVID-19 and Brexit, the EU had the same GDP as the United States and was one of India's major trade and investment partners. Being the largest democracies and unions of linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse States, both the EU and India are well suited for a special relationship, but the reality is that the status is one without any spark of mutual chemistry. The EU now finds itself in an unusually turbulent situation. COVID-19, Brexit and international tensions caused by former U.S. President Donald Trump have unsettled the EU and exacerbated internal discords. The crises of 2020 obfuscated the structural lack of unity in the EU, because despite its desire for greater integration, it faces obstacles from adherence to the rule of law to a strategy for dealing with China, Russia, Turkey and Iran. After months of tortuous negotiation over Hungary and Poland's objections, member States finally agreed on a long-term budget and a COVID-19 recovery package of \$2 trillion. The two countries had opposed anti-COVID-19 support



being linked to good governance, in particular, accusations of suppression of human rights and lack of independence in the judiciary.

Shadow of Euroscepticism

The EU's attempt to condition its budget on the rule of law during the pandemic and recession only sharpened the emphasis on the veto power to which every member State is entitled. Apart from the two main defaulters, many others also resiled on civil liberties, making the option of approving COVID-19 recovery funds by excluding the dissenters a proposition that would have risked a dangerous controversy on how united the EU should be. It was not only Britain that spawned a populist movement agitating to leave the EU. Europe's many Eurosceptic parties now focus on preventing closer unity, which has been lacking on the eurozone and migration crises and implementing COVID-19 lockdowns. Elections are due in many EU States, including Germany and the Netherlands, which both have strong Eurosceptic movements. The Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) is the official opposition in Germany, while in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders leads the largest opposition party. The fear of Eurosceptic parties forces mainstream politicians, as in Britain, to adopt populist rhetoric. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and French President Emmanuel Macron have criticised Islam and anti-secular immigrants, a pattern repeated in other EU countries including Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria.

Trump and a recalibration

The Trump presidency forced Europe to reassess its relationship with America, which stimulated the EU's drive for greater self-reliance in security, economics, supply chains and climate change, and an attempt to emerge as a major global pillar alongside the United States and China. While there is relief that the U.S. may now be more predictable, Europe will resist taking sides in any U.S.-China tug of war. This is underlined by the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment concluded after minimal consultation with Washington. A common security and defence policy also causes division. Mr. Macron would like to see Europe take greater control of its security, but Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and others are uncomfortable with the prospect of building larger military capabilities, and remain content with security being subsidised by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the U.S. while they continue to engage in profitable business with China and Russia. The COVID-19 pandemic led to riots in the Netherlands for the first time in 40 years, and the resignation of the Italian Prime Minister. It also introduced divisive vaccine nationalism into the Union. The EU hoped that its central vaccination procurement would be a symbol of solidarity, although initially some members closed their borders, Germany and France restricted exports of personal protective equipment, and there was suspicion by some about the motives of others that were hosts to big vaccine producers. Those fissures are now overshadowed by the EU's procurement programme for the bloc from Astra-Zeneca, Moderna and Pfizer, which warn that vaccines cannot be delivered as scheduled due to production problems despite advance payment, and the anticipated shortfall will be up to 60% in the current year's quarter. Lately, it transpires that the German government, ostensibly a strong advocate of European solidarity, had negotiated a separate vaccine contract with Pfizer in September last year. For the EU to resolve these innumerable and diverse problems without further widening existing ruptures will require enormous political will and adroit skill. Trade agreements with India will be the least of its problems.



MYANMAR COUP

Since Myanmar's military seized power on February 1 by ousting Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government, there have been growing civil protests in the Southeast Asian country against the coup. A striking feature of the protests is the three-finger salute displayed by pro-democracy activists, a symbol of resistance that was also seen in October last year at demonstrations against the monarchy of King Maha Vajiralongkorn in neighbouring Thailand.

What does the three-finger salute mean?

The gesture, which traces its origins to the Hunger Games books and movies by Suzanne Collins, was first used by medical workers in Myanmar protesting against the coup. It was then adopted by youth protesters, and subsequently was seen at the massive protests in Yangon on Monday, a week after the forceful takeover. In the Hunger Games franchise, the salute, in which three middle fingers are raised, and the thumb crosses over them to reach the pinky finger is displayed by oppressed people to express solidarity in a dystopian world ruled by a tyrant called President Snow. The gesture was popularised by a character called Katniss Everdeen, played by Jennifer Lawrence in the films. Demonstrators display placards calling for the release of detained Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi and flash three-fingered salutes, a symbol of resistance, against the military coup during a protest in Mandalay, Myanmar, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021.

The salute first became an anti-coup symbol in Southeast Asia in 2014, when youths in Thailand gathered in front of a shopping mall to signal their opposition to a military takeover that took place that year. When one of the activists raised their hand in a three-fingered salute, others who were part of the rally followed. The new form of silent protest resonated across the country for its anti-authoritarian message. It was imitated at more rallies, and the Thai military reacted by having the salute banned. Despite the ban, the salute has been at several protests in Thailand since 2014. *The symbol was also seen at Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution in 2014.*

US sanctions

Anti-coup protesters on Thursday took to the streets of Myanmar for a sixth consecutive day, after U.S. President Joe Biden announced sanctions against the Southeast Asian nation's Generals and demanded they relinquish power.

Western nations have repeatedly denounced the coup, with the U.S. leading calls for the Generals to relinquish power. In the most significant concrete action to pressure the junta, Mr. Biden announced on Wednesday that his administration was cutting off the Generals' access to \$1 billion in funds in the U.S. European Union Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell has also warned the bloc could impose fresh sanctions on Myanmar's military.

Myanmar's coup leader used the country's Union Day holiday on Friday to call on people to work with the military if they want democracy, a request likely to be met with derision by protesters who are pushing for the release from detention of their country's elected leaders.

Min Aung Hlaing's February 1 coup ousted the civilian government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and prevented recently elected lawmakers from opening a new session of Parliament. The military has said it was forced to step in because Ms. Suu Kyi's government failed to properly



investigate allegations of fraud in November elections, though the election commission has said there is no evidence to support those claims. *Recent rallies against the coup — now daily occurrences in Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay — have drawn people from all walks of life, despite an official ban on gatherings of more than five people. Factory workers and civil servants, students and teachers, medical personnel and people from LGBTQ communities, Buddhist monks and Catholic clergy have all come out against the coup in force.* Thousands of protesters, including Myanmar celebrities, demonstrated outside the Chinese Embassy in Yangon on Friday to criticise what they said was Beijing's failure to condemn the coup.

On Thursday, people from Myanmar's ethnic minority groups, who are concentrated in far-flung, border States, joined in — a striking show of unity in a country where some groups have resented the Burman majority's control and have also had their differences with Ms. Suu Kyi. *The protesters are unlikely to be swayed by Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's call for unity, which came on Union Day, a national holiday celebrating the date in 1947, when many of the country's ethnic groups agreed to unify following British colonial rule.*

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF INDIA'S NAYPYITAW DILEMMA (HAPPYMON JACOB TEACHES AT THE JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY AND RECENTLY FOUNDED THE COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH, A NEW DELHI-BASED THINK TANK)

The long-lingering power struggle in Naypyitaw has finally ended, and the Myanmar junta, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, has won the struggle, dashing decade-long hopes for a truly democratic Myanmar. The future of Myanmar's democracy is uncertain, but the country, sandwiched between two powerful states competing for power and influence, is certain to be a key piece in the region's geopolitics. Given its high-stakes in Myanmar, New Delhi would need to be nimble-footed and creative in its responses with well-thought-out strategic choices taking precedence over knee-jerk reactions.

Coup, politics and geopolitics

If Myanmar's democracy prior to the February 2021 coup was inadequate and intolerant towards minorities, its political future will be a lot more complicated, making the choices of outside powers far more constrained. Strong reactions and the threat of sanctions from the United States and the West in the wake of the recent coup could lead to unique political realignments in Myanmar. As a result, even though the democratic credentials of the former State Counsellor, *Aung San Suu Kyi, remain deeply diminished today, thanks to her shocking justification of the ill-treatment meted out to the Rohingya, the international community may not have any alternatives when it comes to pursuing the restoration of democracy in the country. Ms. Suu Kyi no doubt made a Faustian bargain to cling on to power, certainly since the bloody crackdown against the minority Muslim community in 2017, and yet the recent events have brought her right back into the centre of the international community's political calculations in Myanmar.* Sometimes, good intentions have deeply compromised outcomes. *To rebuild the charisma of the fallen messiah, those battling for Ms. Suu Kyi in the international community may have to condone her government's past actions against the Rohingya in order to highlight her suitability to be the saviour of democracy in Myanmar once again.* She will now be the poster girl for the international campaign to restore democracy in Myanmar and the case against Myanmar's conduct during her government's tenure at the International



Court of Justice (ICJ) will most likely be put on the backburner. *In this process, the plight of the hapless Rohingya will take a backseat or be conveniently forgotten. Put differently, increasing global support for Ms. Suu Kyi could potentially spell doom for the persecuted Rohingya.*

The China factor

This is a coup that seems to suit no one except the Tatmadaw, the armed forces of Myanmar. In the short run, the coup stands to hurt the interests of China, India and even the rest of the international community, all of whom were able to do business with Myanmar in their own unique ways. However, the international community's sharp reactions will likely force the Tatmadaw to turn to China. Even though international sanctions are unlikely to have a major impact on the country's largely inward-looking junta and its Generals with little external interests, it would still expect Beijing to give them political and diplomatic support both within the region and globally. For China, the coup has complicated its larger regional economic plans in Myanmar, at least for the time being. Beijing has recently been cultivating Ms. Suu Kyi, who was keen on a strong relationship with China given the growing criticism she was facing from the West. But the junta's jailing her could complicate Beijing's plans for the country. On the positive side for Beijing, decisive western sanctions will force the military to get closer to China. For Beijing, given that it does not come with the 'baggage' of democratic norms, it may simply be a matter of rejigging its schedule in Myanmar and getting used to the new scheme of things there. To that extent, China will be its biggest beneficiary of the February coup by default. China, therefore, has every reason to go easy on the junta and offer them support in return for increasing the Chinese footprint in the country. On its part, the Tatmadaw, which has traditionally not been an ardent fan of Beijing, would have to change its tune. While China's choices are straightforward, it is far more complicated for others, especially India.

New Delhi's quandary

New Delhi faces the most challenging dilemma on how to respond to the military coup in Myanmar. The dual power centres of the military and the civilian government that existed in Naypyitaw until recently, suited New Delhi quite well as it did not have to worry about hurting the international community's normative concerns or sacrificing its national interests while engaging them both. More so, until recently, New Delhi's Myanmar policy was not shaped by a difficult choice between norms and interests: neither was Ms. Suu Kyi's political experiment without its faults nor were India's national interests hurt by the Tatmadaw. The February coup has undone that comfortable space New Delhi's Myanmar policy occupied for close to a decade. While India's national interests, under the new circumstances, would clearly lie in dealing with whoever is in power in Myanmar, India would find it difficult to openly support the junta given the strong western and American stance. On the other hand, it can ill-afford to offend the junta by actively seeking a restoration of democracy there. Being a close neighbour with clear strategic interests in Myanmar, offending the junta would be counter-productive. While Ms. Suu Kyi was getting cozy with Beijing, it was the Myanmar military that had been more circumspect, to Delhi's delight of course. With Ms. Suu Kyi in detention, Beijing will focus its energies on wooing the Generals. Although the Ministry of External Affairs statement — "We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld. We are monitoring the situation closely" — is definitely in favour of restoring democracy, its past support for the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar is unlikely to return; this is particularly because the nature of the regional geopolitics has changed thanks to the arrival of China on the scene. New Delhi's new Myanmar policy will therefore be a function of interests rather than norms.



Cooperation, Rohingya issue

While a friendless Myanmar junta getting closer to China is a real worry for New Delhi, there are other concerns too. For one, *Myanmar's military played a helpful role in helping New Delhi contain the north-eastern insurgencies by allowing Indian military to pursue insurgents across the border into Myanmar. Coordinated action and intelligence sharing between the two forces have in the recent past been instrumental in beating back the insurgent groups in the northeast. Equally important is the issue of providing succour to the Rohingya in the wake of the military coup in Myanmar.* Unless the military decides to engage in a peace process to gain some brownie points for itself, the Rohingya question is likely to be pushed aside with the campaign against them continuing relentlessly, perhaps with even more ferocity. The inability of the states in the region to address the legitimate concerns of the Rohingya or increased violations of their rights could potentially lead to a rise of extremism within the community, which in the longer run would not be in India's interests. New Delhi then is left with very few clear policy options. And yet, it must continue to maintain relations with the government in power in Myanmar while discreetly pushing for political reconciliation in the country. In the meantime, the focus must be on improving trade, connectivity, and security links between the two sides.

POLAND PITCHES FOR PM'S VISIT TO WARSAW

As the planning for two trips by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Europe this summer get underway, Poland is pitching for a visit to Warsaw. It is also negotiating with India for a travel bubble arrangement to resume direct flights which have been suspended for nearly a year due to COVID regulations, said its envoy. While Prime Minister Modi's first trip abroad after the pandemic is scheduled for Bangladesh next month, he has accepted invitations to Brussels for the European Union-India summit (May 8), and to Cornwall, United Kingdom to attend the G-7 grouping where India is a special invitee (June 11-13). The last visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Poland happened more than forty years ago! The last visit of a Polish President to India happened more than 20 years ago. MEA officials said it is still unclear whether Mr. Modi will make any stopovers during his visits, and much depends on the coronavirus situation closer to the day. His visit to Brussels scheduled for March 13 last year was cancelled due to the sudden spike in cases. *At the top of the agenda for the Prime Minister's visit this year will be to salvage free trade negotiations for the EU-India Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA), which has failed to make headway since talks were suspended in 2014 over a number of issues including market access for automobiles, dairy products, wines and the movement of professionals.* BTIA is much needed to significantly improve our trade exchange and to reduce the barriers are still there Among the issues that Poland hopes will be resolved soon is the resumption of Polish airlines LOT.



NATIONAL

DISABLED ENTITLED TO FACILITIES: SC

The government is not conferring "largesse" on disabled people by facilitating a scribe during the course of the Civil Services Examination, the Supreme Court held on Thursday. The Union Public Service Commission and the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), by allowing a scribe, are not allowing those with disabilities any "privilege", a Bench led by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud declared in a 62-page verdict. The court said it is high time the government shed its "fundamental fallacy" that only persons with "benchmark disability" or specified disability of 40% or more should be accommodated with a scribe while taking competitive tests like the Civil Services Examination. This is a clear violation of the intent to provide "reasonable accommodation" for disabled persons under the Right to Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016.

Writer's cramp

The judgment was based on an appeal filed on behalf of Vikash Kumar, a candidate with Writer's cramp, a chronic neurological condition which causes extreme difficulty in writing, by advocates Rajan Mani and Ritu Kumar. *He was denied a scribe for the Civil Services Exam by the UPSC in 2018, on the ground that he did not come within the definition of person with benchmark disability. "The principle of reasonable accommodation captures the positive obligation of the State and private parties to provide additional support to persons with disabilities to facilitate their full and effective participation in society,"* the court observed.

HC ASKS GOVT., AIIMS TO FACILITATE FREE TREATMENT OF CHILDREN WITH RARE DISEASES

The Delhi High Court has asked the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to obtain instructions on how two minor brothers suffering from a rare disease could be provided free treatment. Justice Prathiba M. Singh listed the case for further hearing on February 19 along with various other pleas filed on behalf of several children suffering from other rare diseases. The two children, who are two and three years old respectively, are suffering from *Mucopolysaccharidosis II or MPS II (Hunter Syndrome, Attenuated Type) which is a rare disease that is passed on in families. It mostly affects boys and their bodies cannot break down a kind of sugar that builds bones, skin, tendons and other tissues.*

Cost of treatment

They have approached the High Court seeking direction to the Centre and AIIMS to provide them uninterrupted treatment free of cost. The two brothers, in their separate petitions filed through their father Ravi Jhawar, said they started facing difficulties and certain changes in their bodies in September and December 2019. The plea said the children were examined by doctors at the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital and AIIMS and after examination and tests, they were diagnosed with MPS II. It added that the treatment of the rare disease is available and administered at AIIMS. The petition said the annual cost of treatment for one patient would be between ₹80 lakh to ₹1 crore and the income of their father is nominal and it would be impossible for him to bear the cost of treatment.



“Without the financial support of the respondent no. 1 [Centre], the petitioner cannot be medically treated in view of paucity of funds. The petitioner is only concerned with medicine and not with any direct financial help,” the petition said.

DANGERS OF HARD SOVEREIGNTY (ATUL MISHRA TEACHES INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AT SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY)

The developments of February 3, 2021 marked the crystallisation and popular production of a new posture in India's engagement with the world — that of hard sovereignty. The posture delivers a firm message: outsiders have no stake in India's internal affairs, especially as it undergoes profound and rapid changes, some of which are deeply disturbing. The posture is unprecedented and dangerous; we will do disservice to ourselves if we endorse it. And policy informed by it will expose inconsistencies in our external relations.

New posture

Over the past 18 months or so, the establishment had been regularly fielding international criticism and expressions of concern on domestic developments such as the changes within Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)-National Register of Citizens protests and the ensuing Delhi riots. One of the elements in its reactions was the assertion that these were India's internal matters which its democratic polity was capable of resolving. The references to internal affairs conspicuously foregrounded the domestic dimension of the state's sovereignty. Against this backdrop came the press statement by the External Affairs Ministry on February 3. It expressed official India's displeasure at social media remarks by well-known figures, including a global celebrity and an activist, on the response to the farmers' protests. Official facts were put forward. The claim was made that 'vested interests' had tried to derail the protests and sully India's international reputation. 'Celebrities and others' were advised to ascertain facts before commenting on the matter and to resist the temptation of sensationalising it. This detailed and somewhat oddly phrased statement was measured in its operative part. However, it ended with two hashtags. One suggested that there was propaganda, presumably global, against India. The other sought to rally Indians against it. Soon, celebrities, partisans of the regime at the Centre, and a large body of concerned Indians picked up where the statement had left off. The hashtags were extensively used as a multitude of statements containing expressions of respect for the farmers and the need to resolve the issue amicably while calling for Indians to stay united swirled about on Twitter. From the intellectual churning arose the posture on hard sovereignty. Sachin Tendulkar's loaded tweet captured the underlying theory. The statements by outsiders threatened to compromise India's sovereignty. They could watch the internal goings on, but had no right to participate in them. Only Indians could 'decide' for India, and they had to remain united as a nation. *Tendulkar had drawn the boundary line. The posture had been popularly produced. India has jealously guarded its sovereignty since independence. However, its past sovereignty posture was deployed towards progressive goals. It was a bulwark against great power bullying and it asserted the autonomy of weaker nations. In contrast, the new posture seeks to fend off international criticism of unpleasant domestic developments. While this may suit hyper-nationalism, it will harm national interest. First, India's global game of status seeking and strategic influence plays out on the turf of liberal democracies.* The Prime Minister's claim of having enhanced India's international prestige has had as its ace reference point the recognition offered to him, and by extension India, by



principally conservative forces within western democracies. Remove the spectacles of bonhomie with former U.S. President Donald Trump, warm relations with former U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, the tactical use of the 'Ab ki baar' slogan, the events of Madison Square Garden (2014), Wembley Stadium (2015), the London townhall (2018), 'Howdy, Modi!' (2019), 'Namaste Trump' (2020) as well as the New Delhi tea with former U.S. President Barack Obama and the claim weakens. On the strategic front, five of India's key partners in the Indo-Pacific context are democracies: Japan, Australia, the U.S., the U.K., and France. Four of these are liberal and western. *A special understanding exists among liberal democracies because they share common norms and beliefs. That human rights are universal and inviolable is one of them, and this gives governments and the civil society within liberal democracies the moral authority to nudge, criticise or rebuke a partner that doesn't match up.* Democracies measure each other by higher standards. This explains the pushback of varying degrees from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and even Mr. Trump in the past two years. *It also explains the concerns expressed by western legislators and human rights bodies. If the establishment adopts a hard sovereignty posture soaring on the wings of strident domestic sentiments, it would encounter greater diplomatic friction. India's global game would also be adversely impacted.*

Siege mentality

Second, hard sovereignty invariably tends towards national isolationism and siege mentality. Chances are high it would further strengthen the national-scale parochialism being encouraged by the rhetoric of Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance). Such trends have an uneven impact. Those who championed hard sovereignty would soon be at an elite sporting event in a western capital. But they would have left their fellow citizens beleaguered. At a time when public sympathy for dissenters is at a discount, critics are being labelled, and institutions are falling short on their constitutional obligations, hard sovereignty falls like an axe on the sapping morale of non-violent social movements. Social movements do not follow the diktats and rhythms of sovereign states. They draw energy through transnational solidarities and bring about important policy corrections within and across states. Case in point: Black Lives Matter, which our celebrities supported. Imagine the consequences of being further marooned for social struggles hitherto considered indispensable to the health of Indian democracy. Finally, it would increase the susceptibility of our neighbourhood policy to criticism on the grounds of inconsistency. Consider the CAA, 2019. Although the letter of the amendment doesn't state it, the accompanying public discourse has carried an indictment of India's Muslim-majority neighbours insofar as their treatment of minorities is concerned. Is it unlikely that we will hear governments and others within our neighbourhood decry us for interfering in their internal affairs? Indeed, the Pakistan Foreign Office took this line in December 2019 as the CAA was passing parliamentary process. It won't be surprising if others followed, especially if equations turned sour, as they periodically do on the subcontinent. Consider also how it would undercut the effectiveness of what is principally a tactical arsenal even if it is grounded in facts: pointing out the dismal human rights situation in Balochistan to the liberal democratic world. If we are discomfited at expressions of solidarity with protesting farmers, why should the international liberals offer us traction? India's reputation had long been the soft power capital it deployed to meet its hard power shortfall as it pursued its international ambitions. As that reputation suffers, the country's options lessen and effectiveness shrinks. Scarcely a welcome development for a 'leading power'. We must



counter interventionist remarks coming from vested interests. But we must be discerning as well, for some critics may mean well.

LAW AND COMPASSION

Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit has decided that only the President can decide the issue of granting remission to the seven life convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. Is the Governor correct in putting the ball in the President's court, contrary to the State Cabinet's advice? *It has often been stressed by the Supreme Court that the clemency powers of the President, under Article 72, and the Governor, under Article 161, stand on an equal footing, and are exercised solely on Cabinet advice. The only limitation in Article 161 is that it should relate to "the sentence of any person convicted of any offence against any law relating to a matter to which the executive power of the State extends". It may be that the Governor decided that it is beyond the State's executive power because the Rajiv Gandhi case was tried under a central anti-terrorism law and under CBI probe. Further, in a situation arising from the State government's attempt in 2014 to remit their sentences under the Cr.P.C., the apex court had ruled in 2015 that such remission would require the Centre's concurrence.* However, this is not a tenable argument, as the same judgment made it clear that its opinion was limited to the Cr.P.C. and would not bind the sovereign power conferred on the President or the Governor under the Constitution. Also, it cannot be forgotten that the apex court had dropped charges under the now-defunct TADA, and sentenced the convicts only under the IPC for the murder conspiracy. As the only surviving sentences are under the IPC, there seems to be nothing in law that bars the Governor's jurisdiction. The decision is debatable for the unusual delay in the Governor reaching his conclusion as much for its legal correctness. It took Mr. Purohit more than two years — since the State Cabinet advised him in September 2018 to order the convicts' release — to decide the question. The Supreme Court has been asking him to avoid a situation in which it would have to intervene. One could speculate that the delay reflected the Centre's concern about releasing those involved in the plot to assassinate a former Prime Minister, and its ramifications for its policy of 'zero tolerance' towards terror. It is equally a matter of speculation whether the ruling party at the Centre is reserving the issue for appropriate use closer to the Assembly polls. It is unfortunate that a new legal question on which authority has the power to decide the issue has been tossed into the equation so late in the day. The Court should settle this. The convicts' continuing incarceration for nearly 30 years, notwithstanding the gravity of their crime, has acquired a humanitarian dimension to many. It is vital that law and compassion, rather than politics and electoral considerations, form the basis for any decision on their release.

DENYING WOMEN THE RIGHT OVER THEIR BODIES (T. SUMATHY AKA THAMIZHACHI THANGAPANDIAN - AN ACADEMIC, TAMIL POET, AN MP (SOUTH CHENNAI CONSTITUENCY), AND MEMBER OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE (INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY))

Recently, Argentina's Congress legalised abortions up to the 14th week of pregnancy. The Indian Parliament too will consider an amendment to our abortion laws this Budget Session but unlike the Argentina law which is touted as being historic, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill, 2020 (MTP Bill), will not translate into greater autonomy for women over their own bodies.



History of the law

*The MTP Act of 1971 was framed in the context of reducing the maternal mortality ratio due to unsafe abortions. It allows an unwanted pregnancy to be terminated up to 20 weeks of pregnancy and requires a second doctor's approval if the pregnancy is beyond 12 weeks. Further, it only allows termination when there is a grave risk to the physical or mental health of the woman or if the pregnancy results from a sex crime such as rape or intercourse with a mentally challenged woman. Therefore, the law is framed not to respect a woman's right over her own body but makes it easier for the state to stake its control over her body through legal and medical debates. Suppose a woman has had voluntary sex and she decides, for personal reasons, to end her pregnancy. If she is 24 weeks pregnant, then this would be a criminal offence. So, she moves the court under the condition that the pregnancy was affecting her mental health. However, here the court can refuse her despite the woman's choice to end it. In one such case, a State government had argued that there were no grounds for an abortion since the pregnancy was the outcome of a voluntary act and she was "very much aware of the consequence" and the court agreed. In such circumstances, women usually resort to unsafe methods of abortion. **Unsafe abortions are the third largest cause of maternal deaths in India. The amendment too continues this legacy of hetero-patriarchal population control, which does not give women control over their own bodies.** The proposed amendment still requires one doctor to sign off on termination of pregnancies up to 20 weeks old, and two doctors for pregnancies between 20 and 24 weeks old. Thus, it is not based on any request or isn't at the pregnant person's will but on a doctor's opinion.*

Personal beliefs

The Bill also mandates the government to set up a medical board in every State and UT. Medical boards can rely on the facts of the case but personal beliefs could impact the medical board's opinion, which is one of the biggest challenges in having a third-party opinion on a decision which is very personal. For instance, the Madhya Pradesh High Court denied permission for terminating a 26-week-old pregnancy to a 13-year-old rape survivor with the psychiatrist on the medical board arguing against the mental and emotional trauma that the survivor would go through. The psychiatrist stated that while the survivor was "feeling anxiety at times", she was "not suffering from delusion and hallucination". While the current Bill provides that safe abortions can be performed at any stage of the pregnancy in case of foetal "abnormalities," it fails to consider any other reason such as personal choice, a sudden change in circumstances due to separation from or death of a partner, and domestic violence. Last, the proposed amendment uses the word "women" throughout, denying access to safe abortion to transgender, intersex and gender diverse persons. Abortion rights are central to a woman's autonomy to determine her life's course. Neither the state nor doctors have any right to deny a woman a safe abortion. Doing so means that women are not being treated properly as adults who are responsible for their own choices.

CITIZEN VS CITIZEN

The Union Home Ministry has embarked on a perilous path with a new programme that invites citizen volunteers to police online content. An MHA circular on the scheme, which will be piloted in Jammu and Kashmir and Tripura, asks volunteers to flag and report child sexual abuse, rape, terrorism, "radicalisation" and "anti-national" activities. This is overreach on numerous counts. To begin with, the existing legal framework does not define what constitutes "anti-national" activity. It

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



is imprecise and arbitrary and there's a formidable body of evidence to show how this has been weaponised. Licensing ordinary people, without any locus standi, to decide what qualifies for that label is an invitation, even exhortation, to misuse and harassment. Second, no statutory backing exists for such a volunteer force, nor is it clear what need it might serve. Third, even if the ministry's stated mission is to counter cyber-crime, it cannot outsource a fundamental state responsibility to a rag-tag corps of volunteers, who will wield disproportionate power to scrutinise fellow citizens on social media without any accountability whatsoever. What stops this programme from turning into a weapon of personal/political vendetta? Fourth, making citizens vulnerable to such unofficial surveillance and scrutiny is a violation of their fundamental rights to freedom of speech and expression and privacy. Fifth, by turning citizen against citizen, it risks deepening polarisation and mistrust in society. Finally, it also ignores the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court, when it comes to criminalising online speech. The court, while striking down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, had ruled that a distinction must be made between speech that is simply "offensive or annoying" and that which is guilty of inciting a disruption of public order, or violence.

The programme is just one more example of the anxiety over social media narratives that is pushing governments to encroach steadily on free speech. From Bihar's recent blanket gag on online criticism of the state government to Uttarakhand police's decision to scan social media for "anti-national" posts to the now rescinded Kerala government ordinance that would have made "defamatory" social media posts punishable by a prison term, the internet appears to trigger the political class's Big Brother reflex with disturbing frequency. It is, of course, true that nearly all high-stakes political contests today are being waged on the internet, from farmers' protest to electoral battles. *Social media is both an avenue of mobilisation as well as prone to capture by purveyors of propaganda and hate. But for the Union home ministry to midwife a proxy force to police ordinary citizens on the internet, to give the weaponization of social media the imprimatur of government authority, is disquieting.* In times when an army of vigilantes entitled to their right to be offended grows in strength and when the overzealous state slaps sedition charges against journalists and students, such a move will only go on to normalise the suspicion and persecution of citizens exercising their right to disagree, dissent or even annoy others. *Without basis in law, undemocratic in spirit, this reckless initiative must be withdrawn immediately.*

LOKPAL PANEL MINUTES NEED NOT BE DISCLOSED

The Centre has refused to disclose the minutes of the Lokpal selection committee's meetings, and its decision has now been upheld by the Central Information Commission (CIC). Right to Information (RTI) activist Anjali Bhardwaj intends to appeal against the CIC's order in court, pointing out the irony that the Lokpal itself is a body meant to augment transparency in governance. A CIC hearing was held in January 2021, more than two years after the RTI query was filed, and the CIC's final order was published last week. At the hearing, the DoPT argued that "*the confidentiality of the said record can be gauged by the fact that the averred minutes of the Selection Committee were received in a sealed cover.*" It invoked the exemption clause in Section 8(1)(e) of the RTI Act, claiming that the documents authored by third parties under reference is held in a fiduciary capacity by the Department of Personnel and Training. Ms. Bhardwaj responded that there has been no prior judgment that the recommendations of public officials are fiduciary in nature. "*The larger public has a right to know about the basis on which their Lokpal or Lokayukta was selected,*" she said during the hearing. *Central Information Commissioner Saroj Punhani upheld the Centre's stance, citing two*



Supreme Court cases related to a Lokpal search committee and the committees for selecting Information Commissioners.

WHAT IS THE LAW ON DRAPING TRICOLOUR OVER BODY OF A DECEASED

Police in Uttar Pradesh's Pilibhit district have booked the mother and brother of a farmer who had died during the farmers' agitation in Delhi, under The Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, after his body was allegedly draped in the national flag. The deceased farmer, Balvinder Singh (32), died on January 24 near Ghazipur where he was participating in the farmers' agitation. Police in Pilibhit district have booked his mother Jasveer Kaur (51), and brother Gurvinder Singh (22), under Section 2 of the Act. Speaking to The Indian Express, Allahabad High Court senior advocate Jaideep Narain Mathur said: "A cognizable offence under The Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act can only be made out against someone who intentionally disrespects the flag."

What Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act says

The law, enacted on December 23, 1971, penalises the desecration of or insult to Indian national symbols, such as the National Flag, the Constitution, the National Anthem, and the Indian map, as well as contempt of the Constitution of India. Section 2 of the Act, "Insults to Indian National Flag and Constitution of India", says: "Whoever in any public place or in any other place within public view burns, mutilates, defaces, defiles, disfigures, destroys, tramples upon or otherwise shows disrespect to or brings into contempt (whether by words, either spoken or written, or by acts) the Indian National Flag or the Constitution of India or any part thereof, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both." As per the Act, "disrespect to the Indian National Flag means and includes", among other things, "using the Indian National Flag as a drapery in any form whatsoever except in State funerals or armed forces or other para-military forces funerals". Section 3.22 of The Flag Code of India, 2002 (which deals with laws, practices and conventions that apply to the display of the national flag), reads: "The Flag shall not be used as a drapery in any form whatsoever except in State/Military/Central Paramilitary Forces funerals hereinafter provided." Section 3.58 says: "On occasions of State/Military/Central Paramilitary Forces funerals, the flag shall be draped over the bier or coffin with the saffron towards the head of the bier or coffin. The Flag shall not be lowered into the grave or burnt in the pyre."

Use of flag in funerals

A senior advocate at the Allahabad High Court said that the flag can only be used during a funeral if it is accorded the status of a state funeral. "Apart from police and armed forces, state funerals are held when people who are holding or have held office of President, Vice-President, Prime Minister, Cabinet Minister, Chief Minister pass away. The status of a state funeral can be accorded in case of death of people not belonging to the armed forces, police or the above-mentioned categories by the state government. Then too, the national flag can be used," the advocate said. The latest to get a state funeral from fields outside police, armed forces and government dignitaries was Roddam Narasimha, who was an aerospace scientist and fluid dynamicist from Andhra Pradesh. Others who were accorded a similar honour recently were actors Sridevi and Shashi Kapoor.



Similar instances earlier

An instance where the body of a deceased was wrapped in the Tricolour was that of the farmer Navreet Singh, who died in Delhi on January 26 during the violence related to the anti-farm laws protests. Photographs of the body draped in the flag had been shared widely on social media. In October 2016, a deep-freezer casket was covered in the Tricolour, which had the body of 21-year-old Ravin Sisodia, an accused in the killing of Mohammad Akhlaq. Akhlaq was beaten to death in September 2015 in Dadri's Bisara village by a mob after an announcement was made asking villagers to assemble since a cow had allegedly been slaughtered. According to officials, Sisodia, who had tested positive for dengue, died of respiratory and renal complications.

INTER-MARRIAGES CAN REDUCE CASTE TENSIONS, SAYS COURT

Educated youngsters are showing the way forward to reduce caste and community tensions in India by tying the knot in inter-marriages, the Supreme Court said in a recent judgment. "Educated younger boys and girls are choosing their life partners, which, in turn, is a departure from the earlier norms of society where caste and community play a major role. Possibly, this is the way forward where caste and community tensions will reduce by such inter-marriages," a Bench, led by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul, said. *Justice Kaul quoted B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, in which the Father of the Constitution said, "I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling — the feeling of being aliens — created by caste will not vanish."* Even as more and more cases challenging religious conversion laws enacted by several States reach the Supreme Court, Justice Kaul observed in the judgment on February 8 that "consent of the family or community or clan is not necessary once the two adult individuals agree to enter into a wedlock and that their consent has to be piously given primacy". The judgment came in a case filed by a lecturer, an MBA graduate, who fled from Bengaluru to Delhi to marry a man, an M. Tech. and assistant professor. The investigating officer, on a complaint filed by her relatives, directed her to leave her husband and be present at the police station. She refused, saying they were legally married and it was her choice to do so. The court quashed the case against the couple and directed the police authorities to not only counsel the investigating officers but devise a training programme to deal with such cases for the benefit of the police personnel. "We expect the police authorities to take action on this behalf in the next eight weeks to lay down some guidelines and training programmes how to handle such socially sensitive cases," the Supreme Court ordered.

CENTRE OBJECTS TO PLEA AGAINST SPECIAL MARRIAGE ACT

The Centre has objected to a petition seeking to discontinue with the provision of inviting objection from public while applying for marriage registration under the Special Marriage Act (SMA). In an affidavit filed before the Delhi High Court, the Ministry of Law and Justice said that the intention behind the provision in SMA was to "keep adequate safeguards to the interest of various parties involved".



Gestation period

All marriages done under the SMA requires publication of the names of the couple for inviting objections from public for 30 days. Within this period, anyone can object to the marriage on the ground that it would contravene one or more of the conditions specified in section 4 of the SMA. Some of the conditions include neither party has a spouse living; either of them is of unsound mind, incapable of giving a valid consent; and the man has completed twenty-one years and the woman eighteen years. The provision was challenged by an inter-faith couple on the ground that the 30 days gestation period was not warranted as the same objective can be mitigated on the basis of certificates issued by government hospitals and on the basis of undertaking by them. However, the Law Ministry said: "If any person raises objection to the said marriage within a period of 30 days, the marriage officer shall not solemnise the marriage until he has enquired into the matter of objection. It may not be possible to verify the credibility of such person if at least thirty days period is not given." The Ministry added, "the procedure laid down in this Act for registration of marriage is fair and reasonable". Advocate Utkarsh Singh, who had appeared for the couple, argued that the question with regard to whether either party has a living spouse can arise in other religious marriage also, but they are exempted from 30 days' notice period.

SMA sections

The petition has sought to quash section 6 and 7 of SMA, which mandates publication of the public notice, on the ground that it is unreasonable and arbitrary. "The 30-day period offers an opportunity to kin of the couple to discourage an inter-caste or inter-religion marriage," the petition filed by the couple, who were then housed at an NGO here at the time of filing of the petition in October last year, said.

ODISHA TO MOVE SC OVER BORDER DISPUTE WITH ANDHRA PRADESH

The Odisha government on Monday decided to move Supreme Court challenging the conduct of panchayat elections in three of its villages in Koraput district and violation status quo in respect to border dispute. "Andhra Pradesh is conducting panchayat elections in three of our bordering villages. It is violation of status quo continuing as per the Supreme Court order. We will challenge the election as well as other administrative steps being taken by Andhra Pradesh in our villages in the top court," said Bishnupada Sethi, Revenue and Disaster Management Secretary, here. "The last general and Assembly elections had been conducted by Odisha in the three villages. How could Andhra Pradesh hold election in the same place now," questioned Mr. Sethi. According to sources, the State government is in favour of an amicable solution to the border dispute. Deployment of police force to guard the territory is likely to escalate the situation and make matter worse for people living on both sides of border. Koraput district administration on Monday consulted with the Advocate General of Odisha on this issue.

Names to be changed

Andhra Pradesh is scheduled to hold panchayat elections in three villages — Talaganjeipadar, Patusineri and Phagunseneri in Kotia gram panchayat by changing their names to Ganjeibadara, Pattuchennuru and Pagluchennuru on February 13. Nominations have been filed for the post of Sarpanch and Ward Members from the three villages.



ODISHA REPROMULGATES ORDINANCE ON APMCS

The *Odisha government has proposed to set up and operate private market yards and farmer consumer market yards to enhance competition among different markets and market players for the agricultural produce. The State Cabinet on Tuesday approved repromulgation of Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) for the third time.* The 'Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation)' has been drafted on the lines of a model law titled 'The Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2017' circulated earlier by the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmer Welfare. "Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the State government had brought the ordinance to give an immediate benefit to the farmers. Accordingly, the third ordinance has been drafted," the State government said. The ordinance proposes to abolish fragmentation of market within the State by removing the concept of notified market area so far as enforcement of regulation by the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Market Committee is concerned. The government aims to declare warehouses or silos or cold storages and other structures or space as market sub-yard to provide better market access or linkage to the farmers.

SUPER BOWL FEATURES 30-SECOND TV AD ON FARMERS' PROTEST

Football championship Super Bowl, which is one of the most-watched events on American television, has featured a 30-second commercial on the ongoing farmers' agitation in India, terming it the "largest protest in history". The advertisement was funded by the Sikh community of Fresno, a city in central California, according to a grateful tweet from the Kisan Ekta Morcha handle, which is the official voice of the protesters. The 30-second spot in this year's Super Bowl cost \$5.5 million, and last year's viewership of the championship was around 100 million.

Martin Luther quote

The commercial begins with a quote from Martin Luther King: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". Images from the farmers' tractor parade and their border camps are overlaid with text alleging human rights violations against protesters. Punjabi music plays as "No Farmers, No Food, No Future" flashes on the screen. It includes a message from Fresno Mayor Jerry Dyer. *"We want you to know, our brothers and sisters in India, that we stand with you," he says. Fresno has a large Sikh population, as high as 40,000, according to some local reports.* Pop music icon Rihanna's viral tweet on the protests also gets a mention. "Fresno City community put that ad during the Super Bowl. This is great work by community to aware people regarding Farmers Protest. Thank you Fresno Sikh Community," said the Kisan Ekta Morcha tweet. After tweets from Rihanna and other celebrities put a global spotlight on the protest, the Ministry of External Affairs rebuked them in an official statement.

A LINGAYAT SUB-SECT'S QUOTA DEMAND: CONTEXT, IMPLICATIONS(M)

Politics around the Lingayat community has once again taken centre stage in Karnataka, with a section of BJP MLAs and seers in the community demanding inclusion of a large Lingayat sub-sect in an OBC quota category that provides 15% reservation in government jobs and education in the state.



Who are the Lingayats?

The Lingayats are a dominant community who make up nearly 17% of Karnataka's six crore population. The community can determine the outcome of polls in as many as 90-100 of the state's 224 Assembly constituencies. The Lingayats, classified as a Hindu sub-caste called Veerashaiva Lingayats, are essentially followers of the 12th-century philosopher Saint Basavanna, who started a movement to help sections of society break away from the chains of caste. The Veerashaiva Lingayats are an amalgamation of the followers of Basavanna's teachings and Veerashaivas who follow more traditional Hindu practices. The Lingayat community has many sub-sects identified on the basis of the vocations they followed.

How are they politically aligned?

The community has backed the BJP and its leader B S Yediyurappa, now Chief Minister, since the turn of the century after the Congress lost ground with the community in the 1990s on account of its shabby treatment of leaders such as former Chief Minister Veerendra Patil. *During its 2013-18 rule, the Congress tried to win back the Lingayats' support by backing a demand from within a section of the community for the status of a minority religion — independent of Hinduism — and recommending grant of the status to the Centre.* But the community largely continued to back the BJP.

What is the current controversy?

Veerashaiva Lingayats have been provided 5% reservation under a special category called 3B. A sub-sect called the Panchamasali Lingayats — basically agriculturists who account for nearly 70% of Lingayats — have now risen in protest seeking reservations under the category 2A, which currently provides 15% reservations to backward castes. The demand has been raised by BJP MLA Basavaraj Patil Yatnal and two prominent seers, Jaya Basava Mruthyunjaya Swami and Vachananda Swami. A protest march and rallies in parts in north and central Karnataka since January 14 have put pressure on Yediyurappa to take a decision.

What is the basis of the demand?

The main stand of the Panchamasali Lingayats is that the community has been denied benefits, and that large sections dependent on agriculture are socially, economically, and educationally backward. Of the BJP's 38 Lingayat MLAs, 11 are Panchamasalis. Community leaders have noted that only two of the 17 Panchamasali legislators (including six MLCs) have been given Cabinet berths while nine berths have gone to Lingayats from more dominant sub-sects such as Banajigas. BJP MLA Yatnal has argued that the two Panchamasli ministers have only been given minor portfolios. Incidentally, at a public meeting in Haveri in early 2020, the seer Vachananda Swami had said an MLA from the community, the wealthy businessman Murugesh Nirani, must be made a minister since it was the community that helped the BJP come to power. Yediyurappa, who was at the meeting, had threatened to walk out over the seer's remarks. Nirani was finally made a minister last month.

How does the government plan to address the reservation demand?

On Friday, *Yediyurappa directed the chairman of the Karnataka Backward Classes Commission to conduct a study and submit a report on the social, economic and educational status of the*



Panchamasali community to determine their inclusion under the 2A category. Yediyurappa has indicated to the agitating seers that his government would take a favourable decision. But he sent out mixed signals by stating in the Assembly that he does not have the powers to recommend inclusion under 2A. Ours is a national party and not a regional party. We can take a decision only on the basis of the advice of the PM and other leaders in such matters. I do not have the power to make any decision on my own," Yediyurappa said when the issue was raised by a BJP MLA. Later, he issued a clarification that the issue can be resolved only by consultation. He has also argued that it was his government that got Panchamasali and other Lingayats included in the 3B category. Last November, he had proposed demanding the inclusion of all Lingayats in the central OBC reservations category through a state Cabinet decision, but was reportedly dissuaded by the central BJP leadership. Currently, only 16 sub-sects of Lingayats are provided reservations in the OBC quota for central jobs.

What are the political ramifications?

Yediyurappa's brief suggestion that the agitators approach the BJP central leadership seems to indicate the BJP may be trying to loosen his personal grip over the Lingayat community. The BJP has not pulled up MLAs participating in the movement. The agitation has also picked up momentum at a time when there has been speculation on the future of Yediyurappa, nearly 78, as Chief Minister.

GUJARAT'S TWO-CHILD POLICY: WHY 3 CIVIC CANDIDATES WERE DISQUALIFIED

Three candidates from the Municipal Corporations of Vadodara and Rajkot were disqualified on Monday under the two-child policy in place in the state for candidates. The nominations were challenged because each candidate had three children.

What is Gujarat's two-child policy?

In 2005, the Gujarat government amended the Gujarat Local Authorities Act to "prevent a person having more than two children to be a member of panchayat, or the councillor of a municipality or municipal corporation". The amendment also added the clause to the other Acts governing elections to local administrative bodies such as the Gujarat Provincial Municipal Corporations Act, 1949, and the Gujarat Panchayats Act. The rationale behind the two-child policy was said to be the need to "order and stabilise" the growing population of the country, beginning with elected representatives, who should lead by example.

So, who are the candidates facing disqualification?

Congress candidate from Rajkot Municipal Corporation Naran Savseta was disqualified for having three children, the first by a wife now divorced. In Vadodara, two-term sitting corporator from BJP, Dipak Shrivastav, contesting as an independent after being denied a party ticket, declared that his second child (born 2017) had been "adopted" by his father BJP MLA Madhu Shrivastav in December 2020 — two months after the birth of his third. Both children were born during his ongoing term (2015-20); the first had been born in 2011. But the election department invalidated his nomination citing Vadodara birth records as having registered Dipak as the biological father and the Gujarat Local Authorities Act, which states that every biological child is to be counted as



children born to the candidate, regardless of their survival, adoption or separation. The third candidate, sitting corporator Viren Rami from Vadodara who was contesting as an independent, was disqualified on the same grounds as the Rajkot candidate — he had a biological child from his first marriage, who was not mentioned in his affidavit. Rami, incidentally, had been allowed to contest in 2015 (and won) because no one objected to the nomination.

Does a third child born at any time disqualify a candidate?

There is a cut-off date. The section added in the 2005 amendment to the local body Acts states, “Provided that a person having more than two children on the date of commencement of the Gujarat Local Authorities Laws (Amendment) Act, 2005... shall not be disqualified under this clause so long as the number of children he had on the date of such commencement does not increase.” *It essentially means that the election departments would consider nominations of candidates with more than two biological children, if the children were born before the commencement of the amended Act in 2005 or up to one year after the commencement i.e. 2006.* The Act had considered the period of one year from the date of commencement to include those candidates, who might have been on the way to have their third child at the time the Act was amended.

What about twins, and adopted children?

The section states that the birth of any additional biological children to a candidate, post 2006, would be counted as “one entity” each, even if more than one child is born in a single delivery (twins, triplets etc). Where a candidate has only one child on or after the date of the commencement of the policy, any number of children born out of single subsequent delivery shall be deemed to be one entity. The policy does not include an adopted child or children.

And what about children from divorced spouses?

Yes. According to the law, any biological surviving child of a candidate is considered as “one entity”, even if the marriage to the other parent has been legally dissolved. Experts said that the election department does not consider “biological children” as those being only from current marriages. Therefore, children from previous marriages, if more than two, would make for a valid consideration for disqualification.

One of the candidates claimed his second-born had been given away in adoption. Why was it not considered?

The law does not provide for exceptions to children who may have been given away in adoption. In his order in the case of Dipak Shrivastav, the election officer said, “... The candidate has presented a registered document stating that his father Madhu Shrivastav is the father of Pratishta Shrivastav by legal adoption, which does not remove the ground for disqualification...”

Do deceased children count?

Yes. According to an election officer from Vadodara, even biological children who were born alive, regardless of the duration of survival, are counted as “one entity”. “We have a precedent in Gujarat High Court which has upheld the disqualification of a district panchayat candidate, whose fourth child was born and subsequently died a few months later. The HC has held that mortality of a



biological child cannot be made relevant to subvert the purpose of disqualification because it would defeat the purpose of the law... In the same judgement the HC also said biological children given in adoption to other persons, cannot be disregarded from the number of biological children of the candidate.”

Does the policy apply to sitting corporators contesting again?

Yes. If their third biological child is born during the course of their tenure, it is a ground for disqualification from the post.

SABARIMALA SLIP

The draft law prepared by the Congress in Kerala on Sabarimala reeks of electoral populism. With the state likely to go to assembly polls in April, the Congress evidently wants to win over the “Hindu vote”. The Sabarimala Ayyappa Devotees (Protection of Religious Rituals, Customs and Usages) Act, 2021, mooted by the party on Friday, promises to give legal sanctity to the custom that bars entry of women of a particular age group into the shrine, authority to the chief priest to decide on rituals and practices followed in the temple, and a two-year imprisonment for those who violate them. It is inappropriate for the party to make such promises when a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court is reviewing its own judgment, which had found the custom related to the entry of women to be unconstitutional. Like most parties, the Congress has performed flip-flops on Sabarimala. Congress chief Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi initially held that the party stood against customs that were prejudiced against women, but they retreated when the party’s Kerala unit spoke in favour of the status quo. The party actively supported the mobilisations against the 2018 Supreme Court verdict. In the general election that followed, the Congress won 19 of the 20 Lok Sabha seats — its success was attributed to a Hindu consolidation on account of its Sabarimala stance. But the political scenario in the state has changed since. Results of the recent local bodies polls indicate that the ruling Left Front has recovered lost ground. *The Congress now seems to think that Sabarimala could help revive its fortunes and force the LDF on the defensive. The promise of a law to protect a custom that is evidently anti-women, however, is a stark reminder of its ever-wavering liberal credentials. In the Shah Bano case (1985), the Congress sided with the conservative view and legislated to overturn a Supreme Court verdict. The party did not benefit from its embrace of conservatives — in fact, its move unleashed a wave of conservatism, which privileged community identities and customs over the republican values and individual rights ingrained in the Constitution.* The space for centrist views got restricted and ended up diminishing its own prospects, among others. That the party has fallen back on an agenda that had run its course also shows a lack of political imagination within the Congress. And shines the light on the path not taken — the party could have made its pitch for office by questioning the LDF’s record and offering a better governance agenda.

SC ORDERS STATUS QUO ON INS VIRAAAT DISMANTLING

The Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered status quo on the dismantling of the Navy’s decommissioned aircraft carrier, INS Viraat. A Bench led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde issued notice to the Union of India and Shree Ram Group of Industries, who were arraigned as respondents in the special leave petition filed by Envitech Marine Consultants Pvt. Ltd.,



Vishnukant Sharma and Rupali Vishnukant Sharma. "In the meantime, parties are directed to maintain status quo with regard to dismantling/breaking of the subject-ship known as INS Viraat, as on date," the SC ordered.

Museum proposal

Envitech had earlier approached the Bombay High Court with a request to buy the decommissioned Viraat so that it could be converted into a maritime museum and a multifunctional adventure centre. The High Court had asked the government to take an appropriate call. *The warship is currently awaiting dismantling at the ship-breaking yard at Alang in Gujarat. "The hull is still intact," Ms. Rupali Sharma, appearing in person, submitted before the Bench. The petitioners have argued that Viraat, which was the oldest serving warship at the time of its decommissioning, should not be sold as scrap.* In the High Court, the Centre had reportedly said that the 67-year-old ship, which had served the Navy for about three decades, was sold to the Gujarat-based Shree Ram Group, a ship-breaking firm, which won the bid. *It had said that communications to various States for proposals on the ship were unanswered. The government, it was reported, had suggested in the High Court that the petitioners could approach the Shree Ram Group with a proposal to purchase the ship.*

CUTTING TRANS FAT

Come January 1, 2022, *India will join a select group of countries limiting industrial trans fat to 2% by mass of the total oils/fats present in the product. India would thus be achieving the WHO target a year in advance. In mid-2016, the trans fat content limit was halved from 10% to 5%, and in December 2020, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) capped it to 3% by 2021. While trans fat is naturally present in red meat and dairy products, the focus is on restricting the industrially produced trans fat used solely to prolong the shelf life of products at less cost.* While the government's notification specifically mentions edible oils and fats that are used as ingredients, it also applies to emulsions such as margarines. *Targeting these ingredients would in effect result in reducing the trans fat content to 2% in all food items as these two are the major sources of industrial trans fat. Also, even when the fat/oil contains less than 2% trans fat, repeated use at high temperature can increase the trans fat content. The focus on cutting down trans fat content in food arises from its proclivity to negatively alter the lipoprotein cholesterol profile by increasing the level of bad cholesterol (LDL) while decreasing the level of HDL or good cholesterol.* These changes in the lipoprotein cholesterol profile increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases. In 2004, when Denmark became the first country to limit industrially produced trans fat content in all foods to 2% of fats and oils, it faced resistance from much of Europe, including the European Commission. However, many countries have since adopted similar restrictions themselves. In fact, in April 2019, the *European Union (EU) adopted a new regulation — from April 2021 — to limit the amount of industrially produced trans fat to 2% in all foods sold within the EU.* According to a 2020 report of WHO, 32 countries already have some form of mandatory limits on trans fat. The benefits of reducing trans fat can become quickly apparent, as seen in Denmark; three years after the cap came into effect, it saw a reduction of about 14 deaths attributable to cardiovascular diseases per 1,00,000 population. It is now well known that trans fat can be completely eliminated and replaced with healthier substitutes without any change in the food taste or cost. *According to WHO, a dozen large multinational food companies have already committed to eliminate industrially*



produced trans fat from all their products by 2023. With a year's notice, it should be possible for the multinational food companies to redouble their efforts to meet the FSSAI standard, while Indian companies that have earlier been able to cut the level of trans fat as in the FSSAI limit, should have no excuse not to meet the current capping.

FSSAI CAPS TRANS FATS IN FOOD PRODUCTS

*The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has amended its rules to cap **trans-fatty acids (TFAs)** in food products, just weeks after it tightened the norms for oils and fats. "Food products in which edible oils and fats are used as an ingredient shall not contain industrial trans-fatty acids more than 2% by mass of the total oils/fats present in the product, on and from 1st January, 2022," said the revised regulations notified recently and made public on Friday. In December, the FSSAI had capped TFAs in oils and fats to 3% by 2021, and 2% by 2022 from the current levels of 5%. "The 2% cap is considered to be elimination of trans-fatty acids, which we will achieve by 2022. We will be reaching this goal a year sooner than the WHO deadline," FSSAI CEO Arun Singhal told The Hindu. Trans-fatty acids are created in an industrial process that adds hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils to make them more solid, increase shelf life of food items and for use as an adulterant as they are cheap. They are present in baked, fried and processed foods as well as adulterated ghee, which becomes solid at room temperature. They are the most harmful form of fats as they clog arteries and cause hypertension, heart attacks and other cardiovascular diseases. The WHO has called for the elimination of industrially produced trans-fatty acids from the global food supply by 2023. "The latest amendments to FSSAI rules signal the completion of the process of regulating trans fats in India. The move will make a big difference to the health harm caused by this unwanted ingredient," said Ashim Sanyal, COO of Consumer Voice.*

COCONUT CLIMBER WINS KERALA GOVT. AWARD

Forty years ago, K. Sasi chose to become a coconut plucker. He has never looked back. Now 60, Mr. Sasi is on cloud nine after bagging the 'Thozhilali Sreshta' award of the Kerala government last week. "I am a coconut tree climber and never expected to win an award. It is a great gesture on the part of the government to recognise people like me," says Mr. Sasi, a resident of Mampuzhakari in Kuttanad. Instituted by the Department of Labour and Skills, the award comprises a cash prize of ₹1 lakh and citation. Mr. Sasi started climbing coconut trees at the age of 20 with a machete tucked to his back and using two small loops of rope — one around his feet gripping the front of the tree and the other he carries to hold on to the trunk. The sexagenarian still practises the traditional method with relative ease, which helped him win the laurel. "I am happy that I chose coconut plucking as my job. It helped me build a house and educate my two children. The award is a cherry on the cake," he says.

From 20 paise to ₹50

"When I began work, I would get 20 paise a tree. Nowadays I receive ₹50 a tree," he says. Mr. Sasi climbs around 30 trees daily and gets ₹1,500. He says that despite the good pay, the educated younger generation, including his own children, is not keen on considering it a career. "An award like this will help change the perspective of society towards jobs like tree climbing and attract youngsters to the profession," he adds. In a first-of-its-kind initiative in the country, 15 labourers



from the private sector were given the 'Thozhilali Sreshta' award by the government based on their skills. The winners were selected from various sectors, including security guard, headload worker, construction worker, toddy tapper, housemaid and salesman/woman.

SAFETY FIRST (AAKASH CHAUDHRY - MD, AAKASH EDUCATIONAL SERVICES LIMITED)(M)

With the entire world being practically shut down because of the Coronavirus pandemic since early 2020, most people ended up spending more of their lives online. Reports suggest, in 2020, *India had nearly 700 million Internet users across the country. Getting comfortable with working from home, seeking entertainment on streaming services, learning new skills online, indulging in online shopping, the lockdown made us adapt to changes which we never thought was possible.* Come 2021 and we find ourselves thriving on the opportunities the Internet has to offer. However, like everything else, this too *has its share of disadvantages.* Online safety has become a matter of great concern, across the globe, especially given the number of younger people who are now using the Internet.

Threats

The Internet has truly transformed how young people learn, socialise and communicate today, but the pressure to share intimate images, rising cases of cyberbullying and cyber scams, exposure to content that may promote self-harm, anorexia etc., make the youth more vulnerable and puts them at a greater risk. The majority of young people today use smartphones for everything. Numerous apps are downloaded every day, thereby exposing sensitive personal information. With the boom in online shopping, financial information is knowingly or unknowingly shared to make online payments and thereby increasing the risk of sharing sensitive data. Students, especially those in college, rely heavily on the Internet for their projects. Every time they open a link, pop-ups and links to unsafe websites appear. Clicking on these can lead to malware that can damage their devices and steal critical personal information. Moreover, online scams in the form of contests, discounts, and free goodies, trick youngsters into sharing personal information, thereby leading to a risk of identity theft. Apart from this, online grooming, cyberbullying and peer pressure, online social abuse and exploitation, and fatal online challenges such as the Blue Whale Challenge, which claimed over hundred lives across the world, are constant threats. Safe Internet Day (February 9) offers a great opportunity to empower young people and make the Internet a safer and better place. Leaders, mentors, educationists, parents and guardians need to intervene and get involved.

What we can do

The safety of our children is our responsibility and we need to talk to them about safe Internet use, online dangers and threats, and equip them with the necessary skills and competencies. *Encourage children to check the reliability and credibility of online websites, keep their social media accounts private and avoid adding unsavoury people to their friend list can make a difference. Students should know the importance of privacy and that it is 'not okay' to share their pictures with strangers or be harassed, bullied or humiliated online.* The need of the hour is to inculcate good online habits among the youth and *develop their digital intelligence and socio-emotional skills. This Safe Internet Day, let us help them recognise online threats and safeguard themselves against it.*



BEGGARS LEARNING VOCATIONAL SKILLS FOR LIFE WITH DIGNITY(M)

A new scheme launched here for the *rehabilitation of beggars through vocational training has enabled them to lead a life with dignity. Beggars are being equipped with the necessary life skills at a special training centre established in Jaipur by the Rajasthan Skill and Livelihoods Development Corporation (RSLDC).*

'Willing participants'

Over *40 beggars hailing from Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, who came to Jaipur in search of livelihood but ended up on footpaths, have been provided with shelter, where they are learning yoga, meditation, sports and computer operations.* RSLDC chairman Neeraj K. Pawan told The Hindu that about *1,100 "willing participants" had been enlisted for training after a survey of the police and Social Justice and Empowerment Department. In addition to skill development, psychological counselling and emotional support is also being given during the residential training.* Mr. Pawan, who is also Secretary (Labour, Skill, Employment & Entrepreneurship), said the RSLDC would help the *trainees find jobs and remunerative work. "Separate centres will be opened later for women,"* he said. Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot had recently announced that the State would be *made beggar-free, and all destitute and homeless people rehabilitated.*

Image makeover

"The process commenced with an image makeover. The participants were given a haircut and were motivated to wash and also provided with new clothes," Mr. Pawan said. The first group of beggars is being trained in the *catering skills. Others will be trained later for a variety of occupations, such as that of an electrician, plumber, guard or beautician.*

FURNACE OIL FROM TITANIUM FACTORY SPILLS INTO SEA

An emergency clean-up was launched along the coast on Wednesday to mitigate the fallout of *furnace oil leak into the sea from the Kerala government undertaking Travancore Titanium Products Ltd. (TTP) at Kochuveli, near the State capital.* TTP officials put the spillage, caused by a rupture in a pipeline carrying the oil, at roughly 5,000 litres. After the alarm was raised in the morning, the district administration declared the coastal stretches along Shanghumughom, Vettucaud and Veli off-limits to the public and tourists for two days.

Fishing banned

Fishing activities along these regions also stand banned as a precautionary measure, District Collector Navjot Khosa said. Locals, largely comprising the fishing community, expressed outrage over the oil leak, blaming the TTP for negligence. They alleged that the oil leak would have a prolonged impact on marine resources, and consequently, their livelihood. The leakage occurred around 7 a.m., but it went unnoticed at the time. *The oil spilled out into a drain that opens out into the nearby beach, contaminating the beach and coastal waters. The leak was promptly plugged once the alarm was raised around 8 a.m., TTP officials said.*



Probe ordered

Dr. Khosa, who visited TTP and the affected coastal stretch, said the situation was under control. She ordered an investigation by the *Kerala State Pollution Control Board (PCB)*. The PCB study will also cover the possible fallout of the oil leak. On its part, the TTP too ordered an internal investigation. A preliminary survey revealed that the oil spill was largely confined to near-shore waters and the beach. As a troubleshooting measure, the top soil along the affected stretch of coast would be removed, the Collector said. The Coast Guard is closely monitoring the situation using a ship and a Dornier aircraft. The leak was reportedly discovered by fishers in the densely populated neighbourhood on Wednesday morning. The fishing community demanded urgent measures to clean up the beach and the coastal waters. They fear the oil leak will have a prolonged impact on fishing activities unless prompt measures are initiated.

PM'S ASSAM VENUE: 'MARTYR TOWN' WHERE A 12-YR-OLD FELL TO BRITISH BULLETS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his second visit in a fortnight to poll-bound Assam on Sunday, and both venues have historical significance. *The first was Sivasagar's Jerenga Pothar, where 17th-century Ahom Princess Joymoti sacrificed her life. And on Sunday, Modi was at the historic "martyr" town of Dhekiajuli, associated with the Quit India Movement of 1942, to lay the foundation stone for two medical colleges and launch a road and highway project. "Dhekiajuli is a historic land and a symbol of valour and pride. In 1942, Assam's freedom fighters laid down their lives..."* the PM said in his speech.

What is Dhekiajuli's connection to the Quit India movement?

Dhekiajuli was home to possibly the youngest martyr of the Indian freedom struggle. On September 20, 1942, as part of the Quit India movement, processions of freedom fighters marched to various police stations across several towns in Assam. These squads, which were known as 'Mrityu Bahini', or death squads, had wide participation — including women and children — and set out to unfurl the tricolour atop police stations, seen as symbols of colonial power. The British administration came down heavily on them. *In Gohpur, 17-year-old Kanaklata Barua and others fell to bullets. And in Dhekiajuli, at least 15 people were shot dead, three of them women, including the 12-year-old Tileswari Barua. "Monbor Nath, who was leading the squad, was the first to get gunned down,"* said Dhekiajuli-based teacher Ramesh Chandra Bora. *"He was followed by Kumoli Devi and Mohiram Koch, and after that, the youngest, Tileswari, charged towards the police like a tigress, clad in a mekhela sador, holding the tricolour, before getting shot."* According to Bora, who has for decades documented *the history of Dhekiajuli, Tileswari was the youngest martyr of India's freedom struggle.* Bora said the town *comprised primarily farmers and tea plantation workers. "These are the kind of people that participated in the movement,"* he said. *The 15 who died in the firing included a beggar and an ascetic. "Only the names of 11 are known,"* Bora said. September 20 has for long been observed as Martyrs' Day in Dhekiajuli town.

How significant was this event?

According to Avinibesh Sharma, who runs Vintage Assam, a website that documents Assam's history, Assam's participation in the freedom struggle intensified in the 1940s. *"Patriotic fervour was at its peak — and this was also a time when you saw a lot of women coming to the fore and*



visibly participating in the movement — because till the civil disobedience movement, women's participation was rather limited," he said. "But suddenly you had them not just picketing, but leading 'death squads', presiding over meetings." Barnali Sarma, Associate Professor of History at Gauhati University, noted that historians and scholars often say that before the Assam Agitation (1979-85), it was only the Quit India Movement that saw mass participation of women. "You had Kanaklata Barua, Pushpalata Das, Tileswari Barua — who all became inspiring icons," she said. Bora said this was a time when a number of children too, swept by emotion, despite their parents' concerns, joined the freedom struggle. "Even Tileswari, inspired by the fiery speeches she would hear in Congress meetings in her village, Nij-Borgaon on the outskirts of Dhekiajuli town, felt that she must do something for her country," Bora said.

How has the episode been commemorated so far?

It is sometimes said that Tileswari's supreme sacrifice has been forgotten. Dwijendra Mohan Sharma of the *All Assam Freedom Fighters'* Association said that so far no one paid the attention this event deserved, but with their effort awareness is slowly on the rise. *A martyr's memorial was erected in 1975, and two recent books have been written. Recently, the Dhekiajuli police station was accorded heritage status and restored by the Assam government.*

A PUPPET MASTER WITH A CHIP IN THE BRAIN)

When tradition meets modernity, the result can sometimes be amazing. *A puppet with robotic movements may not sound very charming but in a melding of traditional art and cutting edge technology, a shadow leather puppet in Kerala's famous temple art Tholpavakkoothu is being animated by a robot.* For the first time, *the famous shadow leather puppets will tell stories of the epic Ramayana with the help of robots. M. Lakshmana Pulavar and his son Sajeesh Pulavar from Harishree Kannan Tholpavakkoothu Kala Kendra, Koonathara, are set to animate their leather puppets using robotics with help from Inker Robotics, owned by Rahul Balachandran. The first robotic leather puppet was installed at the Palakkad District Heritage Museum, which was inaugurated by Minister for Museums Kadannappally Ramachandran, on Thursday.* Although there is a wide variety of art and cultural symbols showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Palakkad at the museum, the shadow leather puppets installed at Navarasa zone-5 have been a big draw with visitors with their robotic movements. According to Lakshmana Pulavar, the most difficult part of Tholpavakkoothu is the limb movements of the puppets. These are now being controlled through robotics. "We have puppets in several museums across the country. But this is the first robotic leather puppet," said Sajeesh Pulavar, who graduated from the NSS Engineering College in Palakkad. He has turned to Tholpavakkoothu full-time to preserve and promote the temple art form. "It was a dream come true for me," said Mr. Sajeesh. Tholpavakkoothu is a traditional temple art in Kerala having its roots in Palakkad and neighbouring regions. It used to be performed in the Bhadrakali temples of Palakkad, telling tales from the Ramayana. It is also known as Nizhalkkoothu and Olakkoothu.

BENGALURU SCIENTISTS DEVELOP A NEW MARIGOLD VARIETY

Generally, flowers lose their value if they get spoilt either due to rain or delay in harvest. But the new variety of marigold developed by the Hessarghatta-based Indian Institute of Horticultural



Research (IIHR) will fetch money even if they get spoilt as *it can be used for extraction of crude carotene, which is mainly used in the pharmaceutical sector*. “All marigolds have a carotene content of up to 1.4%. However, *the Arka Shubha variety of marigold has a carotene content of 2.8%, which is the highest content from a plant source*,” said Dr. Tejaswini P., principal scientist in the IIHR’s Division of Floriculture and Medicinal Plants, who led the team of scientists that developed this variety. *These flowers can be sold for ornamental purpose too. Dr. Tejaswini suggests that farmers consider this variety purely for extraction of carotene. There is always a high demand for carotene in the pharma sector. Presently, India imports most of its carotene from China and other countries. Dr. Tejaswini feels that it is better to take up the carotene extraction venture through farmers’ groups as a large area is needed for marigold cultivation*. This also provides scope for exports, she says. *The Arka Shubha variety is of use in the poultry sector as well. Its petals could be used as feed to get quality yolk, she said. It is used as feed for sheep too. Arka Shubha is on display at the ongoing national horticulture fair on the IIHR campus.*



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WHY NVIDIA'S ACQUISITION OF ARM LTD HAS COME UNDER SCANNER

American chipmaker Nvidia's \$40 billion acquisition of Arm Ltd from SoftBank Group has come under a cloud, with both the British and European competition watchdogs opening "in-depth" investigations into the deal. This is in addition to the US Federal Trade Commission announcing last year that it will be seeking additional information about the deal to ensure it didn't breach competition rules, and expectations of a "tough and protracted" scrutiny from China. The increasing examination into the acquisition is the function of a number of factors including what it means for rivals and rising oversight of jurisdictions over strategic sectors.

What is the Nvidia-Arm deal?

In September, Nvidia had announced that it will purchase Arm from SoftBank for \$40 billion. This became the largest-ever deal in the semiconductor industry. At the time, the deal was looked at giving the US a leg up in its so-called trade wars with China, in a highly strategic sector like semiconductor design and manufacturing. Even though China is still looking to develop its presence in the semiconductor industry, the deal saw protests from other quarters like South Korea and Taiwan, where major players expected a negative impact on competition. According to Bloomberg, mergers and acquisitions in the semiconductor industry more than doubled last year to \$144 billion, marking a consolidation drive of the sector.

Who is opposing the deal and why?

Rivals of the two companies fear potential locking out of smaller players if Nvidia decides to put brakes on Arm's open-licensing business model, which is based on customer neutrality. As a supplier of chip designs and intellectual property to most players in the semiconductor industry, Arm has managed an unparalleled reach with large customers like Intel, Samsung, Apple, Qualcomm, etc — some of which are increasingly competing with Nvidia. *One of the most recent opposers of the deal is British chipmaker Graphcore, which is backed by Microsoft and Samsung, among various other investors.* One of the early developers of Arm in 1990s, Hermann Hauser, who is now an investor in Graphcore, told CNBC: "If Nvidia can merge the Arm and Nvidia designs in the same software then that locks out companies like Graphcore from entering the seller market and entering a close relationship with Arm". Graphcore has made a "major submission" to the UK's Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

What are the antitrust regulators looking at?

In addition to the impact that Nvidia's acquisition of Arm could have on its rivals, the regulators are also looking at the impact of a deal this size on the strategic interests of their respective jurisdictions. For the UK, which opened the probe into the deal last month, it has become the first major investigation by the competition watchdog after Brexit. The UK CMA has also noted earlier that it plans to put greater scrutiny on strategic deals in the technology sector, irrespective of the size of a deal. The two companies have also said that they expect the deal to undergo "tough and protracted" scrutiny from China.



How has Nvidia responded to the concerns?

At the time of announcing the deal, Nvidia had noted in a statement that Arm will continue to operate its open-licensing model, while maintaining the global customer neutrality that has been foundational to its success, with 180 billion chips shipped to-date by its licensees. The companies, anticipating regulatory scrutiny, had set an 18-month timeframe for the deal to complete.

How is the global semiconductor industry shaped?

According to Gartner, the worldwide semiconductor revenues in 2020 stood at \$449.8 billion, an increase of 7.3% from 2019. Intel retained its position as the top global semiconductor vendor by revenue in 2020, followed by South Korean firms Samsung Electronics and SK hynix at number 2 and number 3. Others in the top 10 semiconductor vendors by revenue are Idaho-based Micron Technology, California-based chipmakers Qualcomm and Broadcom, Texas Instruments, Taiwanese company MediaTek, Tokyo-based Kioxia and Nvidia. Of the \$449.8 billion in 2020 revenues, these 10 companies accounted for \$251.8 billion. The industry has also seen a spur of consolidation, the latest of which is Japan's Renesas Electronics Corp agreeing to buy British chipmaker Dialog Semiconductor for nearly \$6 billion. Both these companies are suppliers to Apple.

WHY A GLOBAL CHIPSET SHORTAGE IS CHOKING TOP CARMAKERS

A global chipset shortage has created panic among the world's leading automakers, so much so that the companies have been forced to either halt or slow vehicle production. At the moment, all top carmakers from Toyota to Volkswagen, Daimler and GM are reeling from this global shortage of semiconductors. Ford is cutting production of its highly profitable F-150 pickup trucks, whereas General Motors said it plans to temporarily shut work at three plants in North America as chip shortages halt production lines. If the ongoing global semiconductor shortage will continue for a few more months, it will hit the carmakers who are already under pressure from regulators to pump more resources into electric vehicles.

Why are automakers hit?

Like a smartphone, a modern car also uses semiconductors. In fact, a Deloitte analysis suggests that *electronics make for 40 per cent of a new car's total cost.* Over the past few years, automakers have increasingly become dependent on semiconductors and electronic components. *More cars now have a power steering, tablet-like display, Wi-Fi connectivity and cellular connectivity. That means to make a car you need semiconductors and without access to the chips, it is impossible to manufacture a vehicle.* A delay in getting the chips will halt production lines and automakers can't keep up with a boom in demand. That's exactly what's happening now.

Why is there a global semiconductor shortage?

Silicon chips are the backbone of the consumer electronics industry, but they are in short supply. Demand for these sophisticated chips have soared during the pandemic, as homebound consumers lapped up laptops, next-gen game consoles like the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, smartphones and TVs. When the Covid-19 was its peak, carmakers slashed orders for the chip due to lower than expected sales. At the same time, chipmakers started diverting attention to meet the growing



demand for chips used in the consumer technology space. Automakers began warning of a semiconductor shortage sometime late last year after demand for vehicles picked up in many parts of the world following a shutdown of production plants due to the pandemic. However, the production has not been able to shift back to the requirements of the auto segment as quickly. Experts, however, blame automakers and their lack of farsightedness and poor planning for the current situation. Global carmakers have been badly affected by the aftermaths of the Covid-19 pandemics, but this continuing critical shortage of semiconductors could potentially derail the chances of them recovering as fast as many had initially hoped for.

WHY HAS TESLA INVESTED IN BITCOIN?

Electric car maker Tesla announced Monday that it invested \$1.5 billion in bitcoin, making it the biggest investment by a mainstream corporation into the most popular cryptocurrency. In addition, the company also noted in a filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) that going ahead, it plans to start accepting the digital currency as a payment option for its products. Soon after Tesla's announcement, the rate of bitcoin skyrocketed to an all-time high, breaching the \$44,000-mark for the first time.

Why has Tesla invested in bitcoin?

In its SEC filing, the company pointed out that last month it updated its investment policy to be more flexible in further diversifying and maximising returns on its idle cash. As a part of this plan, it said it would invest in certain “alternative reserve assets including digital assets, gold bullion, gold exchange-traded funds” and other assets. “Thereafter, we invested an aggregate \$1.50 billion in bitcoin under this policy and may acquire and hold digital assets from time to time or long-term. Moreover, we expect to begin accepting bitcoin as a form of payment for our products in the near future, subject to applicable laws and initially on a limited basis, which we may or may not liquidate upon receipt,” it said. In its earnings report for the fourth quarter released last month, Tesla said it had cash and cash equivalents of \$19.4 billion.

What investment opportunity does bitcoin present?

The first advocates of bitcoin did not intend for it to be used as an asset, but with the mushrooming of exchanges where it could be easily purchased and sold, the currency became one. While not with the same approach, traditional investment experts have also cautioned against Bitcoin as an investment. Market participants say that the huge volatility in the price of bitcoin without any major fundamental reason is a factor that retail investors should be cautious about.

Are other corporations investing in bitcoin or accepting cryptocurrencies as a payment option?

While Tesla's may be the biggest investment in bitcoin by a consumer facing company, it is noteworthy that it does not hold the largest quantity of bitcoin for a single entity's corporate treasury. Virginia, US-based business intelligence and mobile software company MicroStrategy has around 71,079 bitcoins in its holdings, compared to Tesla's 43,053 bitcoins, while US-based financial services tech firm Square holds 4,709 bitcoins. *Among the major firms to accept bitcoin as payments are Microsoft, telecommunications giant AT&T, in addition to other companies like Pizza Hut, Subway, which accept bitcoin as payments in some of their branches in the US and*



Venezuela. Notably, AT&T was the first major US company to provide cryptocurrency payment option to its customers.

INVERTED-V — THE SHAPE OF INDIA'S GDP GROWTH RATE OVER THE PAST DECADE

Last two weeks saw a flurry of macroeconomic publications — the presentation of the Economic Survey for 2020-21, the Union Budget for 2021-22, and the first bi-monthly monetary policy review by the Reserve Bank of India. But this flood of information also hid something crucial — the First Revised Estimates (FRE) of GDP growth in 2019-20, which were released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) on January 29. The latest revisions have not only tweaked the GDP growth rates for 2019-20 but also recalibrated the GDP growth rates of two more years — 2017-18 and 2018-19. Accordingly, *India's GDP likely grew by just 4% in 2019-20 as against 4.2%. The MoSPI press release also dialled down the GDP growth rate for 2017-18 from 7% to 6.8%. However, for 2018-19, the GDP growth rate has now been moved up from 6.1% to 6.5%.*

There are three main takeaways from this tweak of GDP data.

1: The extent of data revisions

Take the example of 2018-19. According to the First Advance Estimates for 2018-19 released on January 7, 2019, the GDP was to grow by 7.2%. Then Second Advance Estimates in February 2019 said the GDP would grow by 7%. The Provisional Estimates at the end of May 2019 pegged the GDP growth at 6.8%. Then the First Revised Estimates, released on January 31, 2020, revised the growth rate down to just 6.1%. Now the Second Revised Estimates for FY19 inform us that the GDP grew by 6.5%. To be sure, there are at least two more revisions left — the "third revised estimates" (another year down the road) and the "actuals" (two years hence). Similarly, the year 2019-20 started off with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman expecting the GDP to grow by 8%-8.5%. The First Advance Estimates in January 2020 finally accepted that the economy will grow by just 5%. By the time the year was over, the estimates pegged the growth rate at 4.2%. Now, a year later, the First Revised Estimates have been dialled down the growth rate to just 4%. Another example is from 2016-17 when the GDP growth rate went up from 7.1% (according to the First Advance Estimates) to 8.3% in the final analysis. Mind you, these revisions are for years before the Covid pandemic disrupted the Indian economy and none of them involves a change in methodology.

2: The importance of India's GDP in 2019-20

The combined result of an 8% GDP contraction in the current year (2020-21) followed up by a (projected) 10%-11% GDP growth in the next financial year (2021-22) will be that, at the end of March 2022, the absolute level of India's GDP will be almost the same as it was in March 2020 — that is, the end of 2019-20. That makes the absolute level of India's GDP — the total GDP expressed in rupee terms — in 2019-20 all the more significant. But as things stand, given the extent of revisions — not just in 2019-20 data but also in GDP levels of preceding years — it would be hard to be sure of what India's GDP was at the end of March 2020. *The year 2019-20 is also significant for another reason. Since the Covid disruption hit the Indian economy only in the last week or so of March 2020, the overall GDP growth of 2019-20 provides a good measure of how weak/strong the Indian economy was going into the pandemic. This, in turn, should ground our expectations about*



how fast can India grow from 2022-23 onwards — that is, once the low base effect of 2020-21 has run its course in 2021-22.

3: The “inverted-V” shape of India’s GDP growth rate during the past decade

The past decade started with policy paralysis and sub-optimal growth rate. India’s GDP growth rate followed an “inverted-V” shape before Covid brought the economy down to a complete halt. The manufacturing sector is possibly the most important sector for India as it has the capacity to absorb the maximum number of unemployed people in the country. The GVA growth rate of a sector shows how well that sector has grown over the years. The upshot: There is much talk about India registering a “V-shaped” recovery in the next financial year (2021-22). But, what the data above suggests is a more broad-based loss of growth momentum in the economy before Covid. The likely gains in FY22 will only bring the economy at par with where it was at the end of FY20. In other words, the actual recovery — whatever be its shape — will start once India starts growing beyond the FY20 levels of GDP.

INFLATION COOLS TO 4.06%, IIP RISES 1%

India’s retail inflation slowed to a 16-month low of 4.06% in January, helped by a sharp deceleration in food prices, while industrial output rebounded to growth of 1% in December aided by increases in electricity and manufacturing. Inflation based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which was 4.59% in December, continued to decelerate after being stuck above the RBI’s upper tolerance threshold of 6% for six months from June to November. Rural inflation eased last month to 3.23%, while urban inflation stood at 5.1%. *The moderation in consumer prices was driven by a broad-based softening in food inflation, with the Consumer Food Price Index rising just 1.89% in January, appreciably slower than December’s 3.4% pace.*

Concern over core

However, core inflation, excluding food and fuel prices, was estimated to be at about 5.7% and hovering close to the same level as in December. Economists foresee a resurgence in overall inflation from February as a base effect wears off. The sequential momentum in core inflation had risen, following the highest ever WPI-core momentum reading in December, rising mobility indicators and falling COVID-19 cases, said Sreejith Balasubramanian, economist at IDFC AMC. *The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) data for December provided some cheer as it revealed a recovery in output following a 2.1% drop in November. The rebound was led by a 5.1% jump in electricity production and a 1.6% increase in manufacturing output.*

PRATISATION PLAN OF GOVERNMENT

The government’s spending plans for 2021-22 hinge on better compliance lifting tax collections, and an ambitious plan to raise non-tax revenue. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced large-scale monetisation of government sector assets, including vast tracts of land, and is banking on disinvestment receipts of ₹1.75-lakh crore. The policy, promised as part of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package, states *the government will exit all businesses in non-strategic sectors, with only a ‘bare minimum’ presence in four broad sectors. These strategic sectors are — atomic energy,*



space and defence; transport and telecom; power, petroleum, coal and other minerals; and banking and financial services.

PUSH FOR ENTREPRENEURS

In her Budget speech, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced measures to ease norms on setting up one-person companies (OPCs). Ms. Sitharaman said the step — allowing OPCs to grow without any restrictions on paid-up capital and turnover — would directly benefit start-ups and innovators.

What is a one-person company?

As the name suggests, *a one-person company is a company that can be formed by just one person as a shareholder. These companies can be contrasted with private companies, which require a minimum of two members to get going.* However, for all practical purposes, these are like private companies. It is not as if there was no scope for an individual with aspirations in business prior to the introduction of OPC as a concept. As an individual, a person could get into business through a sole proprietorship mode, and this is a path that is still available.

Why do we need such companies?

A single-person company and sole proprietorship differ significantly in how they are perceived in the eyes of law. For the former, the person and the company are considered separate legal entities. In sole proprietorship, the owner and the business are considered the same. This has an important implication when it comes to the liability of the individual member or owner. *In a one-person company, the sole owner's liability is limited to that person's investment. In a sole proprietorship set-up, however, the owner has unlimited liability as they are not considered different legal entities.* Some see Ms. Sitharaman's proposal as a move to encourage corporatisation of small businesses. *It is useful for entrepreneurs to have this option while deciding to start a business.*

Is this a new idea?

No. Such a concept already exists in many countries. In India, the concept was introduced in the Companies Act of 2013. Its introduction was based on the suggestions of the J.J. Irani Committee Report on Company Law, which submitted its recommendations in 2005.

The law on one-person companies that took shape, as a result, exempted such companies from many procedural requirements, and, in some cases, provided relaxations. For instance, such a company does not need to conduct an annual general meeting, which is a requirement for other companies. A one-person company also does not require signatures of both its company secretary and director on its annual returns. One is enough. There was, however, criticism that some rules governing a one-person company were restrictive in nature. This year's Union Budget has dealt with some of these concerns.

What has changed for these companies with the new measures in this year's Budget?

One of the measures that the Finance Minister has announced in the Budget pertains to the removal of restrictions on paid-up capital and turnover. The 2014 rule, which stated that a one-person



company would cease to have that status once its paid-up share capital exceeds ₹50 lakh or its average turnover for the preceding three years exceeds ₹2 crore, has been lifted. The proposals, the Minister said, also include, *“reducing the residency limit for an Indian citizen to set up an OPC from 182 days to 120 days and also allow non-resident Indians (NRIs) to incorporate OPCs in India.”* Earlier, only an Indian citizen and an Indian resident could start a single-person company. These changes come alongside a proposal to increase the capital base and turnover threshold for companies that can be classified as ‘small’, which means they can enjoy easy compliance requirements a bit longer. *The capital base limit has been increased from ₹50 lakh to ₹2 crore, and the turnover limit has been increased from ₹2 crore to ₹20 crore.*

How many OPCs does India have?

According to data compiled by the Monthly Information Bulletin on Corporate Sector, there were 34,235 one-person companies out of a total number of about 1.3 million active companies in India, as on December 31, 2020. The number of OPCs was 2,238 (out of a total of about 1 million companies) as on March 31, 2015. Data also show that more than half of the OPCs are in business services.

DIRECT ACCESS TO GOVT GILT BONDS: WHAT TO LOOK AT BEFORE INVESTING

The Reserve Bank of India’s proposal to provide direct access to retail investors to its government securities investment platform opens the door to this risk-free investment for retailers.

Can retail investors now buy G-Secs?

Currently, retail investors are allowed to submit non-competitive bids in auctions of government bonds. Further, stock exchanges act as aggregators and facilitators of retail bids. Now, the RBI has decided to move beyond aggregator model and provide retail investors online access to the government securities market. So far, *retail investors could access the NDS-OM (Negotiated Dealing System-Order Matching) through an aggregation model. Stock exchanges were allowed to aggregate the demand for gilts and place it to the RBI in the NDS-OM. Now, a retail investor can place a direct bid with the NDS-OM system and open a gilt account in the e-Kuber system, the RBI platform for gilt auctions.* This will allow them to directly participate in the bidding process for buying gilts and also trading in the secondary market. Until now, direct access was limited to institutional players such as banks, primary dealers, insurance companies, mutual funds, foreign portfolio investors and high net worth individuals. For retail investors, *RBI had so far allowed access to any of the existing NDS-OM members, who also act as Depository Participants (DPs) for depositories NSDL and CDSL.* The NDS-OM trading platform is used by institutional members such as commercial banks, primary dealers and depository participant banks to trade in the G-Sec market. *These members maintain their holdings in government securities in Subsidiary General Accounts held with the RBI.* The new move comes amid burgeoning government borrowings which make it essential for the RBI to broaden its investor base. It has been trying to do so for some time. In April 2019, it allowed NRIs to access the local government securities market. *Retail investors can also take exposure to government securities through debt schemes of mutual funds that invest in them.*



How can investors benefit from G-Sec?

Investment in G-Sec, the safest debt instrument now directly available to retail investors, comes as an additional avenue besides existing options such as fixed deposits, small savings schemes, tax-free bonds and bond funds of mutual funds. *While investors can earn interest income on G-Sec investment, they also get capital gains by trading.* The capital gains, however, depend upon the trajectory of interest rates and whether the investor is going to trade bonds before maturity. If an individual holds a bond carrying a yield of 6%, a rise in bond yields in the market will bring the price of the bond down. So, *if an investor wants to trade the bond before maturity, rise in yield results in capital loss.* On the other hand, a drop in bond yield below 6% would benefit the investor as the price of the bond will rise, generating capital gains. They also have low reinvestment risk in case the investor is saving for retirement. *While fixed deposits are available for a maximum tenure of 10 years and thereby expose the investor to reinvestment risk, in case of G-Sec, the investor can lock himself at the current yield for 20-30 years without exposing himself to reinvestment risk.*

Should you go for direct investment in G-Sec?

Investment experts say G-Secs are highly volatile and only investors who really understand them, or are willing to hold till maturity, should look at them. "While it is a safe investment option with zero credit risk, it is better to invest through mutual fund schemes that invest purely in G-Sec because the yields are very volatile and retail investors may not be equipped to handle it. However, investors who are willing to hold till maturity and are not bothered by day-to-day volatility can go for it,".

G-Sec attracts tax on both interest income and capital gains in case the papers are traded in the market before maturity. While the interest income attracts tax at the marginal tax rate, the capital gains is taxed at 10%. They don't attract capital gains tax if the papers are held till maturity. Fixed deposits and post office deposits also attract tax on the interest income at the marginal tax rate; investment advisors say that G-Secs are better placed against FDs and other small savings schemes as far as savings for retirement are concerned.

WHAT INDIA'S PLAN FOR A FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK WILL ENTAIL

As the government finalises the rules for the new labour codes, the Labour Ministry is now considering giving flexibility to companies to have four working days instead of five or six. The proposal: The proposed new labour codes could provide companies with the flexibility of four working days in a week, even as the working hours limit of 48 hours for a week will remain "sacrosanct", Labour and Employment Secretary Apurva Chandra said on Monday. *This implies that there will be longer working hours if the working days are reduced. For instance, a four working day week will have to meet the 48-hour weekly work hours, resulting in daily shifts of 12 hours, which will correspondingly reduce if there is five-day or six-day working week.* When and how will this be rolled out: The Ministry of Labour and Employment is likely to complete the process to finalise the rules for four labour codes soon. The provision of flexibility to have reduced working days of four days in the labour code rules will mean that companies will not require prior government nod to enact it. The Labour Secretary, however, clarified that having a reduced number of working days does not mean a cut in paid holidays. Therefore, when the new rules will provide flexibility of four working days, it would imply three paid holidays. This ministry would soon be in a position

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to bring into force the four Codes, viz., Code on Wages, Industrial Relations, Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) and Social Security Codes,” Chandra had said. The labour ministry had envisaged implementing the four labour codes from April 1 this year in one go. The ministry is in the final leg of amalgamating 44 central labour laws into four broad codes on wages, industrial relations, social security and OSH. The ministry wants to implement all four codes in one go.

WHY GOVT HAS RAISED FARE LIMITS FOR DOMESTIC AIRLINES

In what could make air travel more expensive going ahead, the government has raised the upper and lower limits on fares of domestic flights in the first amendment to the restrictions after they were imposed back in May 2020.

Why did the government impose the fare restrictions in the first place?

Back in May, *when the Centre announced resumption of domestic flights after a two-month Covid-19 lockdown, it announced an upper and a lower limit on air fares across seven bands based on flight durations.* This was done mainly because of two reasons — *the upper bands were put in place so that the consumers do not have to pay lofty fares upon resumption of flights, whereas the lower limit was imposed to prevent tariff wars among airlines on certain routes.* The government later also indicated how it was crucial to prevent airlines from getting into tariff wars lest it could have led to bankruptcies in the sector.

What are the new fare limits?

The first band is for flights that are of less than 40 minutes in duration. The lower limit for the first band was increased on Thursday from Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,200. The upper limit in this band was set at Rs 7,800, which was Rs 6,000 earlier. The subsequent bands are for flights with durations of 40-60 minutes, 60-90 minutes, 90-120 minutes, 120-150 minutes, 150-180 minutes and 180-210 minutes. The fresh lower and upper limits set by the ministry for these bands on Thursday were: Rs 2,800-Rs 9,800; Rs 3,300-Rs 11,700; Rs 3,900-Rs 13,000; Rs 5,000-Rs 16,900; Rs 6,100-Rs 20,400; Rs 7,200-Rs 24,200, respectively. Under the old fare rules, the lower and upper limits for these bands were: Rs 2,500-Rs 7,500; Rs 3,000-Rs 9,000; Rs 3,500-Rs 10,000; Rs 4,500-Rs 13,000; Rs 5,500-Rs 15,700 and Rs 6,500-Rs 18,600, respectively.

Why has the government increased these fare limits?

While the government order does not detail the rationale behind the decision, officials have alluded to *the rising fuel prices being one of the reasons why the government decided to provide relief to airlines.* Effective February 1, the price of aviation turbine fuel was hiked to Rs 53,795.41 per kilolitre in Delhi, which was 6% higher than the month ago period.

What does the change mean for air travel?

Even though the fare limits have been increased by up to 30%, most fares are still decided on basis of demand on specific routes. However, it is noteworthy that *the government last month allowed airlines to sell only 20% of the tickets below the median fare.* Prior to this, airlines were compelled to sell at least 40% of the seats on a flight below the median fare. Therefore, in cases where



demand is high, the fares are likely to become more expensive. Also, *so far, these fare rules are in force till March 31. Following that, the government may decide to either do away with the restrictions and let the market dynamics decide the fares or take a call on extending these rules.*

THE NSE CO-LOCATION CASE INVESTIGATION, AND WHAT SEBI'S NEW ORDER MEANS

Capital market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) on Wednesday (February 10) imposed a penalty of Rs 1 crore on the National Stock Exchange (NSE), and Rs 25 lakh each on Chitra Ramakrishna and Ravi Narain, the former managing director and vice-chairman of the exchange respectively, in connection with its three-year investigation in the co-location case.

What is the National Stock Exchange (NSE) co-location case?

The NSE is facing allegations that some brokers got preferential access through the co-location facility at the stock exchange, early login, and 'dark fibre', which can allow a trader a split-second faster access to the data feed of an exchange. Even this infinitesimally sooner access is considered to result in huge gains for a trader. In January 2015, a whistle-blower wrote to SEBI alleging that a few brokers were able to log into the NSE systems with better hardware specifications while engaged in algorithmic trading, which allowed them unfair access and advantage. The unfair access issue pertains to 2012-14 when NSE used to disseminate price information through a unicast system. In such a system information is disseminated to one member after another. The whistle-blower's letter to SEBI alleged that sophisticated market manipulation has been taking place for several years at the NSE co-location centre. It also said that NSE had allowed non-empanelled Internet Service Provider (ISP) to lay fibre cables on its premises for few stock brokers.

What happened after the allegation of unfair access in algo trading at the NSE came to light?

Following three letters from the whistle-blower, SEBI formed an expert committee under the guidance of its Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to examine the allegations against NSE. The expert committee found that the architecture of NSE with respect to dissemination of tick-by-tick (TBT) data through Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) was prone to manipulation and market abuse.

Ramakrishna resigned from the exchange in December 2016, much ahead of the scheduled completion of her term. Narain quit in June 2017. In May 2018, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) registered an FIR against a Delhi-based stock broker, Sanjay Gupta, promoter of OPG Securities Pvt Ltd, for allegedly manipulating the NSE system for two years to get first access to markets when they opened. The CBI case is still under investigation.

What action had SEBI taken earlier in the case?

On April 30, 2019, SEBI came down heavily on NSE for alleged lapses in high-frequency trading offered through its co-location facility, directed the exchange to disgorge Rs 624.89 crore, and barred it from accessing the market for funds for six months. SEBI also asked Narain and Ramakrishna to disgorge 25 per cent of their salaries drawn during a certain period. They were also prohibited from associating with a listed company or a market infrastructure institution, or any other market intermediary for a period of five years.



What does the latest SEBI adjudication order mean for NSE?

The new management of NSE had made several attempts to settle the case through the consent mechanism of SEBI, which allows for settlement of the case without the admission or denial of guilt. SEBI had rejected the consent application of NSE, and proceeded with its probe. The latest SEBI order will bring NSE closer to closure of the case which has been ongoing since 2016. So far, NSE has disgorged Rs 624.89 crore it made in profits from its co-location facility to SEBI, in compliance with the order of the regulator. The closure of this controversial case may help NSE bring out its Rs 10,000 crore Initial Public Offering (IPO) that has been delayed because of the co-location probe.

PANEL SLAMS DOT FOR DELAY IN 5G TRIALS

Slamming the government for its 'laid-back approach' and delay in conducting 5G trials, a Parliamentary Panel has said that sufficient preparatory work had not been undertaken for introducing 5G services in India and that the country was likely to witness only partial deployment by 2021-end or early 2022. Globally, as many as 118 telecom service providers across 59 countries have started deploying 5G networks. Among these, major players such as AT&T had started testing and deploying the technology as early as 2018. AT&T's competitor in the US and other markets, Verizon, followed suit; expanding its 5G ultra-wide broadband services to as many as 60 cities in the US till December 2020. On the other hand, China, which led the trials of 5G services, has rolled out these services covering as much as 8 per cent of their population. Compared to this, India is yet to give formal approvals for 5G testing despite all the three major private telecom players having submitted their applications as early as January 2020. While Mukesh Ambani led Reliance Jio Infocomm has already announced it is ready to deploy 5G services as early as September this year, it is still waiting for a nod from the DoT to start testing the network. Its rival Bharti Airtel also showcased the successful demonstration of live 5G service over a commercial network in Hyderabad.

By that time, 5G will have been rolled out to cover 20 per cent of the world population, which is most likely to exclude a major portion of India. Comparing it to the deployment of other older technologies such as 2G, on which it was late by four years, 3G on which India was as much as a decade late, and 4G on which India missed by the bus by 7 years, the committee concluded that "sufficient preparatory work had not been undertaken for launching of 5G services in India."

In the report tabled in Parliament on Monday, the committee, headed by Shashi Tharoor, added *it was very likely that after missing the 2G, 3G and 4G buses, India was going to miss out on 5G opportunities, unless time-bound action was taken in areas where governmental intervention was required. "The committee, while deploring the Department's [Department of Telecom's] unconscionably long delay in auctioning of spectrum, recommends that spectrum auction including auctioning of 3300 MHz to 3600 MHz be conducted at the earliest," the report said, adding that the DoT had assured that the said spectrum would be auctioned in the next six months or so.* The panel said inadequate availability of spectrum, high spectrum prices, poor development of use cases, low status of fiberisation, non-uniform right-of-way issues and deficient backhaul capacity are some factors coming in the way of a 5G services roll-out in India. The committee noted that the reserve price for auction of 5G was one of the highest in the world. It needed to be rationalised,



taking into account the per capita income of the country and also by comparing it with reserve price mandated by other countries.

The committee noted that telcos had submitted 5G trial applications in January, 2020 but that till date, guidelines for trials had not been made clear and there was no set date for commencement of trials.

“It is really disturbing to note that 5G trials have not yet been permitted. This is in complete contradiction to what the Department had informed the Committee... in February, 2020, that the government has allowed all applications for 5G trials in limited areas and for limited time to test potential 5G India-specific use cases.” The panel has sought the reason for delay from the DoT. “The committee has been informed that by the end of calendar year 2021 or beginning of 2022, there will be some roll-out in India for some specific uses, because 4G should continue in India for at least another 5-6 years. From the foregoing, the committee [is] inclined to conclude that sufficient preparatory work has not been undertaken for launching 5G services in India.” The committee was of the view that the issue of allocating the right amount of spectrum as demanded by the industry needed to be addressed if India were to realise the benefits of 5G. “The committee recommends that the DoT needs to have fruitful deliberation with the Department of Space and Ministry of Defence and an understanding must be reached... for identification of adequate spectrum for 5G services.” The panel found fundamental differences between the versions of telcos and TRAI on fixing of spectrum prices and urged a review of the spectrum-pricing policy.

Internet speeds in the high-band spectrum of 5G has been tested to be as high as 20 Gbps (giga bits per second), while, in most cases, the maximum internet data speed in 4G has been recorded at 1 Gbps.

BUFFETED BY CENTRE AND STATE, GM THREATENS LEGAL ACTION

Squeezed between the Centre's decision to clamp down on the proposed sale of its car manufacturing and export plant to a Chinese company, and the Maharashtra State government's restrictions on shutting down the plant, American auto major General Motors has threatened to pursue legal options against the government. More than a year since GM agreed to sell its factory in Talegaon to China's Great Wall Motors (GWM) and six months after it applied for special permission under the government's new 'Chinese-FDI rules', the company is yet to receive clearances. Meanwhile, the Maharashtra government has rejected the company's application for permanent closure of the plant which ceased production from December 24, 2020, and has instructed the company to keep it running and pay the staff as usual. In 2017 the plant had 2,500 employees.

Rock and a hard place

“Effectively, the State's decision amounts to a requirement that GM either produce vehicles for which there are no customer orders, or pay workers indefinitely for doing no work,” George Svigos, General Motors' Director of Communications (International Markets) told The Hindu, in a written response from the company's headquarters in Detroit. “We reject both suggestions. We will move for the reversal of the order as soon as possible and firmly believe the law is on our side,” he added. Hardening its position in the face of the double-clinch from the governments in New Delhi and Mumbai, GM says it sees absolutely no “scenario in which it would reinvest in the



site". "GM's plan is unchanged. GM production has ceased at the Talegaon site and there will be no future GM production at the site," Mr. Svigos wrote, adding that it is completing "all wind-down work" after which the site will be dormant. He said GM's current offered package was well in excess of the legal minimum of 15 days per year of service, and asserted that the union, which moved the court, was refusing to negotiate a settlement.

Clouds from LAC

The plans for General Motors to exit from India ran into trouble last year after tensions at the Line of Actual Control between India and China rose over the Chinese PLA's aggressive incursions into Ladakh, which led to new restrictions on "*neighbourhood investment*". GM applied for permission to sell the Talegaon plant to GWM's wholly owned subsidiary, Billion Sunny Development of Hong Kong, filing an application on July 9, which was forwarded to the ministries of external affairs and home affairs, as also the Reserve Bank of India, for clearances on July 13. While none of the departments concerned has commented on the issue, sources confirmed to The Hindu that *GM has not received any clearances thus far, nor has the government given clearance to any of the companies that have applied in the Chinese-FDI category.*

2017 sale to MG Motor

In 2017, GM was successfully able to sell its Halol plant in Gujarat to another Chinese-owned company, MG Motor, the Indian subsidiary of SAIC Motor Corporation of China. Experts say the changed environment due to India-China tensions is affecting many third parties as well as India's attractiveness to investors. "The GM-GWM saga is a stalemate that benefits no one and is adversely impacting India's stature as an FDI destination," said Santosh Pai, a partner with Link Legal, which advises companies on investments in India. *"Ease of business includes ease of exiting a market."* According to sources aware of the negotiations, GWM has not yet given up hope of being allowed to buy the GM plant in Talegaon, but plans are on the back-burner for now. Also hanging in the balance the Chinese company's MoU with the Maharashtra government for investments of up to ₹3,770 crore for "Make in India" projects.

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

WHAT NEXT FOR CHINA'S FIRST MARS MISSION?

*China's Tianwen-1 mission successfully entered the orbit of Mars, making it the first time for a Chinese mission to be able to successfully make a journey to another planet. China launched **Tianwen-1** along with the **UAE's Hope** mission and NASA's Perseverance rover mission in July. All three missions to Mars were launched during the brief launch window available in July. During this launch window, Earth and Mars were aligned at their closest points in two years, which means using less fuel to reach the planet. Launch windows are significant since if a spacecraft is launched too early or too late, it will arrive in the planet's orbit when the planet is not there.*

The China mission

China's first Mars probe is called **Tianwen-1 (formerly Huoxing 1)**, which means "Questions to Heaven". *The spacecraft is carrying 13 payloads (seven orbiters and six rovers) consisting of an orbiter, a lander and a rover, and the mission aims to study the thickness and sub-layer distribution of the Martian soil.* The spacecraft, weighing five tonnes, launched on a **Long March 5 rocket**—a launch system developed by the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT)—from Xichang, China. The scientific goals of the mission include studying Martian topography and geology and determining the composition of the surface material, climate and environment. The orbiter will use high-resolution cameras to search for *a suitable landing site somewhere in the Utopia Planitia region.* It weighs around 240 kg and will carry cameras, a subsurface radar, a spectrometer, a magnetometer, and atmospheric sensors. *The rover is expected to land on Mars in May and the success of the mission will make China the third country to achieve a Mars landing after the USSR and the US.* As per a report in the Air and Space Magazine, the Chinese mission will be the first to place a ground-penetrating radar on the Martian surface, which will be able to study local geology, as well as rock, ice, and dirt distribution. Two candidate landing sites have been identified, one of them being Utopia Planitia, according to Space News. *China's previous 'Yinghuo-1' Mars mission, which had piggybacked on a Russian spacecraft, had failed after it could not leave the Earth's orbit and disintegrated over the Pacific Ocean in 2012.*

WHAT UAE'S HISTORIC HOPE MARS PROBE AIMS TO ACHIEVE

The United Arab Emirates' first mission to Mars entered the orbit of the red planet on Tuesday, seven months after the Emirati-built 'Hope Probe' was launched from Tanegashima in Japan. With this, the UAE has become *the fifth country after the US, Russia, China, the EU, and India,* to reach the Martian orbit. Relieved ground controllers at the UAE's space station in Dubai broke into applause after *the unmanned spacecraft called 'Al-Amal' — the Arabic word for hope — executed a 'burn' on its braking engines to reduce speed and successfully slipped into Mars' gravity.* The historic event was timed to coincide with the *50th anniversary of the unification of the UAE's seven emirates.*

What is the UAE's Hope Probe?

First announced in July 2014, the Emirates Mars Mission was developed and operated by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre in collaboration with the University California, Berkeley,



Arizona State University and the University of Colorado-Boulder in the United States. In July 2020, *it was launched from the Tanegashima Space Centre in Japan aboard a Mitsubishi Heavy Industries' H-II A rocket and its launch became the 45th for H-IIA.* Carrying three instruments, including a high-resolution camera and a spectrometer, the spacecraft is on an orbital mission *to collect data on Martian climate dynamics and help scientists understand why Mars's atmosphere is decaying into space. Hope is the UAE's fourth space mission and first interplanetary one. The previous three were all Earth-observation satellites.* Once it is successfully able to reach the planet, it will start orbiting the planet. *Its overall mission life is one Martian year, which is about 687 days on Earth.* The mission is one of three launched to Mars from Earth in July. The other two — China's Tianwen-1 dual orbiter-rover and Perseverance from NASA — are expected to reach the red planet later this month. *While Hope was the first to arrive, Tianwen-1 will reach on February 10, followed by Perseverance on February 18.* The timing of the mission is crucial as it was launched at a time when Earth and Mars were aligned at their closest points around the Sun, the Verge reported.

What is the objective of the mission?

The primary objective of the mission is to study Martian weather dynamics. By correlating the lower atmosphere and upper atmosphere conditions, the probe will look into how weather changes the escape of hydrogen and oxygen into space. By measuring how much hydrogen and oxygen is spilling into space, scientists will be able to look into why Mars lost so much of its early atmosphere and liquid water. Over the next two months, the spacecraft will continue to move into its final orbital position — around 20,000-43,000 kilometres about the planet. The distance is calculated in a way that allows the craft to use *all three instruments to capture a complete view of the Martian atmosphere every nine days for the next two years. It is expected to create the first complete portrait of the planet's atmosphere.* With the information gathered during the mission, *scientists will have a better understanding of the climate dynamics of different layers of Mars' atmosphere. Al-Amal will be the first "true weather satellite" orbiting around the planet.* But the UAE also wants the mission to inspire the country's youth to take up careers in the sciences. The government also hopes that the mission will boost the UAE's science and technology sector. "As a young nation, it is a particular point of pride that we are now in a position to make a tangible contribution to humanity's understanding of Mars".

How did the Hope Probe swing into orbit around Mars?

In order to be captured by Mars' gravity, the spacecraft had to pull off an intricate braking manoeuvre known as the Mars Orbit Insertion (MOI) to slow down its speed considerably. It was approaching the planet at over 120,000km/h (relative to the Sun) and had to execute a 27-minute burn on its braking engines so that it could avoid the risk of missing its orbit or getting lost in deep space. The manoeuvre was performed by the craft's six Delta V Thrusters in the required time frame, however, the ground controllers on Earth received the confirmation only 11 minutes later. The delay was caused due to the time it took for the radio signals to cover the *190-million-km distance between Earth and Mars.* "Mars orbit insertion was the most critical and dangerous part of our journey to Mars, exposing the Hope probe to stresses and pressures it has never before faced," Omran Sharaf, project director for what's formally known as the Emirates Mars Mission, said in a statement. "With this enormous milestone achieved, we are now preparing to transition to our science orbit and commence science data gathering."



Not only national space agencies but aerospace manufacturers such as Elon Musk's SpaceX too harbour ambitious missions to the Red planet. SpaceX, for instance, sees Mars as an alternative to living on Earth since it is its "closest habitable neighbour". What makes scientists and researchers curious about Mars is also the possibility that the planet was once warm enough to allow water to flow through it, which means life could have existed there too. This question makes the planet more intriguing for scientists since "almost everywhere we find water on Earth, we find life," as NASA puts it. However, *no human has set foot on Mars yet because the atmosphere on Mars is very thin, consisting of mostly carbon dioxide with no breathable oxygen, making it difficult for astronauts to survive there. Further, the landscape of Mars is freezing, with no protection from the Sun's radiation or passing dust storms. Therefore, more research, technology and testing is required to be able to send humans to Mars. NASA plans to do so by the 2030s.* According to the Planetary Society, Mars has historically been "unfriendly" to Earth's attempts to visit it and more missions have been planned to reach Mars than any other planet or place in the solar system, barring the Moon. According to Science magazine, out of the 18 lander or rover missions to Mars, only 10 have been successful.

WHAT IS EINSTEINIUM, THE MYSTERIOUS ELEMENT NAMED AFTER ALBERT EINSTEIN?

A team of scientists at the Berkeley Lab has reported some of the properties of element 99 in the periodic table called "Einsteinium", named after Albert Einstein. It was discovered in 1952 in the debris of the first hydrogen bomb (the detonation of a thermonuclear device called "Ivy Mike" in the Pacific Ocean). Since its discovery, scientists have not been able to perform a lot of experiments with it because it is difficult to create and is highly radioactive. Therefore, very little is known about this element. With this new study published in the journal Nature last week, for the first time researchers have been able to characterise some of the properties of the element.

The discovery of the element

When Ivy Mike was detonated on November 1, 1952, as part of a test at a remote island location called Elugelab on the Eniwetok Atoll in the South Pacific, it produced an explosion that was about 500 times more destructive than the explosion that occurred at Nagasaki. Subsequently, the fallout material from this explosion was sent to Berkeley in California for analysis, which was examined by Gregory Choppin, Stanley Thompson, Albert Ghiorso, and Bernard Harvey, who within a month had discovered and identified over 200 atoms of the new element. According to a podcast run by Chemistry World, *the discovery of the element was not revealed for at least three years and it was first suggested that the element be named after Einstein in the Physical Review in 1955.*

What did the researchers find?

The scientists worked with less than 250 nanograms of the artificial element, which was manufactured at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's High Flux Isotope Reactor, which is one of the few places in the world capable of making einsteinium. Specifically, *the team worked with einsteinium-254, one of the more stable isotopes of the element that has a half-life of 276 days. The most common isotope of the element, einsteinium 253 has a half-life of 20 days. Because of its high radioactivity and short half-life of all einsteinium isotopes, even if the element was present on Earth during its formation, it has most certainly decayed.* This is the reason that *it cannot be found in nature and needs to be manufactured using very precise and intense processes.* Therefore, so far, the



element has been produced in very small quantities and its usage is limited except for the purposes of scientific research. *The element is also not visible to the naked eye and after it was discovered, it took over nine years to manufacture enough of it so that it could be seen with the naked eye.* “In part the tiny quantities of Einsteinium that have been made reflect the difficulty of producing it. But it also receives the sad accolade of having *no known uses*. There really isn’t any reason for making einsteinium, except as a waypoint on the route to producing something else. It’s an element without a role in life,” the Chemical World podcast said. For the recent research, using a precise X-ray produced by a particle accelerator, the scientists were able to examine this element to find out how it bonds with atoms. *By studying this atomic arrangement, scientists can find out interesting chemical properties of other elements and isotopes that may be useful for nuclear power production and radiopharmaceuticals,* Rebecca Aberge who co-led the study was quoted as saying in a release.

WATER SCARCITY LIKELY IN THE HIMALAYAN CATCHMENT IF WARMING CONTINUES

The coldly white snowpacks and glaciers of the Himalayas that make for a picturesque panorama are also important sources of water for about a billion people who live in the basins of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. But with rising global temperatures, these snowpacks and glaciers, which are highly sensitive, are affected. This, in turn, affects the Himalayan hydrology. India, Nepal, Pakistan and China hugely depend on these Himalayan rivers for their daily needs and energy production.

Himalayan rivers

A new paper published last month studied how these Himalayan rivers are affected by the different components – *rainfall-runoff, snow-melt and glacier-melt* – and notes that if drier and warmer scenarios continue in the near future (2031–2050), *we are more likely to face water stress in these catchment areas.* They also note that if there is *increased rainfall, this could lead to a water surplus situation. The team studied five basins in the central Himalaya – Sutlej, Thulo Bheri, Kali Gandaki, Dudh Kosi and Arun. They analysed the daily precipitation, maximum and minimum daily temperatures, wind speeds, land cover, elevation and soil properties.* “*We developed a new glacier melt model and integrated it to the currently used land surface model. The currently used land surface model – used even by the Ministry of Earth Sciences – does not take into account glacier melt. This could lead to serious errors in the study of north-Indian rivers. Our model helps make the current one complete and turns it into a more advanced and better one,*” explains Subimal Ghosh, the corresponding author of the paper published in *Water Resources Research*. He is from the Department of Civil Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Wetter scenario

The results show that the glacier-melt increases about 15% to 70% in a warmer environment with its present volume, but then decreases to 3%–38% substantially when the glacier volumes shrink. However, such a decrease can be compensated if there is increased rainfall and if a wetter scenario persists. “Snowpacks and glaciers are two important water storage units in the Himalaya. Though snow is lower density and will melt easily in a warming climate, the reduced snowfall will in turn reduce the amount of snow-melt. Though glacier melt will increase initially, they will shrink in size quickly and the amount of glacier melt will also decline in the latter end of the century,” adds



Vikram S. Chandel, first author of the paper. He is a research scholar of Interdisciplinary Program in Climate Studies, IIT Bombay. The future study will focus on understanding the predictability of the land-atmospheric processes. The team notes that proper water-management and governance are urgently required. "Changing patterns of precipitation systems — Indian Summer Monsoon and Western Disturbances — are important for the future situation of water resources in Himalayan catchments," adds the paper.

WHY SCIENTISTS WANT PABLO ESCOBAR'S HIPPOS IN COLOMBIA CULLED

When notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar dominated the cocaine trade during the 1980s and early 90s, he brought a wave of violence to Colombia, which included bombings, murders and kidnappings. Now, almost three decades after the gangster was hunted down and killed by the police, Colombia is grappling with another troubling aspect of his legacy—feral hippopotamuses that are threatening the country's fragile tropical ecology.

Colombia's 'cocaine hippos'

Escobar, who was considered the world's wealthiest narco trafficker, had many extravagances, one of which was collecting exotic wild animals at his luxurious Hacienda Nápoles fortress, 250 km northwest of Colombia's capital Bogotá. His private zoo boasted of a variety of animals illegally imported into the country, such as kangaroos, elephants, giraffes and hippos. When Escobar was killed in 1993, most of the animals on the sprawling estate were rounded up and distributed to zoos across the country, except his four hippos—one male and three females—which authorities found too difficult and expensive to transport. Left undisturbed, the hippos multiplied to 16 by 2007, 40 by 2014, and are currently estimated to number between 90 and 120 over an area of more than 2,250 sq km. Within a decade, their population is expected to grow to 200, and thousands in the next few decades. According to an expert speaking to BBC, Colombia's hippo herd is now the biggest outside Africa. *The 'cocaine hippos' are thriving in the fertile region between Medellín and Bogotá, and are now spreading in the Magdalena River, one of the country's main waterways. A reason for their growing numbers is that unlike in Africa, the hippos have no natural predators in Colombia.*

Why scientists want them culled

Being non-native in Colombia, the hippos are considered an invasive species, and their growing population is believed to be a ticking time bomb that will seriously harm indigenous flora and fauna. *They are considered to be a threat to local species such as the West Indian manatee, Neotropical otter, spectacled caiman, turtles as well as endangered ones such as Dahl's toad-headed turtle and the Magdalena River turtle.* Growth in the number of feral hippos is also expected to cause deadly encounters with humans. A study published in the journal Biological Conservation in January this year argues that culling the hippos is the *only option to deal with this menace. It says that if the hippos are not killed now, their numbers could expand to 1,500 by 2035. To prevent their environmental impact, 30 animals need to be killed or castrated every year to stop their numbers from expanding. Castration, however, is an option that has already been dismissed by many in the past, mainly due to the animal's aggressive behaviour even while being in a sedated state, and due to the procedure's high cost.* A castration performed in 2009 cost \$50,000, according to the BBC. Ecologist Nataly Castelblanco-Martínez, the lead author of the study, has described the hippo problem to the Associated Press as "one of the greatest challenges of invasive species in the



world". Last year, another study found that the hippos have caused levels of nutrients and cyanobacteria to go up in the lakes that they inhabit, which can lead to toxic algae blooms and die-offs of aquatic fauna.

Resistance by locals

Despite the negative impacts that several studies have attributed to the feral hippos, the exotic animals are hugely popular among locals, and the government has imposed a ban on hunting them. In 2009, when *Colombian Army soldiers gunned down a feral hippo called Pepe, it led to a massive public outcry. For many local people, the hippos are a source of revenue from tourism, and culling them is an unpalatable idea. Some experts too oppose the idea to cull them, arguing that the 'cocaine hippos' offer an opportunity to preserve the global number of hippopotamuses, which are regarded by many NGOs as a vulnerable species.*

WORLD'S SMALLEST REPTILE? HOW IT COMPARES TO OTHER REPTILES

A chameleon discovered in the island country of Madagascar by scientists from Germany and Madagascar may be the world's smallest adult reptile. The discovery has been reported in the journal Scientific Reports. The team found one male and one female of the species, named Brookesia nana, during an expedition in 2012. The male has a length (snout to vent) of 13.5 mm and a total length of 21.6 mm when the tail is included. For context, a six-inch ruler (150 mm) would accommodate almost seven of these males in a row, tails outstretched. The female is slightly longer at 28.9 mm. Previously, the chameleon species Brookesia micra was thought to be the smallest. The average length of adults of this species is 16 mm (29 mm with tail), while the smallest adult male has been recorded at 15.3 mm. Reptiles come in a wide size range. The longest, the reticulated python, at 6.25 m is almost as long as 289 Brookesia nanas. The gharial is more than 200 Brookesia nanas long, while the king cobra can measure up to nearly 180 Brookesia nanas. On the smaller size, the gecko Sphaerodactylus ariasae of the Caribbean is almost as small as the Brookesia micra, or about 20-25% longer than the Brookesia nana. The gopher tortoise is equivalent to 12 Brookesia nanas, and the veiled chameleon to about 18 specimens of the newly reported Madagascar species. Madagascar is home to tiny lizards and also the smallest species of snakes. One possible reason for such small species is the so-called "island effect" that causes species on small islands to get smaller. But the study authors note that the new chameleon occurs in a rainforest. "These forests are quite well connected (for the time being) with others across northern Madagascar, and so this tiny new chameleon violates the pattern of the smallest species being found on small islands. That suggests that something else is allowing/causing these chameleons to miniaturise," study co-author Dr Mark D Scherz wrote in a blog. Scientists believe the species might be threatened by extinction because of habitat degradation.

WHAT GOOGLE PUSHING 'NEWS SHOWCASE' MEANS FOR THE AUSTRALIA SEARCH IMBROGLIO

Google is currently embroiled in a tussle with the Australian government over a proposed legislation that would require it to pay news publishers for using their content. Arguing that the proposed law would mean a fundamental re-evaluation of how its search engine works, the tech giant even threatened to pull out from Australia and argued. This even as Microsoft came out in support of the



law. In the latest development, Google is proposing its '*News Showcase*' product could be used to compensate news publishers under the upcoming law.

What does the Australia bill propose?

The upcoming '*News Media Bargaining Code*' is a "*mandatory code of conduct*" which the Australian government says *is meant to fix the "bargaining power imbalances" between news media businesses and tech giants, especially Google and Facebook.* The bill is specifically targeting these two players. *The argument is that news media businesses have been stripped of their revenue models as advertising went online, while Google and Facebook benefitted. The code proposes that digital platforms such as Google and Facebook pay for using links and content from news publishers. The bill also includes a clause for compulsory arbitration, meaning if a news publisher feels that the deal being offered by Google or Facebook is not fair, then they could go to an arbitral panel in hopes of getting a better one.* It also requires that digital platforms will "*provide registered news business corporations with advance notification of planned changes to an algorithm or internal practice that will have a significant effect on covered news content.*" Australia will introduce the legislation on February 15, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg confirmed to Reuters. *It will then be the first country to have such a law once it is passed.* In light of the bill, *Facebook threatened that it would have to ban Australian users from sharing news articles.* Google is not too happy about this either.

What has Google proposed?

Google's offering comes in the form of its 'News Showcase' product. In a blog post, Kate Beddoe, Google's Head of News, Web & Publishing Product Partnerships for the APAC region wrote that the company will make its "News Showcase" product "subject to the News Media Bargaining Code." Calling it a "workable solution", the company said publishers who are not happy about their News Showcase deals are welcome to "go to an arbitration to resolve any disagreement," which appears to be a step down from the earlier stance. The company says it has partnered with seven Australian publishers, who represent more than 25 titles for this product.

What is 'News Showcase' from Google?

The product is a licensing deal from Google, which includes publications such as the Crikey, The Conversation, The New Daily and regional newspapers from Australian Community Media. It is being added to Google News (mobile, Android and iOS app) and the Discover feed, which appears on the Google Search app. *Participating publications get monthly payments from Google for their curated articles, which appear in a carousel.* These could also include access to select paywalled content from publishers. Google says it will give monthly fees, "which are intended to provide payments over three years." *The idea with Showcase is to drive "clicks through to news brands' websites, giving publishers the opportunity to monetise that traffic through ads or subscriptions," in addition to the monthly fee.* Further this is not a "pay-per-click model." The product is already live in the Google News app for customers in Australia. Google says the panels are starting to roll out on its Discover Feed on iOS today, and will be visible to Australian users in the coming days. The product is also live in Germany, Brazil, the UK and Argentina.



Why is Google pushing this product now?

'News Showcase' appears to be a last-ditch effort from Google to find some middle ground in the market. The company thinks this model can best support “public interest journalism” without “breaking Google Search.” It also plans to make Showcase available with more partners in Australia, adds the blog post. One reason why Google is bargaining is that Australia is set to pass the new law. *The government appears to be in no mood to back down, despite Google's threat it would leave the market entirely.* Plus, *it would not look good for Google to leave a Western democratic market, even if it is not as big as say a market like India in terms of size.* Further, *Microsoft has come out in support of the law, meaning if Google leaves, another big rival could try and take its place.* Nonetheless, once the law passes, Google would have to significantly rework how it operates in the Australian market.

Isn't Google paying for content in France?

Yes, it has done similar deals for News Showcase in France and in other countries. But in Australia, Google will have to “pay for all links and snippets”. Currently Europe's Copyright Directive does not call for this. Google's defence is that “links and snippets are the building blocks of the free and open web,” and paying for all of those would not be fair. *It has also found support from Sir Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web. Lee wrote in a submission to the Australian Senate Standing Committees on Economics, that the law breaches “a fundamental principle of the web by requiring payment for linking between certain content online.”* He cautioned that if the example set by Australia “were followed elsewhere it could make the web unworkable around the world.” In a separate blog post, Kent Walker, Google's SVP Global Affairs and Chief Legal Officer, wrote that the company doesn't have a problem paying for content, the issue is over ‘how.’ “The law would unfairly require unknown payments for simply showing links to news businesses, while giving, to a favoured few, special previews of search ranking. Those aren't workable solutions and would fundamentally change the Internet, hurting the people and businesses who use it,” Walker wrote.

So what next for Google and Facebook in this Australia stand-off?

In a separate blog post, Mel Silva, the Managing Director for Google Australia, wrote that the law will disrupt the “free and open service” as it exists right now and replace the current model “with one where links come at a price, and where the Government would give a handful of news businesses an advantage over everybody else.” What remains to be seen is whether Google will really pull its services from the country.

VIRUS UNLIKELY TO HAVE LEAKED FROM LAB

The virus responsible for COVID-19 was unlikely to have leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, and the evidence pointed to natural origins, according to a World Health Organization (WHO) and China joint expert team that concluded a visit to Wuhan, where the pandemic began. The team also concluded that there was no indication of SARS-CoV-2 having spread among the population there prior to December 2019, when Wuhan's hospitals first began reporting a pneumonia outbreak. The authorities first confirmed human-to-human transmission in mid-January. The team of 17 international experts and 17 Chinese scientists spent the past two weeks visiting hospitals, a seafood market that was one of the earliest clusters, and laboratories in Wuhan.



Four possibilities

The location of the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) in the city had led to theories suggesting the virus may have leaked from a laboratory, but Mr. Embarek said, “the findings suggest that the laboratory incidents hypothesis is extremely unlikely to explain the introduction of the virus to the human population”. *The team examined four pathways: direct transmission from wildlife, transmission through intermediate hosts, transmission via cold chain products, and a laboratory leak. Officials in China have been strongly pushing back against the laboratory leak theory, while recently also suggesting that the virus may have come to China via cold chain products from outside the country, a prospect that is being examined but also considered unlikely.* Reports from Wuhan said the team spent around an hour at the market and four hours at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and met scientists there, including China’s leading bat coronavirus expert, Shi Zhengli, who has been researching bat coronaviruses in the laboratory. There was no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 was being studied at any of the laboratories in the city, the team said. Mr. Embarek’s comments suggested *transmission through an intermediate host was the most likely scenario*, and the evidence pointed “towards natural reservoirs of the virus” considering similar viruses in the bat population. “Therefore, we have tried to find what other animal species were introduced and moving in and out of the city that could have potentially introduced the virus, in particular at the Huanan seafood market (the site of the first major cluster).” While so far the intermediate host has not been identified, samples of some animals known to be susceptible to coronaviruses were identified at the market and some of those traced back to farms or parts of China that harboured bat environments. “The joint team in their study have identified the vendors who were trading these type of products, the suppliers of these vendors, the farms from where the products were coming from,” Mr. Embarek said. Liang Wannian, head of the China team of experts, said there was no indication that the virus was being spread in the population before December 2019. He also said there was no evidence to suggest the Huanan market was the source, as the earliest case in Wuhan, reported on December 8, 2019, was not linked to the market.

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