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DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

BIDEN GOVT. TO DEEPEN GLOBAL ALLIANCES

U.S. President Joe Biden released an interim government strategy document on Wednesday that called for America to re-engage with the world while strengthening itself at home. The document warns that democracies are under siege around the world, including in the U.S., and makes numerous references to strategic competition with an increasingly assertive China, which it said was the only competitor who could effectively challenge an open international system.

Invest in democracy

In addition to reaffirming its alliances with NATO, Australia, Japan and South Korea, Mr. Biden said in the document, 'Renewing America's Advantages: Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', that his administration would deepen its partnership with India and work alongside New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members to advance its objectives. The document, which serves to guide the agendas of U.S. government departments and agencies, said America would recommit to its alliances and invest in its own democracy and economy. "...Because our strength is multiplied when we combine efforts to address common challenges, share costs, and widen the circle of cooperation. As we do, we will recognise that our vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. And we will be mindful of both our values and our interests as we engage partner nations," the document said. Critics have argued that the Trump administration prioritised interest — including in its relationship with India — over values.

Multilateral groups

The U.S. will also move to "earn back" its position of leadership in multilateral organisations to tackle shared challenges like climate change, as per the strategy. "Because the United Nations and other international organisations, however imperfect, remain essential for advancing our interests, we will re-engage as a full participant and work to meet our financial obligations, in full and on time," Mr. Biden said. The U.S. and some other democracies (including India) have been concerned about Chinese government-inspired language finding its way into documents and resolutions of the UN and its agencies. Mr. Biden's interim strategy highlighted this concern, without naming China, and said the U.S. would not cede ground on it. "It is also critical that these institutions continue to reflect the universal values, aspirations, and norms that have underpinned the UN system since its founding 75 years ago, rather than an authoritarian agenda. In a world of deepening rivalry, we will not cede this vital terrain." "The most effective way for America to outcompete a more assertive and authoritarian China over the long-term is to invest in our people, our economy, and our democracy," the document said, adding that the U.S. would support China's neighbours and trading partners to defend their rights.



WITH BIDEN, INDIA MAY NEED A NEW TEMPLATE (K.V. PRASAD - A FULBRIGHT-AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION CONGRESSIONAL FELLOW)

The new administration in the United States, of Joseph R. Biden, and the 117th U.S. Congress, two separate branches in the American system of governance, hit the road running with a sense of purpose to 'heal' the country and restore its leadership role in the world. Now, with the Congress settling down to find its rhythm, it would turn attention to issues the Members are committed to and their constituents push for. While pursuing their agenda on The Hill, members tend to work together building support among colleagues as they move towards legislative action. Early conversations between the leaderships in both countries offer an insight into the priorities of the Biden administration in furtherance of strategic bilateral ties amid early signs that the mood on Capitol Hill could be less favourable.

Message by the India Caucus

India does enjoy bipartisan support in the Congress but the first signal of a possible direction can be interpreted from the recent formal interaction that members of the India Caucus in the House of Representatives had with the Indian envoy in Washington DC. Founded in the early 1990s, it is the largest country-specific caucus on The Hill. Caucus co-chair Brad Sherman (Democrat) and Steve Chabot (Republican), along with Vice Chair Rohit 'Ro' Khanna (Democrat), organised a meet with the Indian Ambassador to the United States, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, with particular reference to the farmers' protest in India. Irrespective of who took the initiative for the meeting, the message delivered by the Caucus underscored its priority. A formal statement by Mr. Sherman said the group urged the Government of India to make sure that the norms of democracy are maintained and that protesters are allowed to protest in a peaceful manner with access to the Internet and journalists. "All friends of India hope that the parties can reach an agreement," was the message as a few other Congressmen took to social media on the farmers' issue separately. Rohit 'Ro' Khanna is one of the youngest among the four Indian-Americans in the current House of Representatives, the others being Dr. Ami Bera, Pramila Jayapal, and Raja Krishnamoorthi. He identifies with the progressives group that has more members in the current Democratic Party set-up and is a powerful voice. Mr. Khanna was associated with the campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders considered Left and keeping him company in the group is Ms. Jayapal (Democrat). It was her possible presence in a meeting with members in the Congress, that led to India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar cancelling the engagement in December 2019 when he was in the U.S. This made then Senator Kamala Harris join issue.

Indian community is a force

While interaction between government officials is a regular exercise, there is another significant dimension to the growth of bilateral relations. It is the immense contribution of the Indian-Americans, the second largest immigrant community with a strength of four million plus people. The massive effort by this highly educated and economically strong community makes it count as one of the most influential groups in the U.S. From the time when India came under sanctions following the Pokhran explosions, to the time the U.S. Congress voted on the civil nuclear deal, Indian-Americans have played a key role in transforming the relations. Yet, over the past few years, there has been a divergence in the preferences of the community. A recent survey on



attitudes of Indian Americans by Carnegie, Johns Hopkins and University of Pennsylvania (<https://bit.ly/3kLfMhh>) offers an understanding into many facets. The community today may be less willing to engage with lawmakers and their aides with the same sense of purpose it did earlier on account of differing perceptions of events in India. In addition, over the past decade-and a-half, a number of Indian-Americans have found their way into various branches of the administration and the Congress.

Assessments and response

These second-generation members of Indian-Americans have their own individual assessment of developments in India, making it tougher for New Delhi to put forward a convincing argument from its perspective to counter perceptions. In America's way of working, the standpoint of aides go in as valuable inputs for hard-nosed policy drafters while preparing documents for the administration and the Congress. The farmers' protests in India attracted attention across the world and found resonance in the U.S. too. The sharp reaction in India to comments on social media by Rihanna and Meena Harris came around the time when racial justice and the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement remains strong in the current American political discourse. India, of course, has stepped up its outreach on the Hill and New Delhi enjoys an advantage to the extent that both Mr. Jaishankar and the current Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, served as Indian envoys in Washington DC. Both are well-versed with the way the city functions inside the Beltway. Adding sinews to this effort is the pace of engagement by Indian missions. A leading Indian think-tank too opened its U.S. arm to supplement efforts in a city where the hiring of a professional lobby firm in Washington DC is well-accepted practice.

A direction pointer

A challenge in the current scenario would also be to translate the intent expressed at the last India-U.S. 2+2 meeting, in October 2019, of establishing an India-U.S.-Parliamentary Exchange for formal and reciprocal visits by parliamentarians (<https://bit.ly/3ecqFHB>). This is because opinion articulated by lawmakers has an amplifier effect and at times determines the path for the administration. The accumulated reservoir of goodwill by Indians should help in defining the future course of bilateral ties; but it would require imaginative engagement to deal with the Democrat-controlled House, making it easier for the new administration to work on its India-centric plans. A test case waits in the form of CAATSA, or Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, as India moves ahead to procure the Russian S-400 missile defence system. The 'imperfect' fight against proliferation

IRAN DEAL

The move by the Joe Biden administration of the U.S. to revive the Iran nuclear deal has once again turned the spotlight on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which played a key role in enforcing the original nuclear deal from which Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. in 2018. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal, proved that the IAEA can emerge beyond its mandate of being a monitoring and inspection agency and, in fact, play a key role in finding solutions to tense international crises. Last week, the IAEA and Iranian diplomats struck a "temporary" deal to continue inspection of Iran's nuclear plants for three more months, which keeps at least the diplomatic path to revive the deal open. As the preeminent

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nuclear watchdog under the UN, the IAEA is entrusted with the task of upholding the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970. Established as an autonomous organisation on July 29, 1957, at the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the IAEA claims that it “works with its member states and multiple partners worldwide to promote the safe, secure and peaceful use of nuclear technologies”. Though established independently of the UN through its own international treaty, the agency reports to both the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. However, there have always been questions about the Agency’s ability to work independently, without being drawn into big power rivalries. What the IAEA missed in terms of real authority over sovereign states, it compensated for that by cultivating some tall leadership whose actions kept the issue of non-proliferation on the multilateral table. Both Mohamed El Baradei (1997-2009) and Yukiya Amano (2009-19) were vocal at difficult moments. Under pressure from the George W. Bush administration to back the American claim that the Saddam Hussein regime of Iraq was pursuing nuclear weapons, Mr. El Baradei maintained that he would not rush into a judgment on this matter without incontrovertible evidence that could prove that Hussein had committed a gross violation of non-proliferation. History proved that his cautious approach was right as the invasion of Iraq failed to yield the necessary proof of Hussein’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. While the agency played a key role in providing the platform for holding frank discussion about civil nuclear requirement for several countries, it proved to be ineffective to prevent power politics from influencing nuclear negotiations. This was particularly visible when Pakistan pursued a nuclear weapons programme in the 1980s and despite overwhelming evidence in possession of the American authorities, they did not pursue the case effectively through the IAEA because of the cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan on the Afghan front. Defenders of the Agency would say the lack of executive authority has not been a real issue as the IAEA was originally set up as a monitoring organ. Richard Barlow, who was in charge of the CIA’s non-proliferation programme that tracked Pakistan’s nuclear programme, says that having the IAEA is an “imperfect system but it’s better than nothing”.

Civil nuclear solution

Apart from dealing with the sovereign states and their pursuit of civil and military nuclear programmes, the IAEA is also active in championing civil nuclear solution to a number of areas like health, which is one of the main areas of peaceful application of nuclear know how. That apart, in recent years, the IAEA is also active in dealing with climate change, pandemic containment and in prevention of Zoonotic diseases. The IAEA’s lack of enforcement capability was hinted by El Baradei who had observed that IAEA had “uneven authority” as it does not have any power to override the sovereign rights of any member nation of the UN. The uneven authority produced results when in the case of Iran when the Agency’s efforts were backed by big powers. The same, however cannot be said about North Korea. The IAEA was the first to announce that the North Korean nuclear programme was not peaceful. North Korea finally expelled IAEA observers and as a result, there are no on-the-ground international inspectors in North Korea. The world is reliant on ground sensors and satellite imageries to observe North Korea’s nuclear actions. In comparison, Yukiya Amano was able to conduct some tough negotiation with Iran and managed to convince Iran to allow inspection of some of the top nuclear sites of the country by scientists and observers. His negotiation coincided with the back channel negotiation between the Barack Obama administration and Iran, which ultimately led to the JCPOA. As a partner to some of the complex and high stakes diplomacy, the IAEA has an air of secrecy around its functions and is



accused of not being transparent about its actions. The IAEA-certified the nuclear power plant at Rawatbhata in Rajasthan in 2012, which drew criticism as the power plant had two incidents of leakage of nuclear material earlier that year. The second incident affected at least four workers who worked in the nuclear power plant and had caused concern among the scientific community. One major criticism of the IAEA is that it never challenges the nuclear dominance of the five permanent members of the UNSC, who themselves hold some of the biggest nuclear arsenals of the world. That apart, there were controversies in the case of inspection of Iranian nuclear installations when Iran's then Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi had accused the IAEA of sending intelligence operatives who engaged in espionage against the interest of the Islamic Republic. The 2010 allegation also hinted that IAEA inspectors and observers had shared information with the U.S. government.

Iran challenge

The coming weeks will, however, test the 63-year old organisation as Iran remains suspicious of the exact intentions of the U.S. under the Biden administration. The current episode, which involves regional political concerns like Saudi-Iran and Iran-Israel rivalries as well as the American interests in the region, will certainly test the leadership of Rafael Mariano Grossi, the current Director General of the IAEA. It will also test the ability of the IAEA to deal with powerful states from its position of "uneven authority". After this week's visit to Tehran, Mr. Grossi had posted on Twitter, "A temporary technical understanding has been reached" with Iran. However, the main negotiation on this front is dependent on Tehran's demand of lifting of American sanctions. Iran has said its compliance will depend on lifting of sanctions. The issues involved between Iran and the U.S. indicate that they are not part of the mandate of the IAEA. Iran also requires assurance that once activated, the deal will not be abandoned in future by an American President in the way that President Trump had done in 2018. Tying all the loose ends of this difficult negotiation will be the biggest challenge for all parties.

REVIVING THE IRAN DEAL

U.S. President Joe Biden's attempts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, have not seen any breakthrough with both sides waiting for the other to blink. The Biden administration says it would return to the deal if Iran starts complying with its terms. Tehran, on the other side, asks the U.S., which unilaterally quit the deal under the Donald Trump administration in May 2018, to return to the agreement first and lift sanctions on Iran. The EU's efforts to organise direct U.S.-Iran talks were also unsuccessful as Tehran reportedly rejected the offer. Iran has also accelerated its nuclear programme. This game of chicken continues as the clock is ticking. Iran will elect a new President in June. Hassan Rouhani, who bet his presidency on the deal — only to be repudiated by Mr. Trump — cannot stand in a third consecutive election. There is no guarantee that a moderate like Mr. Rouhani would be elected this time. And it is not a secret that there is considerable opposition among the hardliners, a powerful constituency, towards any kind of engagement with the U.S. Mr. Biden's best bet is to get the nuclear agreement back on track before Mr. Rouhani leaves office. To be sure, Mr. Biden has moved with a sense of urgency after assuming power. He appointed a special envoy for Iran, showed signs of rebalancing ties with Saudi Arabia, and sent clear signals to Tehran about America's desire to get back to the deal. But these actions do not seem to be enough to rebuild the



trust after the acrimonious Trump years. Some of Iran's concerns are genuine. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, Iran had cooperated with the U.S. in the war against the Taliban. But once the Taliban were driven out of power, the Bush administration branded Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" along with Iraq and North Korea. As President Barack Obama offered diplomacy, the Iranians grabbed the opportunity, leading to the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. And Iran was fully compliant with the agreement when Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of it. So Iran would seek some consistency in U.S. policy. But Iran is also in a tough spot. Hit by sanctions and a devastating COVID-19 outbreak, its economy is bleeding. It had violently cracked down on protests in 2019-20, the embers of which are still burning. Its regional operations took a hit after Qasem Soleimani was assassinated by the U.S. in January 2020. Its assets in Syria are under repeated air strikes by Israel. Last week, the U.S. had also bombed pro-Iranian militants in Syria. Both sides are under pressure. Both sides need the deal — the U.S. wants to scuttle Iran's nuclear programme and Iran wants relief from sanctions. They should stick to the diplomatic path for a breakthrough.

THE VITAL BUT DELICATE TASK OF REVIVING THE IRAN DEAL (RAKESH SOOD - FORMER DIPLOMAT AND CURRENTLY DISTINGUISHED FELLOW AT THE OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION)

Of all the foreign policy challenges facing the Joe Biden administration, none is more critical than salvaging the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear deal) that has been unravelling over the last three years when Donald Trump unilaterally discarded it. It also seems the most straightforward because Mr. Biden has consistently advocated a return to the JCPOA provided Iran returns to full compliance; Iran has always reiterated its commitment to the JCPOA maintaining that the steps it took are reversible as long as the United States lifts the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration since 2018. And yet, it is complicated and time is running out as both Iran and the U.S. struggle to overcome the impasse.

U.S. policy reversal

The JCPOA was the result of prolonged negotiations from 2013 and 2015 between Iran and P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union, or the EU). It happened, thanks to the back channel talks between the U.S. and Iran, quietly brokered by Oman, in an attempt to repair the accumulated mistrust since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Former U.S. President Barack Obama described the JCPOA as his greatest diplomatic success. Iran was then estimated to be months away from accumulating enough highly enriched uranium to produce one nuclear device. The JCPOA obliged Iran to accept constraints on its enrichment programme verified by an intrusive inspection regime in return for a partial lifting of economic sanctions. Faced with a hostile Republican Senate, Mr. Obama was unable to get the nuclear deal ratified but implemented it on the basis of periodic Executive Orders to keep sanction waivers going. Mr. Trump had never hidden his dislike for the JCPOA calling it a "horrible, one sided deal that should have never, ever been made". After ranting about it for a year, he finally pulled the plug on it in May 2018 and embarked on a policy of 'maximum pressure' to coerce Iran back to the negotiating table. The U.S. decision was criticised by all other parties to the JCPOA (including the European allies) because Iran was in compliance with its obligations, as certified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). For the first year after the U.S. withdrawal,



Iran's response was muted as the E-3 (France, Germany, the U.K.) and the EU promised to find ways to mitigate the U.S. decision. But by May 2019, Tehran's 'strategic patience' was wearing out as the anticipated economic relief from the E-3/EU failed to materialise. As the sanctions began to hurt, Tehran shifted to a strategy of 'maximum resistance'.

The unravelling of the JCPOA

On the nuclear front, beginning in May 2019, Iran began to move away from JCPOA's constraints incrementally: exceeding the ceilings of 300kg on low-enriched uranium and 130 MT on heavy-water; raising enrichment levels from 3.67% to 4.5%; stepping up research and development on advanced centrifuges; resuming enrichment at Fordow; and violating limits on the number of centrifuges in use. Finally, in January 2020, following the drone strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Gen. Qasem Soleiman, Tehran announced that it would no longer observe the JCPOA's restraints, though its cooperation with the IAEA would continue. Tensions rose as the U.S. pushed ahead with its unilateral sanctions, widening their scope to cover nearly all Iranian banks connected to the global financial system, industries related to metallurgy, energy and shipping, individuals related to the defence, intelligence and nuclear establishments and even senior political leaders including the Supreme Leader and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. By end-2020, the U.S. had imposed nearly 80 rounds of sanctions targeting close to 1,500 individuals and entities.

Events in Iran

This came on top of COVID-19 that affected Iran badly, which had over 1.6 million infections and more than 60,000 deaths. The Iranian economy contracted by 7% in 2019 and another 6% in 2020. In mid-2020, Iran was shaken by a series of unexplained fires and blasts at a number of sensitive sites including one at the Natanz nuclear facility and another at Khojir, a missile fuel fabrication unit. The damage at Natanz, described as 'sabotage', was significant, leading Tehran to announce that it would be replaced by a new underground facility. Last November, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a senior nuclear scientist and head of the Research and Innovation Organisation in the Iranian Defence Ministry was killed outside Tehran in a terrorist attack amid rumours of external intelligence agencies' involvement. Days later, Iranian Parliament, dominated by the conservatives, passed a bill seeking enrichment to be raised to 20%, acceleration of deploying new cascades and suspending implementation of some of the special inspection provisions with the IAEA within two months if sanctions relief was not forthcoming.

No appetite for talks

Clearly, Mr. Trump's policy may have provided comfort to Israel's leader Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but it failed to bring Iran back to the negotiating table and only strengthened the hardliners. Iran has suffered and there is no appetite for more negotiations. The E-3's promised relief Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), created in 2019 to facilitate limited trade with Iran has been a disappointment; its first transaction only took place in March 2020. EU-Iran trade fell from €18 billion in 2018 to less than a third in 2019 and dropped further last year. A recent IAEA report has confirmed that 20% enrichment had begun as had production of uranium metal at Isfahan. However, a recent visit by IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi to Tehran enabled a 'technical understanding' to postpone Iran's



withdrawal from the Additional Protocol (that it had voluntarily accepted in 2015) by three months. Moreover, Iranian elections are due in June and it is likely that President Hassan Rouhani's successor may not be from the 'moderate' camp. Though the nuclear dossier is controlled by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, he too had to wait for the moderate Rouhani/Zarif combine to be elected in 2013 for the JCPOA negotiations to commence. If the U.S. waits for Iran to return to full compliance before lifting sanctions or Iran waits for the U.S. to restore sanctions relief before returning to full compliance, it can only lead to one outcome — the collapse of the JCPOA with Iran going nuclear like North Korea; an outcome that would create major reverberations in the region and beyond. Only good intentions will not be enough to overcome this impasse.

Overcoming the impasse

The Biden administration has made a good start by appointing Robert Malley as the U.S. Special Envoy for Iran but he will need help. Positive steps along multiple tracks are necessary for creating a conducive atmosphere. Release of European and American nationals currently in custody in Iran would help. Clearing Iran's applications to the International Monetary Fund for COVID-19 relief and for supply of vaccines under the international COVAX facility can be done relatively easily. Oman's quiet facilitation helped create a positive environment for the JCPOA. After the Al Ula summit, Qatar and Kuwait too are well placed to play a diplomatic role and together, they can urgently explore the possibilities for forward movement in Yemen, with help from the EU and the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths. The E-3/EU need to fast track deals worth several hundred million euros stuck in the INSTEX pipeline, with a visible nod from the U.S.. Not all U.S. sanctions can be lifted instantly, but reversing Mr. Trump's Executive Order of May 8, 2018 is possible as also removing sanctions on Iranian political leaders; both would send a positive signal. If not with Iran, the U.S. should share with the E-3/EU a 45-60 day time frame for progressive restoration of sanctions relief. Meanwhile, Iran needs to refrain from any further nuclear brinkmanship. The IAEA and the E-3/EU should work on a parallel reversal of steps taken by Iran to ensure full compliance with the JCPOA. Brussels has long wanted to be taken seriously as an independent foreign policy actor; it now has the opportunity to take a lead role.

WHY THE DECISION TO TAKE MEAT OFF SCHOOL MENUS SPARKED A POLITICAL STORM IN FRANCE

Lyon mayor Grégory Doucet's decision to take meat off the menu at school canteens in the city, which is considered to be the culinary capital of France, sparked a political storm this week. Apart from reigniting the debate about the environmental cost of eating meat and dairy, the new school menus also led to widespread protests by farmers and butchers across the country. When students returned to their classrooms earlier this week after school holidays, the usual school menu — which featured chicken and beef — was replaced by one without any meat options. But the menu was not completely devoid of animal proteins. The four course meal offered at school cafeterias still included fish and eggs. Despite City Hall authorities insisting that the meatless menu was a temporary measure, several lawmakers accused Doucet, an ecologist and member of the Green Party, of risking children's health by enforcing his own ideology.



But why was meat removed from the menu in the first place?

According to the City Council, the decision to remove meat from school menus was purely practical. To ensure that social distancing is maintained in cafeterias amid the coronavirus pandemic, authorities decided to offer largely vegetarian meals along with fish and eggs. Doucet insisted having a single menu, without meat, would help ensure smooth service at mealtimes, particularly as services were scaled back during the pandemic. He clarified that the menu would return to normal once social distancing norms were relaxed and students had more time to eat.

What was the response to the new school menu?

Several top lawmakers condemned the decision, stating it was risking children's health in order to enforce a pro-environment agenda. "Let's stop putting ideology on our children's plates," Agriculture Minister Julien Denormandie tweeted. "Let's just give them what they need to grow well. Meat is part of it." Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said the new menu was an "unacceptable insult" to farmers and butchers in France. "We can see that the moralising and elitist policy of the Greens excludes the popular classes. Many children often only get to eat meat at the school canteen." Hitting back on Twitter, Doucet said the measure was taken for purely practical reasons, pointing out that his right-wing predecessor, mayor Gerard Collomb, too, had taken the same decision during the first wave of the pandemic. He insisted the menu was "balanced for all our schoolchildren". Meanwhile, on Monday, angry farmers drove their farm vehicles, some with cows and goats in tow, to protest against the new school menu, The Associated Press (AP) reported. The protestors carried banners and placards slamming the government for its decision. Some of them read "meat from our fields = a healthy child" and "Stopping meat is a guarantee of weakness against coronaviruses to come."

But what does the new menu have to do with the environment?

Environmentalists have long argued that meat consumption worsens climate change and deforestation. In France, food represents around a quarter of the country's carbon footprint, according to a report by Guardian. The French government has been encouraging citizens to eat more local produce and consume higher quality meat. However, all proposals to reduce consumption of meat are met with fierce resistance from the country's powerful farming lobby. A number of candidates from the Green Party, including Doucet, won during France's municipal elections last year defeating French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist La République En Marche party. The recent wave of wins is reflective of growing concern among the French about the environmental degradation caused by intensive farming and other environmental issues. But Doucet insists the removal of meat had nothing to do with the Green Party's pro-environment agenda. The mayor said he eats meat in reasonable amounts himself, and would not try to force vegetarianism on children, AP reported.

SWISS NEUTRALITY IN WORLD AFFAIRS ATTRACTIVE AGAIN: ENVOY

Switzerland's traditional foreign policy of neutrality has become attractive again because of the changing political reality in the world, said its Ambassador Ralf Heckner at a think tank event on Saturday. He said neutrality has become necessary as a foreign policy tool as the phase of power politics has returned in the world affairs. "Switzerland's neutrality has to serve a purpose. The



purpose of neutrality to the global powers was maintained also after 1945. After 1991, at the end of the Cold War, neutrality was not very much in demand. There was a moment of unipolar world and that can explain it. Now with big power politics, Switzerland's neutrality and Switzerland as a place to meet is much more attractive again," said Mr. Heckner at an online discussion organised by Asian Pathfinders, an open knowledge sharing platform for policy planners and academics. When asked whether Switzerland would redefine its neutrality to adjust with the global order, the Ambassador said, "The answer could be yes." The envoy said the foreign policy was born out of a necessity to stay away from the wars in Europe from the 19th century till the middle of the 20th century. The policy, he said, was not just to the advantage of Switzerland as it also served a purpose of the European powers who wanted a neutral venue to meet and do business. In the 21st century, Switzerland is again becoming a destination for dialogue on difficult issues, he said. "Discussions on Syria, Libya and Yemen were held in Geneva. A lot of the Iran talks were held in Geneva." Ambassador Heckner said Switzerland is also likely to extend its foreign policy tool to the digital domain.

ENDING THE WAR IN YEMEN

One of the first key foreign policy decisions that President Joe Biden took after assuming office was to end the U.S.'s support for Saudi Arabia's six-year-long war on Yemen. He halted weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, appointed a Special Envoy for Yemen, and removed the Shia Houthi rebels, who control the northwestern parts of the Arab country, from the list of foreign terrorist organisations. Both former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump looked away from Yemen even as the country, amidst a multipolar civil war and Saudi bombing, descended into chaos and witnessed a humanitarian catastrophe. Can Mr. Biden be different?

The war in Yemen

The crisis in Yemen is not only about the Saudi-Houthi conflict. It has many more dimensions: humanitarian, civil, geopolitical and sectarian. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their allies went to Yemen in March 2015, they had a clearly defined objective: drive the Houthis, who are backed by Iran, out of the capital Sana'a and stabilise the country under the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi that they support. The Saudi-led coalition imposed a blockade on Yemen, which they hoped would eventually weaken the Houthis, and started a bombing campaign aimed at wrecking the rebels militarily. This campaign was a failure as the Houthis entrenched themselves in the north-west despite the military and economic challenges. The only success the Saudis can claim from a tactical point of view is that the Houthis were limited to the north-west. But the Saudi-backed government failed to consolidate its position even in the south. A separatist group, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has established its rule in southern Yemen. The UAE, which backs the STC, has pulled out of the Saudi-led coalition. All this is happening while the humanitarian situation in Yemen is worsening by the day. The war has killed over 10,000 people and pushed the country to the brink of a famine. According to the UN, 50,000 Yemenis are starving to death and 16 million will go hungry this year. They are depending on food assistance to survive, but the war is making it difficult for aid groups to operate in the country. Many more are dying due to preventable diseases as Yemen lacks proper health infrastructure and essential medicines.



Blockade and bombing

Finding a solution to such a vexed, multipolar conflict will not be easy. But that shouldn't prevent the international community from taking steps. Their immediate focus should be on tackling the humanitarian situation in Yemen. This week, the UN held a conference to raise up to \$2.41 billion for aid works in Yemen, but got pledges only for \$1.35 billion, which means the aid operations would be impacted further. Even the limited humanitarian work cannot be sustained if there is no reprieve in the fighting. The last six years of war prove that the Saudi strategy of blockade and bombing was a failure. The Houthis continued to amass weapons, even technologically advanced drones which they use to attack Saudi targets across the border, despite the blockade, while the Yemeni people continue to suffer. The Saudis should ask themselves whether they should continue with a failed strategy while the situation in Yemen keeps worsening. Also, the continued Houthi rocket and drone attacks have left a hole in Saudi Arabia's national security umbrella. The Houthis are also under pressure. If they want international legitimacy, they should stop fighting and start talking with other stakeholders. A ceasefire is in everybody's interest but the question is who will blink first. The Biden administration should use its leverage to pressure Riyadh to lift the blockade, a key Houthi demand, as a confidence-building measure and push for talks for a lasting ceasefire. Once a ceasefire between the two main rival blocs is achieved, the U.S. and its regional allies could call for a multilateral conference involving all stakeholders to discuss Yemen's future. Yemen can find a way out of the current crisis provided the war is brought to an immediate end and the country is given diplomatic assistance.

THE PERILS FACING BRITAIN (GAURAV DAGA - ASSOCIATE VICE-PRESIDENT AT GUIDANCE, INDUSTRIES DEPARTMENT, GOVERNMENT OF TAMIL NADU)

Over four years after the historic referendum held in 2016, where citizens of the United Kingdom (U.K.) decided to leave the European Union (EU), in December 2020, the U.K. and the EU finally struck a provisional free-trade agreement as part of their Brexit deal. While the recently concluded trade and cooperation agreement charted out the key aspects of everyday governance and the rules for enforcement between the two parties, at a broader level, the U.K. may now be forced to face the constraints it had originally escaped. Since the beginning of the 19th century, Britain had the unique advantage of relieving its constraints on land, energy, and (localised) power. But with Brexit in place, the country may have to evaluate its limitations. As historian Kenneth Pomeranz argues in his book *The Great Divergence*, Britain, in the 19th century, solved its land problem by anchoring "ghost hectares" in the Americas, where it could exploit the land, labour and capital of the continent to "relieve its hard-pressed land", and "turn a demographic and proto-industrial expansion that (unlike in East Asia) far outpaced advances in agriculture into an asset for further development". Dr. Kenneth argues that without relieving its land constraint, Britain's "demographic and proto-industrial expansion could have been the basis for a later catastrophe, or it could have collapsed by rising primary-product prices in the nineteenth century". Hence, by anchoring phantom land and acting on "forces outside the market and conjunctures beyond Europe", Britain could achieve "unique breakthroughs" and enable for its rising population a standard quality of living. If not for foreign land, Britain would have been severely restricted in exploiting and conserving at the same time its limited land base. With Brexit, however, the U.K. may now have to find contemporary 'ghost hectares' through its trade deals. The mainstreaming of coal and oil in the 20th century ensured that Britain's phantom land could



be maintained in other ways. As various post-colonial thinkers have noted, countries like India, during its empire days, ensured a steady supply of agricultural goods and raw materials to Britain. With a heavy dependency on fossil fuels, Britain became a consumer of energy, which was, in practice, generated by others. It was not until the 1970s that the U.K. started taking steps to move from being a net importer of energy to a net exporter. While this dependency on energy 'ghost hectares' continues even today, the discovery and development of high-quality coal in England and Wales led to the creation of its own energy system.

New power positions

This new energy system, however, led to the creation of new dynamics of power, position and political representation, where those in control did not oversee just the flow of energy, but also had the power to slow it down or disrupt it. The coal mining strikes of the 1980s, which Margaret Thatcher termed as an 'enemy within', is the perfect example of such power and agency. But with oil, things became different. While the power of the 'enemy within' diminished, the anchoring of ghost hectares in OPEC countries continued, to the extent of nearly 50% energy dependency in 2013. Nevertheless, an analysis reveals that for the first time in 2019, the U.K. generated more electricity from renewables than fossil fuels. While this is a welcome step, and the U.K.'s presidency at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference indicates its commitment towards the Paris Agreement, a lot is yet to be achieved. The withdrawal of the U.K. from the EU only complicates the issue. The anchoring of coastal 'ghost hectares' via offshore wind farms is an example of the choices the country will be forced to weigh up — including the issues around living on a thin critical zone of Earth. Lastly, by the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, it was argued by many scholars that a liberal democracy with access to a free market is the best way to organise societies. An idea that all nations should pursue unequivocally is globalisation. It was envisaged that the infinite expansion would last forever and national citizens will eventually become 'global citizens'. It was in this swell that the Maastricht Treaty of the 1990s led to the creation of the European Union — a Europe without frontiers. But with Brexit, where do the citizens of the U.K. go? For the first time in centuries, the U.K. faces these constraints together, with an added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will have to learn to pass this astounding hailstorm and become 'earthbound', as French sociologist Bruno Latour calls it, and rethink its organising structure and the relationship it will have with its land.

A MURDER, AND BUSINESS AS USUAL (MOHAMMED AYOUB - UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY)

*The case of the "smoking saw", to use U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham's phrase, is solved. The declassified version of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report on journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder states in no uncertain terms "that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved [the] operation...to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi." It bases this conclusion on the evidence that the persons responsible for the crime were members of the security detail of the Crown Prince, who is popularly known as MBS, and reported to his close advisers. It argues that an operation of this nature could not have been conducted without his approval. Although the declassified version does not provide the gory details of the heinous act, it is common knowledge, thanks to revelations made by Turkish intelligence, that *Khashoggi's body was dismembered with an electric saw before its final disposal.**



A short-term recalibration

The U.S. Congress had been demanding for over a year that the report be declassified but former President Donald Trump had refused to do so because of his and his son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner's cosy relationship with MBS as well as Mr. Trump's interest in selling massive amounts of arms to the petrostate. However, the release of the report does not mean a major reversal or even re-evaluation of America's relationship with Saudi Arabia. It only signifies a short term "recalibration" of Washington's approach towards the Kingdom. *It is primarily a public relations exercise undertaken to assuage Congressional anger and to appease the human rights constituency.* This was indicated by the fact that although some sanctions were imposed on a few Saudis, MBS was not subjected to any penalties. President Joe Biden's call to King Salman the day before the document's release reinforces this message. It made no mention of the imminent release of the damning report and instead assured the Saudi monarch of America's continued support for his country's security. According to the White House, Mr. Biden "discussed regional security, including the renewed diplomatic efforts led by the United Nations and the United States to end the war in Yemen, and the U.S. commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory as it faces attacks from Iranian-aligned groups."

Balancing act

These actions demonstrate that *Mr. Biden is engaged in a balancing act aimed at assuaging domestic anger at the Saudi government's role in the murder of an American resident and a columnist for The Washington Post while preserving America's long-standing strategic and economic relationship with the Saudi regime.* Saudi Arabia's strategic importance for Washington derives from the fact that *it is America's principal regional partner in its efforts to contain Iranian influence in West Asia. Riyadh's strategic value has increased with the sequential normalisation of Israel's relations with Arab countries allied to it since the success of this process is heavily dependent upon Saudi approval. Such normalisation suits Washington, for it relieves pressure on it to address the Palestinian issue.* Furthermore, *Mr. Biden cannot afford to alienate the Saudi regime beyond a point because this could intensify Riyadh's opposition to his stated intention of returning to the Iran nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia may decide to go public on this issue in conjunction with Israel, which also considers Iran its mortal enemy. While the U.S. is no longer dependent on Gulf oil, the importance of Saudi Arabia as the swing producer of oil for the health of the global economy on which U.S. prosperity depends rules out any possibility of the Biden administration punishing the regime for its human rights transgressions.* Once the brouhaha over the CIA report blows over, one can expect Washington and Riyadh to return to business as usual. Realpolitik will, as has always been the case, trump human rights concerns.

THE PATH TO PEACE IN ETHIOPIA (TEFSI GOLLA - RESEARCHER WITH THE INSTITUTE FOR NATURAL RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (INRSD) AND CARLETON UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES; HANY BESADA - EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INRSD AND RESEARCH PROFESSOR AT CARLETON UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES)

The cataclysm in Ethiopia's Tigray region and the country's humanitarian crisis give rise to concerns of long-term regional deterioration. Without a clear framework for peace-building, post-



conflict reconstruction and transitional justice, the country is at risk of drastically postponing both political and economic recovery. This has implications not only for Ethiopia but also the entire Horn of Africa region which is already plagued by low-level conflicts, uneven economic development, border disputes, continued food insecurity, climate change, a precarious political situation, and a dire refugee crisis.

The conflict

The breakdown in the already strained relations between the federal government in Addis Ababa and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)'s leaders in Tigray has resulted in the national crisis. In 2018, anti-government protests by the marginalised Oromo population forced the TPLF to step down, resulting in the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his subsequent crackdown on Tigrayan politicians for corruption and human rights abuses. Internal conflict in Ethiopia has resulted in the death of 52,000 people and the displacement of over 2 million, over 60,000 of whom have taken refuge in Sudan's eastern border. This has triggered an influx of Sudanese and Eritrean military personnel near Ethiopia's northern frontier. The complex process of developing a post-conflict reconstruction framework requires a comprehensive analysis, one that compels immediate coordination between the federal, regional and local governments, independent and partial adjudicators, civil society and victims' and community groups. The various levels of government need to be responsible for two roles: first, the generation of effective regional security architecture for uncomplicated jurisdictions; and second, a narrowed scope and mandate for the Reconciliation Commission and its independent committee of facilitators. Independent mediators and adjudicators can further assist in framing post-conflict models. Currently, Ethiopia is attempting to tackle its domestic emergency. This phase includes securing a military conflict-free environment, addressing increased displacement, allowing access to basic needs assistance for citizens at risk of famine, and strengthening humanitarian capacity in conflict-ridden areas. The part that requires more attention, given that it has been more than four months since the initiation of military conflict in Tigray, would be the medium- and long-term phases. This would mean examining how Ethiopia's response in rebuilding trust and consensus in state institutions will impact its political, economic and security stability. Internally, the federal government would be urged to consider steps in effectively building frameworks for accountability, transparency and power distribution for inclusive national systems of governance. This is particularly important for combating the contentious nature of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system and its lack of non-partisan platforms for political dialogue. This would help build an environment that promotes the establishment of trust and cooperation among its largest and historically conflicted Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayan groups, further preventing a relapse into a state of emergency. Cities in the Northern Gondar Zone, such as Welkait, which have been under the contested control of TPLF forces for decades, will require socioeconomic transitional institutions for effective post-conflict recovery. In Welkait's case, this includes initiating healing dialogue among Amhara and Tigrayan groups, establishing efforts to integrate the cities' education, currently only taught in Tigrigna, and economy into the rest of the neighbouring Amharic-speaking region.

Taking a long-term view

A lack of transitional processes will result in a return to violence in not only the Tigray region but also in other regions where there are rising ethnic tensions. This threatens to derail the economic



progress made over the last few decades. The best way to prevent the same chain of events that led to the 2010 post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire is to begin structuring a post-conflict environment that promotes a peaceful transition. The focus of regional and international media has been heavily geared towards Ethiopia's immediate alleviation of humanitarian strains. But meeting short-term security and humanitarian needs, although extremely important, should not be the sole focus of a sustainable recovery agenda. It is imperative to recognise a broader view and develop successful post-conflict reconstruction policies before stability is beyond reach.

COLD COMFORT

To Islamabad's deep disappointment, the Paris-based 39-member Financial Action Task Force has decided once again to keep Pakistan on its "grey list" of countries under "increased monitoring", giving it another three months to complete its commitments. After being removed from that list in 2015, Pakistan was put back on it in June 2018, and handed a 27-point action list to fulfil. On Thursday, FATF President Marcus Pleyer announced that although Pakistan has made "significant progress", it had three remaining points of the 27 that were only partially addressed, notably all in the area of curbing terror financing. The body listed the remaining tasks: demonstrating terror-funding prosecution is accurate, effective and dissuasive, and thoroughly implementing financial sanctions against all terrorists designated by the UN Security Council, which include LeT founder Hafiz Saeed, JeM chief Masood Azhar, other leaders of terror groups in Pakistan, and those belonging to al Qaeda. Pakistan's former Interior Minister Rehman Malik has protested the decision most vociferously, even suggesting that the FATF should be taken to The Hague, given that other countries that have completed nearly all the points on their task lists have been dropped from the grey list. He also cited a recent report that calculated Pakistan has lost \$38 billion because of its time on the grey list (2008-2015 and 2018-the present). It is cold comfort for Islamabad that the FATF chief also ruled out downgrading Pakistan to the "blacklist", as he said that Pakistan has made progress on its commitments and this is not "the time" to contemplate the extreme step — this would mean enhanced sanctions and restrictions, as Iran and North Korea face at present. Mr. Pleyer advised Pakistan to complete the remaining tasks by June 2021, when the FATF will meet again to vote on the issue. The FATF decision coincides with the first signs of a thaw between India and Pakistan since 2016. The decision of the Directors General of Military Operations, also on Thursday, to strictly observe the ceasefire agreement at the LoC, and revelations in the media, which have not been contradicted by the government, that National Security Adviser Ajit Doval has been in touch with senior officials including the Pakistan Army Chief, are both significant. The joint statement also commits to resolving "core issues" that lead to violence between the two sides, indicating more dialogue between India and Pakistan could be on the cards; there are no political, trade, cultural ties at present. Pakistan's next steps on the FATF directive to successfully prosecute terrorists and terror financiers identified by the grouping are in its own interests. Any proposed New Delhi-Islamabad engagement in the next few months would get a much-needed boost if Pakistan traverses this 'last mile' on the FATF grey list, addressing India's main grievance on cross-border terror that emanates from its soil.



BACK TO PARLIAMENT IN NEPAL (KANAK MANI DIXIT, A WRITER AND JOURNALIST BASED IN KATHMANDU, IS FOUNDING EDITOR OF THE MAGAZINE 'HIMAL SOUTHASIAN')

On February 23, Nepal's Supreme Court reinstated the House of Representatives, which had been dissolved by Prime Minister K.P. Oli on December 20, responding to an attempt to unseat him from leadership of his own parliamentary party in the lower house. After hearing more than a hundred lawyers from both sides, amidst a polarised political environment, the five-judge Constitutional Bench led by Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher J.B. Rana delivered a verdict that throws the ball back to the House.

Dissolution of Parliament

Some hoped and others worried that the Bench would go along with the dissolution, allowing the general elections as had been called for in April-May by Mr. Oli. The Bench preferred a strict reading of the Constitution, which asserts that Parliament may not be dissolved until all options to form a government (by majority party, a coalition, a minority party, or by a member of the House trusted by the President) have been exhausted. These tight provisions were placed in the Constitution by the framers, including those in Mr. Oli's cohort who were then members of the Constituent Assembly, to ensure continuity in governance, especially given the quick and easy dissolutions in the past and ensuing instabilities. The Constitution has other unique provisions to ensure political stability, including one that does not allow a vote of confidence to be brought for the first two years of a Prime Minister's five-year term. A no-confidence vote must include the name of the prime ministerial candidate, and if the vote fails, another motion may not be brought for a year. Before the Bench, the Prime Minister's side argued that the Constitution's declaration of Nepal as a parliamentary democracy had no meaning if a Prime Minister commanding majority in the House did not have the right to disband it. In its unanimous judgment, the Bench maintained that Nepal did not need to look at the procedures of other parliamentary democracies in the instant case; that national experience and provisions of the Constitution should suffice. Even though the Constitutional Bench did not censure him for mal-intent as demanded by the petitioners, Mr. Oli would be feeling out on a limb. While the healthy future of parliamentary practice may require constitutional amendment to allow a sitting Prime Minister to recommend dissolution and elections, for now, the Supreme Court has removed constitutional uncertainty. There was method to what some might see as Mr. Oli's madness, and it has to do with his inability to manage the ambitions of his Nepal Communist Party (NCP) co-chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'). In 2017, during the Dasain (Dushhera) holidays, Mr. Oli had secretly reached out to Mr. Dahal to unify the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) with his Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist). It was a strange coming together of a communist party that had accepted multiparty democracy and the Maoists led by a sweet-talking demagogue. The unification was a windfall for Mr. Dahal and his fast-declining party. It also seemed an unworkable experiment that sooner or later would bring grief to the polity. Even as Mr. Oli took the reins of power, Mr. Dahal initiated his two-pronged strategy of selective media capture and weaning away UML stalwarts by feeding their sense of grievance and powerlessness vis-à-vis the imperious Mr. Oli. In particular, Mr. Dahal worked on former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, who had been defeated by Mr. Oli for the post of Chairman in the UML general convention. Mr. Dahal dangled the carrot of presidency before former Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal. Mr. Dahal moved quickly to encircle and tie down the Prime Minister. Using the proxy of his Maoist subordinate Agni Sapkota,

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made Speaker even with a murder charge pending before the Supreme Court, Mr. Dahal blocked constitutional appointments and sabotaged the government's attempt to receive a \$500 million U.S. grant to expand the national electricity grid. Increasingly, the so-called 'Secretariat' of senior NCP leaders sought to direct government affairs, as if Nepal's was a single-party communist system. It was when Mr. Oli got word that the Dahal group was registering a no-confidence motion that he moved immediately to dissolve Parliament. The motion arrived in the Parliament office after the dissolution declaration, but Mr. Sapkota forged the paperwork to bring forward the time of registration. A reckoning on that episode is still required, now that the House is restored. Mr. Oli's dissolution of Parliament triggered a vehement response with many accusing him of authoritarian tendencies. President Bidya Devi Bhandari was pilloried for having readily okayed the Prime Minister's move. She might have sat on his communication for a day or two, but the 2015 Constitution does not give the President leeway to question the chief executive's recommendations, not even the privilege of consultations which was available to former President Ram Baran Yadav under the interim Constitution of 2007. Mr. Dahal threatened a violent movement should the Justices decide to certify the dissolution and elections. A civil society stalwart warned that "the people would drag the Justices out on to the streets" if they approved Mr. Oli's recommendation. Four former Chief Justices published a statement against dissolution in what could be seen as an attempt to influence the Bench. Neither could former President Yadav hold back.

Only in Nepal

With the verdict given, it is not clear what the inter-party permutations and combinations will deliver in the days to come, or what fate awaits each of the topmost players. But without doubt, the role of Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba will be decisive because of the MPs he holds — whether to become Prime Minister himself, back the Dahal combine, or allow Mr. Oli to serve out the next two years. The Supreme Court has ordered the House to convene before March 8, and rather than wait for a no-confidence motion to be brought by the Dahal group, Mr. Oli is likely to seek confidence of the House. However, because the present crisis is not one between the opposition and party in power, but within the latter, the future course will rest on Mr. Dahal's ability to unseat Mr. Oli as parliamentary party leader. At present, the Oli-Dahal support in the NCP parliamentary party is said to be more or less equal, each numbering in the 80s. (Altogether 138 MPs are required to form the government.) For all the hullabaloo, the NCP party has not split formally, although the chasm within the leadership is deep. Even if the rank and file seek unity for the sake of elections, it is unlikely that the feuding leaders will be able to patch up. For the long-term health of the polity, a decisive divorce between the former Maoists and the erstwhile CPN-UML is recommended. Ideology does not bind the two — the 'democrat communists' in the UML fold and the Maoists led by Mr. Dahal, whose concept of governance does not include democracy if he can help it, and who is yet to concede the need for accountability for grievous crimes committed during the 10-years of the rebellion he led. Meanwhile, one cannot even make an educated guess as to who will become the next Prime Minister among the four former Prime Ministers — Mr. Deuba, Mr. Nepal, Mr. Oli or Mr. Dahal.



INDIA, 17 COUNTRIES FACE U.S. ANTI-DUMPING TAX

The U.S. Department of Commerce is preparing to tax aluminium sheet exporters from 18 countries after determining on Tuesday that they had benefited from subsidies and dumping. The US International Trade Commission (ITC), an independent body, must approve the final decision by April 15 to impose anti-dumping or countervailing duties, a department statement said. The investigation, launched under the Donald Trump administration, had been requested by nearly a dozen U.S. aluminium alloy manufacturers, including Arconic and Aleris Rolled products, which felt they were being harmed by competing imports at lower prices. President Joe Biden's administration determined that imports from Germany in particular (\$287 million in 2019) benefited from dumping, ranging from 40% to 242%. The same is true for aluminium alloy sheets from Bahrain (\$241 million), which the administration said benefited from pricing below the cost of production or the local market of 83%. Imports from India (\$123 million in 2019) have benefited from subsidies for 35% to 89%, according to the U.S. investigation.



DreamIAS



NATION

PARTLY FREE

India has been demoted in the latest annual rankings by global democracy watchdog, the Washington-based Freedom House, and let no one please say “sinister foreign hand” or brush it under the PR carpet. It’s a report, not a conspiracy. The fall in India’s status, from “free” to “partly free”, comes from an assessment that takes into account performance on 25 parameters and indices, measured and measurable, and concludes that “rather than serving as a champion of democratic practice and a counterweight to authoritarian influence from countries such as China, Modi and his party are tragically driving India itself towards authoritarianism”. There can be disagreement over that assessment and conclusion. It can be argued that the dots are being connected in dire ways — from the “dangerous and unplanned” displacement of migrants due to the COVID-19 lockdown to the “scapegoating” of Muslims in the wake of the Tablighi Jamaat episode; from “love jihad” laws against religious conversion in BJP-ruled states to the use of the sedition law to “deter free speech, including discussion of a discriminatory citizenship law and the COVID-19 pandemic”; from a “pattern of more pro-government decisions by the Supreme Court”, to an increasing number of internet shutdowns. But the fact is that each of these dots plots a curve that has raised anxieties with regard to citizens’ freedoms, particularly the freedom of expression, especially of minorities and vulnerable groups. As a mature democracy, India must be able to talk about them, and address the charge of democratic backsliding. As a sure-footed player on the world stage, it can ill afford to swat away concerns, or attribute motives and spectres to them. At the heart of the “foreign hand” narrative, which is, more and more, the reflexive riposte to any criticism from abroad, lies insecurity and an obvious double standard. After all, other certificates from foreign monitors or watchdogs are welcomed and celebrated. This is true of the QS World University Rankings 2021, in which 25 courses offered by Indian universities have figured in the top 100 globally, and earlier, India’s move up by 14 spots in the World Bank’s annual report on ease of doing business in 2020. These are applauded — as they should be. Yet, the bedrock beneath top-notch campuses and a vibrant market are the nation’s democratic credentials and the work of maintaining them is the most stellar achievement of all. They are what separate India from its neighbours in the region, and what distinguish it from its opponent in the face-off with China. The combination of an open market and an open democracy is what attracts private players and investors factor into their economic calculations. There must be no erosion or backsliding here — and in an increasingly interconnected world, perceptions of erosion and backsliding need to be addressed, not dismissed. India’s slide in rankings such as those of Freedom House must be a prod not just for its government, but also for its countervailing institutions and civil society. It is not the political executive alone that defines or circumscribes freedoms in a constitutional democracy — these must also be protected and expanded by the courts, and firewalled by civic norms. The demotion by the watchdog is a cue for an alert and vigilant democracy to do more, and to do better.



FREEDOM IN RETREAT AROUND THE WORLD, SAYS REPORT

Authoritarian actors grew bolder during 2020 as major democracies turned inward, contributing to a 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, the flagship annual report of Freedom House said on Wednesday. Published since 1973, 'Freedom in the World' assesses the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world. "Democracy and pluralism are under assault," the report's author, Sarah Repucci, has written. "The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance." The latest report noted that "the countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006". Freedom House has demoted India from "free" to "partly free", and flagged the sustained erosion of civil liberties in the country.

INDIA IS 'PARTLY FREE', SAYS U.S. THINKTANK

Freedoms in India have reduced, according to a report from a U.S. thinktank, Freedom House, resulting in India being classified as 'partly free'. India's score was 67, a drop from 71/100 from last year (reflecting 2019 data) downgrading it from the free category last year (based on 2020 data). "The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its State-level allies continued to crack down on critics during the year..." the report "Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege" said. "The ruling Hindu nationalist movement also encouraged the scapegoating of Muslims, who were disproportionately blamed for the spread of the virus ...," it said. "Rather than serving as a champion of democratic practice and a counterweight to authoritarian influence from countries such as China, Mr. Modi and his party are tragically driving India itself toward authoritarianism. "The private media are vigorous and diverse, and investigations and scrutiny of politicians do occur. However, attacks on press freedom have escalated dramatically under the Modi government, and reporting has become significantly less ambitious in recent years," the report said, citing the use of security, defamation, sedition and contempt of court laws to quiet critical media voices. "Separately, revelations of close relationships between politicians, business executives and lobbyists on one hand and leading media personalities and owners of media outlets, on the other, have dented public confidence in the press," the report said. On the U.S., the Freedom House said the risky state of American democracy was on display during the January 6 attack on the Capitol. It listed what it called the Trump presidency's "unprecedented attacks" on American democracy (examples included were dismissing inspectors general to sowing mistrust over the electoral system). The U.S. dropped three points over one year, down to 83/100. " ...The United States will need to work vigorously to strengthen its institutional safeguards, restore its civic norms and uphold the promise of its core principles for all segments of society if it is to protect its venerable democracy and regain global credibility." China, classified as 'not free', dropped a point from last year going down to 9/100. "The malign influence of the regime in China, the world's most populous dictatorship, was especially profound in 2020," the report says citing Beijing's disinformation and censorship campaign following the outbreak of COVID-19.

WHO IS ARORA AKANKSHA, THE 34-YEAR-OLD RUNNING FOR UN SECRETARY-GENERAL?

Never mind that Arora Akanksha has worked at the United Nations for only about four years, as an auditor recruited from an accounting firm. Put aside that at age 34, she has no diplomatic

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experience. And forget that she is less than half as old as the incumbent she wants to replace, Secretary-General António Guterres, 71, the veteran Portuguese statesman and former UN High Commissioner for refugees. Arora — she uses her family name first and prefers to be called Arora — said that as a grandchild of people who were once refugees, she was acutely aware of difficult odds. But with a \$30,000 campaign budget drawn largely from her savings, a website and a social media promotion that begins with, “People in my profession aren’t supposed to stand up to the ones in charge,” Arora has declared herself a candidate to be the next leader of the United Nations. On Feb. 17, Arora, a native of India and citizen of Canada, submitted a formal letter of application for the 2022-27 term. “We are not living up to our purpose or our promise,” the letter stated. “We are failing those we are here to serve.” No country has yet formally endorsed her unlikely candidacy. But if nothing else, Arora’s boldness has touched a nerve at the 193-member organization and thrown attention on the historically opaque way that its leader is picked. While the process has been made more transparent compared with the backroom bargaining that prevailed years ago, it is nonetheless widely expected that Guterres will win a second term when the selection is made in October. Arora’s message, she said, is that the United Nations is sclerotic, wasteful, adrift, paternalistic and patronizing toward many of the younger members of its staff of 44,000 people around the world. According to one of her campaign videos on YouTube, only about 29 cents of every dollar, from the UN’s total annual revenue of roughly \$56 billion, goes to actual causes. “We spend our resources on holding conferences, writing reports,” Arora, an audit coordinator for the UN Development Program, said in an interview. “All these frivolous activities that are advertising. We have lost course on why we exist, what we’re supposed to do.” If the United Nations were a private company, she said, “it would have been, like, out of business.” Far from dismissing her ambition as foolish or quixotic, friends and supporters admire her nerve and penchant for speaking her mind. “She’s fearless,” said Pauline Pamela Pratt, a colleague at the UN Population Fund who worked with Arora in 2019. “She’s not afraid to be who she is, even among people who have authority over her.” When Pratt learned of Arora’s plans to seek the secretary-general job, she recalled having expressed surprise “but then thought, ‘Why not go for it?’” Some see Arora as naive about the geopolitical forces that have shaped the United Nations over more than 75 years. Others have wondered how, precisely, she would reduce expenses for travel and other costs of running its far-flung operations. While the secretary-general may have a bully pulpit, the position holds little real power, and its occupant is basically beholden to the five veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — which play a decisive role in who is ultimately chosen. “I’m sure she has no chance and equally sure that she knows that,” said Edward Mortimer, a former UN official who was the chief speechwriter for Kofi Annan, the secretary-general from 1997 to 2006. “It’s a brave way of demonstrating unhappiness, which I’ve no doubt is quite widely shared by her colleagues.” Asked recently about Arora, Guterres’ spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, told reporters, “Let me put it this way. I speak for the incumbent candidate, but we have no comment on anyone else who may wish to put their hat in the proverbial ring.” Arora, who has taken a leave of absence from work for her campaign, said she had received many positive messages from co-workers and more than 2,600 votes on her website, and she is hoping to make her case to UN ambassadors in the next few months. “This is not even a place that challenges, because they go through countries politically and negotiate,” Arora said. “So yeah, this is a straight-on challenge, and I don’t want to play games or anything; I just want to run an honest campaign.” Not widely known outside her workplace, Arora has committed a number of head-turning firsts. She is the first person known to officially challenge an incumbent seeking a second term and the first millennial-generation candidate. And

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if she prevailed, Arora would be the first woman to lead the United Nations — a precedent nearly achieved in 2016 when seven prominent women were in the running with Guterres. Arora talked about her life and ambition recently in an interview at the UN headquarters, a few blocks from her studio apartment on Manhattan's East Side. She lives frugally; speaks daily with her parents, who are "very supportive," Arora said; and reads Harry Potter books to relax. Her wardrobe of brightly colored dresses, including six acquired from Uganda and Kenya in 2017 while on a field assignment, stands out among the suits in her workplace. As for why she aspired to lead the United Nations, Arora traced the reasons partly to her own refugee family background, to a Manhattan taxi accident that sent her to the hospital, and to her memory of a malnourished child in Uganda. Like many Hindus, her grandparents fled from Pakistan to India after the 1947 partition, a fact that colors her outlook on the world. Asked about the possibility of losing to Guterres, she said, "Refugees have no plan B, hence I have no plan B." Arora was born in Haryana, a northern Indian state, and spent her youngest years in Saudi Arabia, where her parents, both doctors, had relocated. From age 9 to 18 she was back in India attending boarding school, she said, and then decided to move to Canada, where she graduated from York University with honors and worked for PricewaterhouseCoopers Canada as an auditing manager. Hired in December 2016 by the United Nations to help improve its internal financial controls, Arora said her admiration for the organization soon turned to shock. "The system is so amazing on the outside, but there's no coherence for getting things done," she said. Just weeks into the job, she was struck by a taxi after work, and as she lay on a hospital bed with a fractured left knee, she thought, "If I died, what would my legacy be?" That, she said, was "my big awakening moment." That summer while working in Uganda, Arora said, she encountered a child eating mud. "That image stuck in my head," she said, recalling how she told a senior UN official back in New York about it. His seemingly callous response stunned her. "He said, 'Mud has iron,'" she said. "That was the first time I was speechless in my life." The exchange, she said, "was one of the big triggers for me." She plunged into learning more about UN history and went back to school while she kept working. She attended Columbia University's graduate program in public administration, where she befriended a fellow student, Anne-Carine Frederique, a Haitian American who had once interned at the United Nations and whose extended family in Haiti had suffered from a cholera epidemic that medical experts traced to UN peacekeepers — an enduring stain on the organization's legacy. With their shared criticisms of the United Nations, one thing led to another, Arora said, and Frederique, who works at Columbia's business school, now helps manage her secretary-general campaign. While Arora has not received explicit endorsements from powerful UN figures, neither has she been discouraged. Mary Robinson, a former High Commissioner for Human Rights and former president of Ireland who was once considered a contender for secretary-general, said, in an emailed statement, that she welcomed Arora's candidacy as "entirely healthy." "I share many of the concerns raised by Arora Akanksha about the need to promote more women and younger staff members into management and leadership roles," her statement said. Lyric Thompson, senior director of policy and advocacy at the International Center for Research on Women — a group that has been grading Guterres' record on gender issues and last year gave him a B — said Arora's candidacy should not be underestimated. "There has been increasing demand for feminist leadership for some time," Thompson said. "From A.O.C. to Jacinda Ardern, we know better than to count out young female voices."



CONSUMER DURABLES

The problem with consumer durables is that they aren't all that durable. The warranty runs out in a year, and then — in India at least — either a neighbourhood repairman does his best to fix the inevitable breakdowns, or the kabadiwala takes the product off your hands. In Europe — and much of the First World — these options are not as readily available. And more importantly, discarded televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, etc are adding to the growing problem of e-waste, continuing the almost irreparable harm to the environment that a culture of consumerism has caused. The European Union has enacted, for this reason, a “right to repair” under which companies will be required to ensure that spare parts are available for their products for at least 10 years. The EU law hits at “planned obsolescence” — companies ensure that their products are made from components that don't last long, to get repeat customers. In some cases (and the law allows for these), technologies may become genuinely obsolete: For example, air conditioners that use less power and CFCs or more fuel-efficient cars. But forcing the purchase of new goods has led to a pressure on wallets and the environment that is now untenable. The next step, according to EU officials, is to extend the ambit of the law to cover IT hardware — cellphones, laptops and the like — which are responsible for a large amount of e-waste. Apple is already facing a lawsuit from Deco Proteste, a private consumer organisation from Portugal, over the planned obsolescence of the iPhone 6. The EU law aims to address the supply-side greed that makes big business sell people things that go kaput. But the other problem with a culture of consumerism is the consumer. Why, pray, do people need a “smart fridge”? Or a new phone which is exactly like the old but pretends not to be? The most durable thing is not the product, but the consumer's desire for the new and shiny.

THE SRI LANKA-PAKISTAN TANGO

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Sri Lanka on February 23 and 24 triggered a fair amount of controversy because of a cancelled invitation to address the Sri Lankan parliament. But ties between the two countries are deeper and on more solid footing than is immediately apparent — and this incident could not have caused any damage to a long and steady relationship.

Visit outcomes

Pakistan is Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner in South Asia after India. During commerce secretary-level talks on February 18 ahead of Prime Minister Khan's visit, the two countries decided to reactivate a Joint Working Group to resolve pending technical issues on trade, Dawn reported. Sri Lanka and Pakistan have a free trade agreement dating back to 2005. *Pakistan's top exports to Sri Lanka are textiles and cement; Sri Lanka's top exports to Pakistan are tea, rubber, and readymade garments. Over the last decade, Pakistan has also tried to work on a cultural connect with Sri Lanka by highlighting its ancient Buddhist connections and sites. Defence ties are a strong pillar of the Sri Lanka-Pakistan bilateral relationship. After pulling back the IPKF in 1990, India provided no active defence support to the Sri Lankan military, although there was intelligence sharing during the war against the LTTE. Sri Lanka turned to Pakistan for arms and ammunition, as well as training for its fighter pilots, in the last stages of the war. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was defence secretary at the time, visited Pakistan in 2008 to request emergency assistance with military supplies. Just as Sri Lankan military officers come to India for training at National Defence*



College and Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (President Rajapaksa is an alumnus), they go to Pakistani military academies. Earlier this month, Sri Lanka participated in Pakistan's multi-nation naval exercise, Aman-21. During the 1971 war, Pakistani jets refuelled in Sri Lanka. Pakistan's envoys to Sri Lanka are usually retired military officials — and the same was true for Sri Lanka's High Commissioners to Pakistan until a few years ago. In 2006, the Tigers carried out an attack in Colombo against then Pakistani High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Bashir Wali Mohamand, a former intelligence chief. He escaped, but seven others were killed. Khan's visit yielded a clutch of MoUs and agreements between the two sides. The headline outcome was a \$50 million credit line in the defence and security sector, underlining the strong, decades-long co-operation between the two countries on this front. Pakistan will set up a centre for the study of Asian cultures and civilisation at Peradeniya University in Kandy. And more than making up for the cancellation of the Parliament speech, Imran Khan's hosts named a sports institute in Colombo after him, highlighting the cricket connection between the two countries.

Neighbourhood friends

Aside from the tangible outcomes, the visit was important to both Pakistan and Sri Lanka for other reasons too. This was Imran Khan's only second foray in the neighbourhood since becoming Prime Minister. His first was to Afghanistan last November. The last time a Pakistani PM visited Colombo was Nawaz Sharif in 2016. *The visit signalled that despite India's best efforts at "isolating" Pakistan, Islamabad has friends in the neighbourhood.* This was also the first visit by a head of government to Sri Lanka since the pandemic began. For Colombo, the visit held much value, coming as it did at a fraught time for the government on the international stage. Imminently, *it is bracing for a resolution against it at the UN Human Rights Commission for withdrawing from resolution 30/1 of September 2015, under which it committed to carry out war crimes investigations.* To make matters worse, *the Islamic world is appalled by Sri Lanka's tight rules for disposal of bodies of Muslims who have died of Covid-19. Burials are not allowed; all bodies must be cremated. The rule created a storm in Sri Lanka, with community leaders convinced that this was in keeping with the perceived persecution of Muslims by the state. Muslims, who make up about 11 per cent of Sri Lanka's population, have had tense relations with the Sinhala Buddhist majority for much of the last decade, with riots shattering the uneasy calm every few years. Tensions spiked especially after the synchronised Easter 2019 suicide bombings by a group of men and women who claimed to be members of ISIS. The visit by a head of government of an Islamic country was good optics for Sri Lanka.*

India, Pak, Sri Lanka

A speculated reason for the cancellation of Khan's address to Parliament was concern that he would raise the Kashmir issue, and that Colombo did not want to rile New Delhi at a time when India is already cut up about Sri Lanka's abrupt withdrawal from a tripartite agreement (along with Japan) for the development of the East Container Terminal at Colombo port, and the award of a contract to a Chinese company to set up a hybrid renewable energy in an island off Jaffna. Over the years, Sri Lanka has learnt to balance its ties with India and Pakistan. Khan's invitation to his hosts to "take advantage" of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to enhance trade ties did not elicit any reaction, at least not in public. In the past, Colombo has pitched for an economic corridor overland for access to countries beyond. As Sri Lanka's closest neighbour with strong, all encompassing ties — even if these keep hitting rough patches — India has not perceived Pakistan as a serious rival



in Colombo so far. Delhi's overflight permission to Khan's plane to Colombo was seen as a sign of the new military thaw at the LoC, but it is possible that permission would have been given even without the imminent India-Pakistan agreement on the ceasefire. Sporadically, the Indian security establishment has voiced concerns about Pakistan's role in the radicalisation of Muslims — especially in Eastern Sri Lanka, where funds have poured in for new mosques from some West Asian countries — and the effect this could have in India. *Now, there is some wariness about a convergence of interests between Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region and in defence co-operation, although this has not been publicly expressed.* In 2016, India put pressure on Sri Lanka to drop a plan to buy the Chinese JF-17 Thunder aircraft made in Pakistan's Kamra Aeronautical Complex, and co-produced by the Chinese Chengdu Aircraft Corporation.

INDIA AND JAPAN BACK IN NEW SRI LANKA PORT PROJECT

Sri Lanka on Tuesday said it will develop the West Container Terminal (WCT) at the Colombo Port, along with India and Japan. The decision comes a month after the Rajapaksa government ejected the two partners from a 2019 tripartite agreement to jointly develop the East Container Terminal (ECT), citing resistance to "foreign involvement". Addressing the media on decisions taken at Monday's Cabinet meeting, spokesperson Keheliya Rambukwella said approval had been granted to develop the WCT with investors nominated by India and Japan. While the High Commission of India had "approved" Adani Ports, which was to invest in the ECT project earlier, Japan is yet to name an investor, according to officially published Cabinet decisions. Neither India nor Japan has officially commented on the offer, or on the said private investment from the countries. According to official sources in New Delhi, Colombo had been in talks directly with the Adani Group, while the government "was not part of" the discussions. Official sources in Colombo expressed surprise at the mention of the Indian High Commission in the Cabinet decision, pointing out that it was the Government of Sri Lanka, and not a foreign mission, that would "approve" investments coming into the island nation. Both India and Japan had expressed displeasure about Colombo "unilaterally" pulling out of the 2019 agreement. The deal had been signed by the former Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe government. The February 1 decision came amid mounting opposition from port worker unions and sections of the clergy to "foreign involvement" in the country's national assets. The Rajapaksa government has offered India and Japan the WCT as an alternative, allowing higher stakes. In the ECT project agreed upon earlier, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) was to hold majority 51%, but in the WCT proposal, India and Japan will be accorded 85% stake, as is the case in the nearby Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT), where China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited holds 85%, the government said. Asked how authorities had convinced the unions of foreign investment at another terminal in the same port, Mr. Rambukwella said their opposition was specific to the ECT, which was partially in use. The terminal's further development, which is now to be undertaken by the Sri Lanka Port Authority, is aimed at augmenting operations at an estimated cost of up to \$700 million. The West Container Terminal, however, has to be built from scratch, requiring a much higher investment. The WCT is adjacent to the China-run CICT and just a couple of kilometres away from the China-backed Port City being built on reclaimed land, making it a strategically desirable spot for India, whose concerns over China's presence in Sri Lanka are well known. Colombo's alternative offer also comes at a time when Sri Lanka is seeking support at the ongoing UN Human Right Council session, where a resolution on the country's rights record will soon be put to vote. The government recently wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Asked if the two developments

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were linked, Mr. Rambukwella said they were “two different areas — one is commercial, other one, more of international relations.”

INDIAN AIRCRAFT TAKE PART IN SRI LANKA EVENT

As many as 23 aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Indian Navy participated in a display event in Colombo, as the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) marked its 70th anniversary. “As a gesture of solidarity, and in keeping with years of close interaction and camaraderie between the two countries and their militaries, IAF and Indian Navy will participate in the event with an aerobatic display by Sarang (Advance Light Helicopter), Surya Kiran (Hawks), Tejas Fighter Aircraft, Tejas Trainer and the Dornier Maritime Patrol Aircraft,” a statement from the Indian High Commission said, ahead of the flypast and display events in Colombo on Wednesday. IAF chief Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria participated in the event, where President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was the main guest.

SURYAKIRAN, SARANG TEAMS TO DAZZLE COLOMBO SKIES

The Suryakiran Aerobatic Team (SKAT) and the Sarang helicopter display team, along with the light combat aircraft, of the Indian Air Force will perform at an airshow at the Galle Face in Colombo from March 3 to 5 as part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF). In all, 23 aircraft of the IAF and the Indian Navy will take part in the show and have begun arriving at the airbase in Katunayake on Saturday, the Indian High Commission in Colombo said on Twitter. The teams are in Colombo on an invitation from Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana, Commander of the SLAF, an IAF statement said. This will be the first performance for the SKAT team outside India since it was resurrected in 2015 with the Hawk advanced jet trainers. Earlier, the SKAT team had toured Sri Lanka during the 50th anniversary of the SLAF in 2001.

1971 commemoration

Marking the golden jubilee year of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, the SKAT team has been flying different formations over landmarks across the country starting from Kanyakumari in the south. The team has already flown over some of the southern cities and more demonstrations are in the pipeline. As an aerial salute to all those who took part in the 1971 war, the number “71” was formed in the air over Kanyakumari with 10 aeroplanes — six aircraft making the number seven and four of them making the number one. More formations are planned all over the country over the year, a defence official said. The team currently has 13 pilots and is led by Group Captain Anoop Singh. The entire team consists of fighter pilots and qualified flying instructors. The team is currently procuring and integrating the smoke pods so it can paint the skies in the signature Suryakiran Style, the official added. The SKAT team, also known as 52 Squadron or The Sharks, is based in Bidar. The team was formed in 1996 with Kiran Mk-II aircraft and had enthralled spectators across the country till 2011. It was revived in 2015 with Hawk trainers initially with four aircraft and grew to the nine-aircraft formation. Since its inception, the SKAT team has carried out over 600 displays all around the country. It has also represented India across southeast Asia including China.



CHINA'S CYBER EYE AND INDIA

Amid souring relations between India and China last year, evidence emerged in September of a *Chinese government-linked company's attempt to monitor the digital footprint of thousands of Indian citizens*. In November, the government was apprised of *a malware threat in segments of its power infrastructure — malware that was last month linked to a Chinese state-backed firm*. Now, a cyber intelligence firm claims another *Chinese government-linked hacking group has targeted the makers of the two vaccines currently used in India's Covid-19 vaccination programme*. A look at the various surveillance and hacking attempts, and their implications:

Zhenhua & its targets

The Indian Express had earlier reported in a series of reports that *a Shenzhen-based technology company, Zhenhua Data Information Technology Co, with links to the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party, was monitoring over 10,000 Indian individuals and organisations*. This was part of the company's *global database of "foreign targets"*. Its modus operandi is to collect information about relevant people from the web and social media platforms, and track research papers, articles, patents, and recruitment positions. The company also monitors the person's digital footprint across social media platforms and maintains an "information library". Those monitored in this database included not only influential political and industrial figures, but bureaucrats in key positions, judges, scientists and academicians, journalists, actors, sportspersons, religious figures, activists and even hundreds accused of financial crime, corruption, terrorism and smuggling. The collection of such data by Zhenhua does not violate any rules under the Information Technology Act of 2000, as nearly all of this data is available in the public domain. However, Zhenhua's 24×7 watch had raised red flags with cybersecurity experts, who observed that *the information collected could be put together for tactical manoeuvring, targeting the individuals under surveillance or their institutions*.

Red Echo & ShadowPad

On February 28, *Massachusetts-based cybersecurity company Recorded Future published a report saying it had observed a "steep rise" in the use of resources like malware by a Chinese group called Red Echo to target "a large swathe" of India's power sector*. It said 10 distinct Indian power sector organisations were targeted, including four Regional Load Despatch Centres (RLDCs) that are responsible for the smooth operation of the country's power grid by balancing the supply and demand of electricity. Recorded Future said the group also targeted two Indian seaports. *Red Echo used malware called ShadowPad, which involves the use of a backdoor to access servers*. The Ministry of Power on Monday confirmed these attempts, stating it had been informed in November 2020 about the ShadowPad malware "at some control centres" of the Power System Operation Corporation Ltd (POSOCO), the government enterprise in charge of facilitating the transfer of electricity through load despatch centres. The Ministry said it was informed of Red Echo's attempts to target the country's load despatch centres in February. It had said "no data breach/data loss" had been detected due to the incidents and that none of POSOCO's functions had been impacted. The government said it had taken action against the threats observed. *While there was speculation earlier that Red Echo was possibly behind the October 12 blackout in Mumbai, Union Power Minister R K Singh on Tuesday denied that the power outage in the city was the result of a cyberattack, instead attributing it to human error*.

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Stone Panda & vaccines

On Monday, *Goldman Sachs-backed cyber intelligence firm Cyfirma said a Chinese hacker group known as Stone Panda had "identified gaps and vulnerabilities in the IT infrastructure and supply chain software of Bharat Biotech and the Serum Institute of India"*, according to a Reuters report. These companies have developed Covaxin and Covishield, which are currently being used in the national vaccination campaign. They are also in the process of testing additional Covid-19 vaccines that could add value to efforts around the world. Some Indian companies involved in Covid-19 vaccine development have told The Indian Express that they have noticed a nearly hundred-fold increase in cyberattack attempts by foreign entities from countries like China and Russia over the last six months.

Possible reasons

All this could be happening for several reasons. One major factor is the border clash between the two countries in June 2020. "As bilateral tensions continue to rise, we expect to see a continued increase in cyber operations being conducted by China-linked groups such as RedEcho in line with national strategic interests," stated Recorded Future. Other cybersecurity experts agree. There was an increase in cyber offensive operations and incidents around the world in the second half of 2020 especially targeting the healthcare and vaccine space, with incidents often attributed to actors linked with the Chinese and Russian governments, according to Chima. When vaccine companies are targeted, the motive could be competition. The motivation behind Stone Panda's attack against SII and Bharat Biotech's IT systems was to extract the companies' intellectual property and gain a "competitive advantage over Indian pharmaceutical companies," as per Reuters. SII and Bharat Biotech have been getting global orders for their vaccines.

Lack of information

India has not voluntarily made information about these attempts public. According to Chima, this lack of information could leave other companies and government bodies may be in the dark about their vulnerability to such attacks. "The problem is you need more data to be able to figure out what is going on, including specific data about what has happened in India," said Chima. He said there is also little clarity on the government's chain of command where cybersecurity issues are concerned, as different agencies deal with this issue. This makes it difficult to understand who all to approach in the event of such cyber threats. "Because that information is not out there, and it's not available easily — except to people who work very closely with the government—it impacts India's cybersecurity as a whole," Chima said.

MASTER AND THE ROSTER (PRANAV VERMA - AN LLM CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE)

The Supreme Court recently laid to rest the proceedings inquiring into a conspiracy to threaten the independence of the judiciary on the basis of sexual harassment allegations against the former Chief Justice of India (CJI), Ranjan Gogoi. After two years, the proceedings remained inconclusive.



Singular power

This was a missed opportunity, for it failed to recognise that if recent experiences are anything to go by, the threat to judicial independence comes from a source closer to home. This is the singular power of the CJI as the Master of the Roster – i.e., the vesting of exclusive discretion in the Chief Justice to constitute benches and allocate cases. In fact, this power lay at the heart of the controversy surrounding the proceedings the Court has now closed. It enabled Justice Gogoi to institute suo motu proceedings despite being an accused; label the case as a matter of judicial independence; and preside over it. From the standpoint of judicial independence, the Master of the Roster power makes the CJI's office a high stakes one. It makes the CJI the sole point of defence of the Court against executive interference. However, this has a flip side. With the CJI as the sole Master of the Roster, any executive seeking to influence the Supreme Court needs only a pliant CJI. In other words, a pliant Master of the Roster carries the danger of producing a pliant Court. This power is predicated upon the CJI's seniority in the top court and the resultant presumption of propriety. However, B.R. Ambedkar had forewarned the Constituent Assembly: "...after all, the Chief Justice is a man with all the failings, all the sentiments and all the prejudices which we as common people have". Yet, the Supreme Court has been reluctant to dilute this power. In *Asok Pande v. Supreme Court of India* (2018), a three-judge bench of the Court held that Master of the Roster is the CJI's exclusive power. Thereafter, a two-judge bench in *Shanti Bhushan v. Supreme Court of India* (2018) rejected the plea that the Master of the Roster should be interpreted as the collegium. Therefore, while the CJI's other powers such as recommending appointments to constitutional courts are shared with other senior judges, the power of Master of the Roster is enjoyed without scrutiny. Justice Gogoi finds himself in a unique position of being both a vocal critic of this power and also championing its execution. Despite levelling allegations of favouritism in how CJI Dipak Misra allocated cases, through the judges' press conference, Justice Gogoi's tenure as CJI did not prove much different. Apart from hearing many sensitive cases such as *Ayodhya* and *Rafale* himself, he also used this power to ignore conflict of interest when he presided over the proceedings on sexual harassment allegations against him.

Judicial reforms

Reforms in the Indian judiciary have been a continuing project, mostly responding to crises of the time. Hence, when Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister ordered punitive transfers of High Court judges and superseded judges to appoint the CJI, the Supreme Court formulated the collegium system in response. However, this system has failed to keep executive interferences at bay from the Supreme Court. This is for two reasons: first, as Justice Gogoi's case shows, there is an attractive lure of post-retirement jobs; and second, as the privilege of Master of the Roster shows, the CJI's allocation of cases is an unchecked power. The continuing project of judicial reforms should then address these two issues. A cooling-off period between retirement and a post-retirement appointment has often been suggested as a way to deal with the first problem. For the second, the power of Master of the Roster needs to be diversified beyond the CJI's exclusive and untrammelled discretion. Whether these should vest with a larger cohort of serving judges is an issue that invites public debate and introspection within the institution of the Supreme Court.



UNSEEMLY PROPOSAL

The implications of a bench of the Supreme Court led by the Chief Justice of India asking a man accused of raping a minor if he would marry the victim are disquieting. Words uttered in the highest, most pre-eminent court of the land ripple out into the larger society. They have the power to expand the constitutional rights of citizens and defend them against unequal value systems of clan, caste, patriarchy. In this case, the SC's remarks, unfortunately, risk perpetuating the offensive and retrograde idea of marriage as a payoff for the trauma and violation of rape. The court posed the question to a government servant, accused of stalking and then raping a 16-year-old girl multiple times as well as forcing her mother to not lodge a police complaint on the promise that he would marry the victim when she turned 18. The accused had appealed against a Bombay High Court order that struck down the anticipatory bail granted to him by a sessions court. "Will you marry her?" the SC bench said, before going on to grant the accused interim protection from arrest for four weeks. Under the law of the land, rape is a "non-compoundable" crime. That is, the offence cannot be diluted or mitigated by any settlement reached outside court. The Supreme Court has repeatedly spoken out against such obscene matchmaking that devalues a woman's worth by making her violation a matter to be settled between families to preserve the reputation and honour of male assailants. In a 2015 judgment in *State of MP vs Madanlal*, the court had unambiguously stated, "In a case of rape or attempt of rape, the conception of compromise under no circumstances can really be thought of ... Sometimes solace is given that the perpetrator of the crime has acceded to enter into wedlock which is nothing but putting pressure in an adroit manner; and we say with emphasis that the courts are to remain absolutely away from this subterfuge". In an earlier judgment in *Shimbhu v State of Haryana*, the SC had said, "Rape is not a matter to be left for the parties to compromise and settle." Nevertheless, the patriarchal understanding of the crime as a permanent damage to a woman's social standing and place (the rape victim as the alleged "zinda laash") discourages the pursuit of justice in favour of a "compromise" that somewhat restores the victim's "honour", even if it means exposing her to more violence from her husband/assailant. It is pertinent to note here that marital rape is not a crime under the Indian Penal Code. Such compromises are routinely peddled by police, village councils and lower courts. In 2015, the Madras High Court granted bail to a rape accused to mediate a marriage with the woman he had assaulted — even when the victim had declared her revulsion at such a settlement. The CJ's remarks in open court could perpetuate this inglorious tradition and derail the progress made by several judgments that affirm the dignity and autonomy of Indian women as equal citizens. The onus is on the court to undo the damage.

RAPE AND MARRIAGE

A relationship between two individuals, including marriage, is built around love, respect, trust and consent. Within that civilised framework, a violent and exploitative act like rape has no place. Seen in that context, the Supreme Court's latest query to a Maharashtra government employee asking whether he would marry a girl he was accused of raping repeatedly while she was a minor is insensitive to the core. By offering marriage as a solution to a rape victim, the judiciary failed to protect the rights of a girl. Instead of meting out harsh punishment, the Court asked the lawyer representing the accused to find out whether his client would be willing to marry the victim or risk going to jail. Equal rights activists have always worked hard against misogyny, patriarchal



mindsets and other failings such as blaming the victim for rape. This arduous battle for equality becomes even more difficult when people in high offices make offensive remarks. On Monday, the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Sharad A. Bobde, told the lawyer of the rape accused, “We are not forcing you....” The lawyer later told the Court that his client refused to marry the girl because he was already married. In his petition, the accused recounted the allegations that he sexually abused the girl since she was in high school, and also that he had threatened the minor. In another case, the Bench stayed the arrest of a man accused of rape after falsely promising marriage. The victim said she was promised marriage and was “brutally and sexually abused”. The CJI asked the girl’s lawyer: “When two people are living as husband and wife, however brutal the husband is, can you call sexual intercourse between them ‘rape’?” In both cases, these crimes attract severe penalties under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. On marital rape, though the recommendation was not included in the Act, the Justice J.S. Verma Committee was clear the law ought to specify that a marital or another relationship between the perpetrator and victim cannot be a defence against sexual violation. Citing the judgment of the European Commission of Human Rights in C.R. vs U.K., it endorsed the conclusion that “a rapist remains a rapist regardless of his relationship with the victim”. In *Shimbhu & Anr vs State of Haryana (2013)*, the Supreme Court said the offer of a rapist to marry the victim cannot be used to reduce the sentence prescribed by law. When the scars of the Nirbhaya case are still raw, and a series of rape and murders are being reported against minors, especially Dalits, in Uttar Pradesh, the judiciary’s shocking remarks echo a deep-set prejudice against gender equality. The law should deliver justice, not blatantly tilt the scales against women’s rights.

SC ASKS MAN ACCUSED OF RAPE IF HE CAN MARRY GIRL

The Supreme Court on Monday asked a State government employee whether he would marry a girl he was accused of raping repeatedly while she was a minor. The man refused saying he was married. A Bench led by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde subsequently stayed his arrest for four weeks so he could apply for regular bail. The court asked the lawyer for the accused to find out if his client would be willing to marry the victim or risk the prospect of going to jail. “We are not forcing you...” Chief Justice Bobde said. “I had initially asked for marriage... Right now, I cannot marry her. I am married,” the lawyer reported to the court on what his client said. The accused in his petition recounted the prosecution allegations that he had sexual intercourse with the girl since she was in high school, stalked and threatened her. It was alleged that his mother had promised marriage when the girl turned 18, but they later backed out. The accused had moved the SC against the cancellation of his anticipatory bail by the Bombay High Court.

SULLYING REPUTATION A GROUND FOR DIVORCE: SC

Allegations of an estranged spouse which has the effect of sullyng the other’s reputation and career amounts to “mental cruelty” and forms a ground for divorce, the Supreme Court said in a recent judgment. The result of this ‘mental cruelty’ must be such that continuation of a marital relationship be impossible. In other words, the wronged person can hardly be expected to condone the other. “The degree of tolerance will vary from one couple to another and the court will have to bear in mind the background, the level of education and also the status of the parties, in order to determine whether the cruelty alleged is sufficient to justify dissolution of marriage,” a three-judge Bench led by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul observed in a judgement. The judgment

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came in an appeal filed by an Army officer whose estranged wife had filed a series of complaints against him with his superiors, even the Army chief. A Family Court had accepted his plea for dissolution of marriage on the ground of mental cruelty on her part. The court had rubbished her claim of adultery against him and refused to accept her plea for restitution of conjugal rights. However, the Uttarakhand High Court, on her appeal, dismissed the trouble between the couple as “squabbles in an ordinary middle-class marriage”. It set aside the lower court’s finding of mental cruelty. This time, the husband appealed to the Supreme Court, which upheld the family court’s finding of mental cruelty. “The allegations are levelled by a highly educated spouse and they do have the propensity to irreparably damage the character and reputation of the appellant [husband],” it said.

PIERCING THE IMPUNITY

The allegations against a senior Tamil Nadu police officer of sexual harassment of an IPS officer, and, worse, of attempting to intimidate her into not filing a complaint, are a particularly brazen example of the impunity and male entitlement that poisons workplaces for women. Coming soon after a salutary judgment in the Priya Ramani vs MJ Akbar case, in which a former editor tried and failed to use the criminal defamation law to silence allegations of sexual harassment against him, it is a sobering reminder of the endemic violations of women at the workplace. The details of the IPS officer’s ordeal, according to her complaint, are deeply unsettling. She boarded her senior colleague’s car on his invitation while on duty, when the Special DGP allegedly held and kissed her hands, and made her sing, even when she objected to his attempts to do so. When she was on her way to Chennai to meet the state home secretary, three IPS officers called her to dissuade her from filing a complaint — allegedly at her assailant’s behest. A posse of police officials barricaded her way with a police car to stop her from reaching Chennai. The appalling chain of events — almost out of a script of a potboiler — has not only led to a probe by the CID, but also led the Madras High Court to take suo motu notice. Like in most cases of sexual harassment, this too lays bare the unequal power equations in professional spaces. That her colleagues in the police force physically obstructed her from filing a complaint also exposes what is not acknowledged enough: That most workplaces are structured around male authority and deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. The mechanism of internal complaints committees enshrined in sexual harassment laws often founders on this very inequality — as the #MeToo movement has often brought home. As the HC pointed out, while deciding to monitor the probe, “The accused is a high-ranking police official of the very same state police force which is stated to be investigating this case.” The police, across India, remains a masculinised institution. But the Tamil Nadu police has one of the highest percentages of women personnel and women officers in the country. The assault on a senior officer, therefore, is also a test of its commitment to making the force a safe space for women. Justice for the IPS officer and punishment for flagrant sexual misconduct is a necessary step in that direction.

‘LATERAL ENTRY’ INTO BUREAUCRACY: REASON, PROCESS, AND THE CONTROVERSY

Earlier this month, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) issued an advertisement seeking applications “from talented and motivated Indian nationals willing to contribute towards nation building” for three posts of Joint Secretary and 27 of Director in central government Departments. These individuals, who would make a “lateral entry” into the government secretariat, would be

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contracted for three to five years. These posts were “unreserved”, meaning were no quotas for SCs, STs and OBCs.

What is ‘lateral entry’ into government?

NITI Aayog, in its three-year Action Agenda, and the Sectoral Group of Secretaries (SGoS) on Governance in its report submitted in February 2017, recommended the induction of personnel at middle and senior management levels in the central government. These ‘lateral entrants’ would be part of the central secretariat which in the normal course has only career bureaucrats from the All India Services/ Central Civil Services. A Joint Secretary, appointed by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), has the third highest rank (after Secretary and Additional Secretary) in a Department, and functions as administrative head of a wing in the Department. Directors are a rank below that of Joint Secretary.

What is the government’s reasoning for lateral entry?

On July 4, 2019, Minister of State for DoPT Jitendra Singh told Rajya Sabha that “Government has, from time to time, appointed some prominent persons for specific assignments in government, keeping in view their specialised knowledge and expertise in the domain area”. In a separate response to a similar question in the same House, he said: “Lateral recruitment is aimed at achieving the twin objectives of bringing in fresh talent as well as augment the availability of manpower.”

Has the government so far made any ‘lateral entry’ appointments?

The new ad is for the second round of such recruitments. Earlier, the government had decided to appoint experts from outside the government to 10 positions of Joint Secretary in different Ministries/Departments and 40 positions at the level of Deputy Secretary/Director. The ad for the Joint Secretary-level appointments, issued in early 2018, attracted 6,077 applications; after a selection process by the UPSC, nine individuals were recommended for appointment in nine different Ministries/Departments in 2019. One of these individuals, Kakoli Ghosh, did not join; the rest — Amber Dubey, Rajeev Saksena, Sujit Kumar Bajpayee, Dinesh Dayanand Jagdale, Bhushan Kumar, Arun Goel, Saurabh Mishra and Suman Prasad Singh — were appointed on a three-year contract. Arun Goel resigned in December last year to return to the private sector.

Why is lateral entry sometimes criticised?

Groups representing SCs, STs and OBCs have protested the fact that there is no reservation in these appointments. Bihar Leader of Opposition Tejashwi Yadav shot back: “You should explain *whether UPSC selection procedure is failing to ensure ‘willing, motivated & talented’ candidates* for ‘nation building’, or hand-picked ones are more so? Isn’t it another ploy to sideline & reduce reservations for deprived sections?” Former UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav tweeted, “*BJP is opening back doors to bring its own people openly.* Who cares about those candidates who are preparing for years?”

So are these contractual appointments not open for quotas?

In a May 15, 2018 circular, the DoPT noted that “in respect of appointments to Central Government posts and services there shall be reservation for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/Other
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Backward Class candidates in temporary appointments which are to last for 45 days or more". This was a reiteration — with OBCs added — of a circular issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs as far back as on September 24, 1968. However, there is a reason why these posts are claimed to be “unreserved”. *As per the currently applicable “13-point roster”, there is no reservation up to three posts.* File notings provided by the DoPT to The Indian Express (reported on June 14, 2019) under the RTI Act state, “In a single post cadre, reservation does not apply. Since each post to be filled under this scheme is a Single Post, reservation is not applicable.” Each of the nine individuals appointed in 2019 was recruited as a separate appointment — had they been considered as a group of nine, there would have been at least two seats for OBCs and one seat for an SC candidate as per the Centre’s reservation rules. Likewise in the latest advertisement, if the 27 Directors were considered as a single group, seven posts would have to be reserved for OBCs, four for SCs, one for ST, and two for EWS category, as per the 13 point roster. But as they have been advertised/ considered separately for each Department, all of them have been declared “unreserved”.

A BAD JOB

This week, Haryana joined the league of misguided states to legislate reservation of private sector jobs for local residents. The Employment of Local Candidates Bill 2020, passed by the Haryana assembly in November last year and notified by the government on Tuesday, requires companies to reserve 75 per cent jobs with a gross monthly salary of less than Rs 50,000 for people born in the state or those who have lived there for at least five years. The Haryana government claims that “the Bill will provide tremendous benefits to the private employers directly or indirectly through qualified and trained local force... and enhance the efficacy of industry”. The underlying purpose of such policy nativism might be to boost employment opportunities. But by constricting the talent pool for the industry, going against the Centre’s credo of ease of doing business, the Haryana government risks doing the exact opposite. The local employment requirement has already created apprehensions about a return to the inspector raj era — not unfounded given that the bill gives “authorised officers” powers to enter premises of firms, check records, impose penalties — and that does not bode well for the state’s post-pandemic economic recovery. The job quota was a poll promise, two years ago, of Dushyant Chautala’s JJP party — a partner in Haryana’s ruling coalition. In July, amidst the raging pandemic, the state government pushed an ordinance to give effect to this promise. Governor S N Arya, however, refused assent and referred the ordinance to the President. The proposed law was shelved in October, only to be tabled and passed in the assembly a month later. The state government hasn’t given a convincing answer to questions related to constitutional propriety that were raised about both the ordinance and the Bill. But the fact that the local domicile rule militates against the fundamental rights to equality and free movement throughout the country and to practise any trade or business, places the Haryana government on shaky legal ground. A similar law passed by the Andhra Pradesh assembly, two years ago, has been challenged before the state high court, and, therefore, not implemented. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy’s data shows that Haryana’s unemployment rate has been in excess of the national average since the past four years. In April last year, about 40 per cent of job seekers from the state returned empty-handed. Though Haryana has not always been short of investments — parts of the state are automobile and software technology hubs and sites of new-age entrepreneurship — industry has sought its human resources from outside the state. One of its longstanding complaints has been the paucity of adequately skilled and locally available workforce, especially tech-talent. Instead of acting on such criticism and making meaningful

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investments in skill development, the state government has taken recourse to parochialism. It must rethink the new law.

THE FINE PRINT OF HARYANA'S QUOTA LAW

Earlier this week, the Haryana government notified a new law that requires 75% of private sector jobs in the state, up to a specified salary slab, reserved for local candidate. This has renewed the debate on whether the government force should private companies to adopt its reservation policy in jobs. While constitutional guarantees for reservation has been limited to public employment, attempts to extend it to private sector are not new either.

What does the Haryana quota law say?

The Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Bill, 2020 requires private companies to set aside for domiciles 75% of jobs up to a monthly salary of Rs 50,000 or as may be notified by the government from time to time. The Bill was passed by the state Assembly in November. Now notified, the law is applicable to all the companies, societies, trusts, limited liability partnership firms, partnership firms and any person employing 10 or more persons and an entity, as may be notified by the government from time to time shall come under the ambit of this Act. In July 2019, the Andhra Pradesh government had passed a similar law, which was challenged in court. The Andhra Pradesh High Court had made a prima facie observation that the move might be unconstitutional, but the challenge is yet to be heard on merits.

What are the legal issues in such laws?

Two big legal questions come up. First, the question of domicile reservation in jobs. While domicile quotas in education are fairly common, courts have been reluctant in expanding this to public employment. Last year, the Madhya Pradesh government decided to reserve all government jobs for "children of the state", raising questions relating to the fundamental right to equality of citizens. The second question, which is more contentious, is the issue of forcing the private sector to comply with reservations in employment. For mandating reservation in public employment, the state draws its power from Article 16(4) of the Constitution, which says that the right to equality in public employment does not prevent the state from "making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State". The Constitution has no manifest provision for private employment from which the state draws the power to make laws mandating reservation.

Would a law mandating reservation in the private sector be legally suspect?

The Constitution places the responsibility of ensuring equality of all citizens squarely on the state. Providing reservation in public employment is one of the many ways through which the state endeavours to ensure equal opportunity for all citizens. If such laws are challenged, the constitutional question that courts will consider is whether by mandating private sector to adopt the reservation policy, the state is delegating its role to the citizen, and whether that is permissible.



What is the government's rationale in bringing such laws?

With public sector jobs constituting only a minuscule proportion of all jobs, legislators have talked about extending the legal protections to the private sector to really achieve the constitutional mandate of equality for all citizens. One argument often made in favour of reservation for private jobs is that since private industries use public infrastructure in many ways — from accessing land through subsidised allotment to receiving credit from public banks, tax exemptions and in many cases subsidies for fuel etc, the state has a legitimate right to require them to comply with the reservation policy. A similar argument was made in requiring private schools to comply with the Right to Education Act, which the Supreme Court also upheld. In fact, in 2004, then Congress-led UPA government had taken the first step in this regard. A Group of Ministers was constituted by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to examine the issue of affirmative action, including reservations, in the private sector. "The GoM will initiate a dialogue with industry to see how best the private sector can fulfil the aspirations of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe youth." However, based on the advice of legal experts, the GoM subsequently said that since a law would be legally suspect, the government would initiate consultations with industry leaders to have them voluntarily comply with the policy.

Do other countries take such affirmative action in employment?

Affirmative action is adopted in many countries in the context of race and gender. For example, in the US, although there is no statutory requirement for employers to have quotas, courts can order monetary damages and injunctive relief, including "such affirmative action as may be appropriate", for victims of discrimination. This power comes from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, national origin, religion, and sex. The Employment Equity Act in Canada also protects minority groups, especially aboriginals from discrimination in federally regulated industries, even in the private sector.

PALER GREEN

In 2010, India became the third country after Australia and New Zealand to have a quasi-judicial body, the National Green Tribunal (NGT), for dealing with environmental cases. The agency was mandated to "expeditiously dispose of cases pertaining to environmental protection". Going by the figures on its website — more than 90 per cent of the cases have been taken care of — the green court seems to have fulfilled its mandate. But the agency has been called out for failing its primary function of securing the "right to healthy environment as a part of the Right to Life under Article 21". In the past three years, particularly, the agency has been faulted for giving short shrift to due procedure. Now, an investigation by this newspaper has revealed that last year, the NGT invoked the deadline-related technical clause to dismiss 11 petitions, even though at least five of them were filed well within the outer time limit. *The NGT replaced the National Environmental Appellate Authority, which, as a Delhi High Court verdict of 2009 pointed out, lacked "expertise... and independence for redressing public grievances".* To address this deficiency, *the NGT Act stipulated that the new organisation have at least 10 officials with a background in the judiciary and the same number with expertise in environmental matters. The tribunal has, however, never functioned with a full house. Currently, it has three judicial and three expert members.* With the scale and nature of contentious environmental issues expanding considerably in the past decade — from vehicular pollution and stubble burning to municipal waste and the risks posed by large dams or mining to

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the challenges presented by e-waste or nuclear waste — the lack of expertise has reflected on the green court's functioning. NGT decisions have been challenged and overruled in the Supreme Court. In 2019, while setting aside the go-ahead to the Subansiri Hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh, the apex court questioned the tribunal's expertise. A year earlier, the SC used even stronger words in the Mopa airport case: "The NGT dealt with the submissions which were urged before it in essentially one paragraph... In failing to carry out a merits-based review, the NGT has not discharged an adjudicatory function". *Of the 11 petitions rejected by the green tribunal last year, one was filed just a day after the deadline and two within 60 days of the outer limit. In one of its earliest orders — Paryavaran Sanrakshan Samiti Lipa v Union of India, 2011 — the NGT had talked about "not being pedantic" in the application of the deadline rule. It invoked the principle of "substantial justice" on "environmental issues". That, less than 10 years later, the same tribunal takes recourse to words like "lethargic" and "careless" to dismiss petitions — mostly by people from rural areas who reportedly wanted more time to get the paperwork done — is a testimony to how much it has strayed from its original vision.*

A CRISIS, TO CONFESS

There are seven sacraments — rites of devotion — that are considered holy and a channel for god's blessings by Catholic and Orthodox Christians across the world. These sacraments — baptism, eucharist (holy communion), confirmation, reconciliation (confession), anointing of the sick, marriage and ordination — lay the very foundation for the church and its believers. Over time, the Church has contended with several crises of faith — sexual abuse charges against its clergymen being the most recent, and perhaps the one with the most ramifications. Recently, *the Supreme Court issued notices to the Centre and the Kerala government and 11 Malankara Syrian Church bodies on a petition filed by three members of the church, challenging the practice of mandatory sacramental confession. The petitioners alleged that the sacrament had been misused for blackmailing and even sexual harassment of women parishioners.* The provocation for the complaint came after *five priests of the Malankara Orthodox Church were disrobed and arrested in 2018 for sexually abusing a woman after threatening to break the seal of confession. Her husband alleged that she was abused by the five priests for years. The woman was pressurised into sexual relations with the priests after she ritually confessed about having a premarital affair. Catholic and Orthodox Christians are mandated to undergo confession at least once a year before a priest to foster their faith.* According to the canon, which lays guidelines for church governance: "The sacramental seal is inviolable. Therefore, it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason." If a priest breaks this law, he is liable to excommunication. Following the case, *many such confession-related blackmail allegations emerged.* In one such case, a woman reportedly committed suicide after a priest leaked her confession to another person. "At a time when many clergymen are facing allegations of sexual harassment, confession before a priest is a risky affair," says Indulekha Joseph, lawyer and member of the Kerala Catholic Church Reformation Movement (KCRM). She says nuns should be allowed to perform sacramental confession for women. "We recently approached Cardinal Mar George Alenchery with our demand to give permission for nuns to perform confession. But he said only ordained clergy have the power to perform Confession and they are specially trained for it. Nuns are not ordained, so they lack the power." According to Indulekha, after the Malankara Orthodox Church blackmail case, many women church-goers came forward with their experiences of exploitation of various degrees. But nobody was ready to go public.

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Violation of privacy

The petition in the Supreme Court says that under the pretext of rules and customs, believers are forced to undergo 'mandatory confession', failing which they are denied church services. They allege that compulsory confession is in violation of their fundamental right to privacy and human dignity.

Jacob Kurian Onattu, member of the Working Committee of the Orthodox Church and retired principal of Baselius College, Kottayam, argues that the practice of confession is not compulsory. "You need to undergo confession only if you want voting rights in parish bodies. According to our belief, confession is done to god, not to the priests. The role of the confessor priest is only to guide the believer. I personally don't believe in doing away with the practice because of a few errant priests." There is also the option of confessing before a priest of one's choice, says Onattu. "If you are not comfortable with a particular priest, you can choose any other priest in any monastery or seminary, and produce a letter to that effect to exercise your voting rights." Compulsory or not, what's undeniable is the need for change. Parishioners say the Church must move with the times. "It is unfortunate that such incidents have been reported in the Orthodox Church too. The church must be cautious and adapt to the changed times. If needed, reformation should be brought in the training practices of clergymen," says Abraham Cherian, a practising lawyer in the Kerala High Court and a member of the Orthodox Church.

Time for a change

Though some clergymen admit in private that it is indeed time for a change, most Church authorities are vehemently against any change and say it is an internal religious matter. In 2018, the National Commission for Women had called for the abolition of the practice of confession, a move that was strongly opposed by the Church. "It's a matter of faith and it's illogical to ban the sacramental confession in the name of misuse of it by a few priests," the Church said. "The Church will go to any extent to protect the sacraments as they are the magical formula to control the laity. And according to the very patriarchal church law, only ordained clergy have the power to perform confession," says Sr. Jesme, a former nun with the Congregation of Mother of Carmel, whose book Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun spoke about gender inequality in the Church and stirred up a hornet's nest. *There have also been instances of children being subjected to inappropriate questioning during confession.* Sr. Jesme recalled an incident when a child complained that a priest had asked her during confession if she touched her private body parts. *One can argue whether or not sins are pardoned after confession before a priest, but when it becomes a matter of belief, most devotees religiously follow it,* says George Pulikuthiyil, a former Catholic priest, lawyer and founder of the Thrissur-based Jananeethi, an organisation that provides free legal service to the poor. "Once you become part of a religion, you need to follow its rules," he points out. *The seal of secrecy has come in conflict with the law of the land many times. In 2019, a legislation was passed in the Australian state of Victoria, asking priests to violate the sacrament and inform the authorities if anything in the confession pointed to child abuse.* Meanwhile, a few women from the Jacobite faction of the Malankara Syrian Church have also approached the SC to demand their right to confess before a priest of their choice.

HIGH STAKES

Assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the Union Territory of Puducherry will be taking place in changed circumstances. Polls will begin on March 27, with the
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results on May 2. Politics in these regions is not the same as it was five years ago. The BJP's unrelenting pursuit of influence has unsettled conventional calculations in all these areas that are outside the core of the party's traditional catchment area. In 2016, of the 824 seats in the fray, the BJP had won only 64 but it emerged as the ruling party in Assam. It hopes to retain power in Assam and win West Bengal, besides expanding its influence in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In 2016, the BJP had won only three seats in West Bengal, but its rise was dramatic in the 2019 Lok Sabha election when it won 18 of the 42 seats and 40.64% of votes. The BJP's performance in West Bengal will be the most eagerly watched aspect in these elections. *The significant strength of Muslim voters in West Bengal is often cited as a demographic barrier for the Hindu nationalist party, but communal politics works best in areas where minorities mobilise in significant proportions. Assam and Kerala too have minority populations that are formidable in elections, and there are plausible combinations that could work to the BJP's advantage.* In Assam, the BJP's twin agenda of the CAA and the NRC is a double-edged sword, and their electoral potency will be on test. What will matter most is the level of disenchantment with the ruling parties, and the alternative governance platform on offer. The underperformance of the Congress in the DMK-led alliance contributed to a consecutive victory for the AIADMK in 2016, a rarity in Tamil Nadu. With the passing of Jayalalithaa and M. Karunanidhi, Dravidian politics is at the crossroads and the BJP is looking for an opening. In Kerala, the LDF is hoping to retain power for a second consecutive term, contingent on a slide of the Congress. Such a scenario would also mean significant gains for the BJP. Across these places, regional parties are in general on the back foot. In Assam, the AGP is reduced to irrelevance and new outfits with a narrow focus have emerged. As the BJP raises its stakes, concerns that the Centre might play a partisan role in these elections are already high. West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee has termed the phasing out of polls in the State into eight segments a conspiracy to unseat her. The Election Commission must scrupulously play its role as an impartial umpire. *There are also disturbing signs that communal polarisation could be higher, particularly in Assam and West Bengal.* There could be some defining trends emerging from this round of elections, with long-term implications for politics in the country.

LSTV-RSTV NOW MERGED UNDER BANNER OF SANSAD TV

After nearly two years of work, the merger of the Lok Sabha TV (LSTV) and the Rajya Sabha TV (RSTV) has been finalised and will be replaced by Sansad TV. On Monday, retired IAS officer Ravi Capoor was appointed its Chief Executive Officer. In November 2019, after deliberations between Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu, a committee headed by former Prasar Bharati Chairman Surya Prakash was set up. It submitted a report in February 2020. Three different sub-committees are currently examining the report to finalise the integration of technical and manpower resources of both the channels. The Surya Prakash panel held a meeting with Members of Parliament from different political parties and they strongly recommended the continuation of the live telecast. Under the banner of Sansad TV, sources said, the LSTV would continue to telecast live the House proceedings and the RSTV that of the Upper House. "During the inter-session period and beyond the working hours of Parliament, both will telecast common content to a large extent. The LSTV platform would telecast programmes in Hindi, while RSTV would do so in English. The two language variants, it was felt, enables better branding and increased viewership," a top official said. The attempt is to go beyond the proceedings of the Houses and show the functioning of Parliament and parliamentarians when the House is not in session. Mr. Capoor's mandate is also to work out the nitty-gritty of the merger, including the

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integration of the assets and manpower. There are nearly 250 personnel working with the RSTV and around 100 with the LSTV. As part of cost-cutting, there was a possibility of termination of the contract of a few employees, the sources said.

ALL NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

A Group of Ministers (GoM), made of nine senior ministers, including five of Cabinet rank, holds six meetings, in the middle of a public health emergency that has sent the nation into lockdown, on how best to communicate the government's message to a media that is already, by and large, not asking the questions that need to be asked. Read that rather long sentence again, to absorb the full solipsism of the ruling regime obsessing over the real and imagined creases and wrinkles in its own image reflected in the media's mirror. And read the 97-odd pages of the "Report of the Group of Ministers on Government Communication" to marvel at the sheer waste of time and effort expended at the top-most echelons of power, to persuade a media that, by all accounts, needs little convincing, and to preach to the converted. Because if there is a binding theme in the report, underlying the stated "vision", "positive initiatives" and "action points", it is this: The government's determination to identify, talk to and promote those who agree with it. Those who don't agree with it are to be tracked, not to be engaged in dialogue, but to be, as a minister puts it in an awkward and surely unintendedly ominous turn of phrase, "neutralised". A GoM, therefore, to help the government make its echo chamber bigger. Of course, much of the BJP-led government's will to consolidate its narrative dominance has been seen before. It has reflected in its political success in installing itself as the polity's dominant pole. For all its affected disdain of the mainstream media, and its clever use of social media to sidestep it, it is also evident that the BJP strategists recognise the power of the media, both new and old. But what is also becoming increasingly clear is the government's anxiety about "negative" news — even after being elected twice, and even after using its parliamentary majority to extend its dominance to sectors and areas that are not governed by the majority or majoritarian principle. From key aspects of COVID management to a budget that sends the right reformist messages, from a refreshing national education policy — at least on paper — to the success of flagship social sector programmes, the NDA government has earned many a good headline. If it wants more, here are a few suggestions that those who are quoted in the report — ministers and other "prominent persons", among whom has been counted, erroneously, this newspaper's political editor, who attended a scheduled debriefing on India-China, not a brainstorming on media management — did not give. Avoid putting young protesters and comics in jail and charging them with sedition; avoid labelling anyone who expresses disagreement as "anti-national" and a "loser." That could be a start.

NEW RULES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA, OTT PLATFORMS

On Thursday, in a long-anticipated move, *the government notified guidelines that seek to provide a grievance redressal mechanism for users of digital platforms of all kinds — social media sites, messaging apps, over-the-top (OTT) streaming services, and digital news publishers. The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also mandate that social media and messaging platforms will have to adhere to new requirements in assisting investigative agencies of the government.* Launching the guidelines, Electronics and Information Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said they were a "soft-



touch oversight” mechanism to deal with issues such as the persistent spread of fake news and other misinformation.

Broadly, what do the new rules require digital platforms to do?

Although there is no single set of rules that uniformly applies to the different kinds of digital platforms, the broad themes of the guidelines revolve around grievance redressal, compliance with the law, and adherence to the media code. *Social media platforms like Google or Facebook, or intermediaries, for instance, will now have to appoint a grievance officer to deal with users' complaints.* There are additional requirements on *'significant' social media intermediaries* — meaning the platforms whose registered users in India are above the threshold notified by the government. *Such intermediaries have to appoint a 'Chief Compliance Officer', who will have to ensure that the rules are followed; the officer "shall be liable in any proceedings relating to any relevant third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by that intermediary". The intermediaries will also have to appoint a nodal contact person for "24x7 coordination with law enforcement agencies".* The other key requirement is that such a social media intermediary would have to *"enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource"* as may be required by a judicial order. In other words, a problematic message, that is considered “an offence related to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, or public order, or of incitement to an offence relating to the above or in relation with rape, sexually explicit material or child sexual abuse material”, will have to be traced to its initiator on messaging applications like WhatsApp and Signal. For digital publishers of news and current affairs as well as video streaming services, an identical three-tier structure for grievance redressal has been mandated. This structure will look into grievances in relation to a Code of Ethics, which is listed in the appendix to the rules. Among other things, the Code of Ethics includes the ‘Norms of Journalistic Conduct’ as prescribed by the Press Council of India, as also content that shall not be published — “content which is prohibited under any law for the time being in force shall not be published or transmitted”, and the Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. The guidelines also require streaming services to classify content based on its nature and type. So, for instance, content “for persons aged 16 years and above, and can be viewed by a person under the age of 16 years with parental guidance shall be classified as U/A 16+”.

What is the context in which these rules have been framed?

The question of stricter regulation of digital media has come up unceasingly in different forms and forums over the last few years. *The issue came up last year when the Supreme Court was hearing a case involving Sudarshan TV. In the course of the case, it asked the government for suggestions to improve the self-regulatory mechanism for electronic media. The government, in its affidavit, highlighted the need to regulate web-based media. There has also been a face-off between the government and Twitter in recent weeks over the social media platform's non-compliance with its order to block several hashtags and handles of journalists, activists and politicians in the backdrop of the ongoing farmers' protests.* Twitter eventually complied, though not fully. Questions about how social media platforms can be made accountable for the spread of fake news and pornographic content have been raised in Parliament and by the Supreme Court in recent years, something that has been highlighted by the government in its release as well. Taking all this into account, it was no surprise that such rules were being envisaged, but critics have said some of



these guidelines will lead to restriction of free speech. There have been many controversies involving content on over-the-top platforms. In one such recent incident, two BJP leaders filed a case against the makers of Tandav for hurting religious sentiments. There have been calls to censor content that appears on digital platforms.

What has changed from earlier?

The scope of regulation of the digital space has been expanded. *The new guidelines not only replace the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011, but go a step further. They also regulate digital news publishers and streaming services, which was not the case earlier. The 2011 rules were a narrower set of guidelines for intermediaries. Under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, the intermediaries are not liable for user-generated content, provided they adhere to the rules — “an intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him,” it states. These rules have been tightened now.*

Why are the rules being criticised?

For digital news media, these guidelines will subject it to governmental regulation in a way. The three-tier structure of regulation will entail oversight by a government committee at the highest level. Any grievance that does not get satisfactorily solved at the self-regulatory levels will get escalated to the government panel. *The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital liberties organisation, refers to this as “excessive governmental control over digital news and OTT content”.* The other rule that has been criticised by the IFF is the requirement of traceability of the originator of a problematic message. The news guidelines do suggest that this will not be required “where other less intrusive means are effective in identifying the originator of the information”. They also suggest that in identifying the originator, “no significant social media intermediary shall be required to disclose the contents of any electronic message”. But the IFF reckons that the government has powers under the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Interception, Monitoring and Decryption of Information) Rules, 2009, to make demands for the content of the messages. The rules have also been criticised for increasing the potential for censorship and surveillance.

The constitutionality of the rules is questionable

Indeed, these rules at the outset appear unlawful even with respect to whether they could have been issued under the Information Technology Act in the manner chosen by the government, leave alone their constitutionality with respect to fundamental rights.

The ability to issue rules under a statute — i.e. to frame subordinate legislation — is by its nature a limited, constrained power. When the Union Government issues subordinate rules, it is limited to the substantive provisions laid out by Parliament in the original act passed by the latter — the executive branch is subordinate to what Parliament has permitted it and cannot use its rule-making power to seek to issue primary legislation by itself.

Unfortunately, with the present Internet content and social media rules, the Union Government has done precisely that. Instead of specifying the basic due diligence requirements intermediaries had to perform in order to make use of the Section 79 safe harbour provision, *the executive branch has created new rules that apply only to “significant social media intermediaries” — a term that*



appears nowhere in the Information Technology Act. It has included mandates for retention of user data by such intermediaries for use by government agencies and clauses on how popular messaging services have to enable the tracing of the original creator of a message (which is regarded as not possible for end-to-end encrypted messaging services without introducing flaws in their systems) even though the sections in the law cited by the government do not give them that power. The rules have grown to include a chapter on how digital news sites have to be registered before the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and further laid out *a mechanism by which streaming video sites featuring original content (which are generally not regarded as intermediaries for the purposes of Internet law) have to agree to a government-supervised "self-regulatory system"*. This, even though digital news service registration is not required under the IT Act and streaming video content has not been included under the ambit of the Cinematograph Act. In any other situation, the package contained in this gazette notification last week would be instead included in a bill sent to Parliament for its consideration — and which would be regarded as ambitious and controversial for any administration.

Why has the Union Government created this legally uncertain, sprawling house-of-cards-like regulatory instrument? Indicating that the government has made up its mind to force these mandates by notifying them, even with doubtful legal validity, is a key signalling effect to Internet ecosystem players, especially firms keen to avoid public battles and smaller entities who do not have the resources or political position to be able to contest overboard government directives. *The Union Government, when issuing these rules, made reference to increased global interest in regulating Big Tech. However, in advancing Internet content control interests and increased requirements around government demands for user data, while not advancing surveillance law reform or enacting a strong statutory data protection framework, it appears that the interest is more in advancing Big Government and trying to force technologists to fall in line, no matter the cost to our fundamental rights in our Internet age.*

THE MYTH OF THE APOLITICAL CAMPUS

In 2020, following nationwide protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 and the proposed National Register of Citizens there was a chorus to keep students out of politics. In December 2019, at the height of the agitation, Union Human Resource Development Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' said political parties should keep educational institutions out of their politics. This is despite the fact that the Bharatiya Janata Party's own student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, conducted rallies and meetings in support of the new law. The political elite of the Congress too advised students to depoliticise after independence, Professor Ghanshyam Shah writes in *Social Movements in India*. Today, several colleges and universities in India have rules mandating that campuses be apolitical spaces where students should focus on studies. Students participating in protests on these campuses are liable to be suspended or dismissed. Recently, following the arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi, this idea surfaced once again. Reports stated that parents are worried about their children's social media posts on contentious issues and participation in protests. The concern possibly stems from a fear of the government and its frequent attempts to crack down on dissenters, a belief that the rough and tumble of politics is not suited for the young, the association of protests with lawlessness, and often a combination of these.



Idea of education

*In India, 18-year-olds are allowed by law to drive cars, marry (if they are women), and in some States, drink. Most important, they are allowed to vote. Ironically, while campaigns are held before every election to increase voter turnout, especially among the youth, young adults are routinely advised to stay away from politics. How can they be expected to make an informed choice at the ballot box if they are not allowed to freely express their opinions on issues that concern them, or participate in protests, which is their democratic right? Many see students who focus solely on academics as role models, achievers and good citizens, and student protesters as rebellious, unruly, and bringing their institutions into disrepute. Such convenient categorisation ignores the very purpose of education and the conceptualisation of a campus. In Tagore's words, an educational institution should not be "a dead cage in which living minds are fed with food that's artificially prepared". Institutions are not merely spaces where knowledge is imparted to passive recipients; they are spaces where there is debate, discussion and contestation of ideas. Moreover, it is fallacious to say that educational institutions are apolitical spaces when administrations and curricula, especially in the social sciences, are changed by the government of the day. We saw this in the case of Delhi University dropping A.K. Ramanujan's celebrated essay, *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*, from the history syllabus in 2011 and in the more recent case of the CBSE removing 30% of the syllabus for students of Classes 9-12, including portions on federalism, citizenship and secularism. It is not participation in protests alone that politicise the youth; it is equally the education they are — or are not — imparted.* Being apolitical, according to the dictionary definition, means to not be interested in politics or connected with a political party. While many citizens fall into this category, it is impossible for us, even the youth, to not have political views. To illustrate: A child who has grown up near a river into which sewage and industrial waste were continuously dumped may grow up fighting for clean water and air. He may not be a supporter of the BJP or the Congress or the regional parties, his knowledge of their ideologies and policies may be limited, but he may still attend a protest against the government's inability to tackle pollution. Like him, *many of us have views on how to tackle inequality, what model of development is appropriate and just, who should be taxed and by how much, food habits, rights and their restrictions, and so on. Much like sending WhatsApp forwards, expressing our views to family and friends, and posting on social media on politics, these views make us political.* As Turkish-British writer Elif Shafak once said in an interview, "Wherever there's power, there's politics." However, only those privileged across the categories of gender, ethnicity, caste, class, religion and social status can afford to remain silent on many of these issues. *The luxury for some of being "apolitical" comes from the fact that they are not the targets of contentious policies — they, their families and communities are unaffected by unfair citizenship laws, agricultural policies, caste discrimination on campuses, bans on certain food, displacement from their lands, and so on.* Some studies such as Ross (1969) also note that privilege is the reason why some students also participate in agitations: they protest because they are protected by wealth and influence. Social and economic privilege is why some may not have reason to protest; it is equally the reason why many can afford to speak out.

Result of sustained demands

Over the years, across nations, *it is sustained demands by citizens that have earned us many of the precious rights we enjoy today, including the eight-hour workday, women's right to vote, and equal*



pay. We also see around us the consequences of turning a blind eye to some of these protests. Reni village in Uttarakhand, which was the centre of the Chipko movement in the 1970s, bore the brunt of the landslide that killed 62 in the region recently. Many of the women who live in Reni now were children when they hugged the trees protesting against commercial logging. Scientists have time and again questioned the model of development in the region, including massive dam projects and rampant deforestation. *When a government passes laws with little deliberation and discussion with the stakeholders concerned, it is but natural that people, many of whom elected that government to power, will protest. From Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam in Hong Kong to Greta Thunberg in Sweden and Disha Ravi in India, it is the youth who seem fearless and outspoken, and willing to take risks.* In the past, too, it is the youth who spearheaded many movements in India, such as the anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu. In India, *Article 19* of the Constitution guarantees us the right to free speech, the right to assemble peaceably without arms, and the right to form associations. The right to protest is a manifestation of these rights. *For the youth, the stakes are even higher in speaking out: policies and laws concern not only the rights, lives and livelihoods of citizens today, but have far-reaching implications for the future of the nation too.*

SCHOOLS DEVISE DIGITAL DETOX ROUTINE

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has not only upended the way we socialise or interact with each other but has also altered the learning patterns of lakhs of students, with online classes becoming the norm. For the last nine months, students in private schools have been glued to their screens for hours on end where otherwise they would have been in a physical classroom interacting with their peers and teachers. The fallout is digital fatigue and eye strain. School managements in Bengaluru are now devising ways to help students cope with digital fatigue — from reorganising holiday schedules and limiting screen time to holding wellness sessions and asking parents to restrict their children’s personal screen time. School principals have acknowledged the problem, with many saying students as well as teachers have been complaining of headache, burning eyes and sleeplessness. “Earlier, there was a lot of enthusiasm about online classes,” said Dakshayini Kanna, principal of Harvest International School. Nooraine Fazal, founder-director of Inventure Academy, said they would be shortening the summer holidays to about a month. Instead, they will give students a week’s holiday after every six to eight weeks of online classes. Manoj Kumar Sharma, additional professor, Service for the Healthy use of Technology clinic at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences, said schools should encourage students to use apps to track their screen time. “Parents and teachers, rather than urging kids to restrict screen time should encourage students to take part in physical activity and spend time with family and friends. Parents should set an example and restrict their screen time,” he said.

WHY CELEBRATION OF GURU RAVIDASS JAYANTI BY FARM UNIONS IS SIGNIFICANT

On Wednesday, *farmer leaders under the banner of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) announced marking the 645th Birth Anniversary of Guru Ravidass at the Singhu border. They also appealed to farmers to reach Singhu and those who cannot come to participate in celebrations in villages, towns and cities.* Can this move bridge the age-old differences between the two communities in the state? And what would be its impact on farmers’ protest? The Indian Express explains.



What does this move by SKM signify?

A farmer is almost a connotation of Jat Sikhs in Punjab because majority farmers are from this community in the state. Due to social differences between the two communities, Jat Sikhs hardly participate in the celebrations of Guru Ravidass Jayanti. Jats and Dalits (Ravidassais) have separate religious places in the villages. A large number of atrocities on Dalits are reported from Punjab every year. "If it (farmers participating in Guru Ravidass birth anniversary) happens then it would be a very welcome step as for the first time the people from Jat community would be participating in the celebrations of Guru Ravidass' birthday," said Jaswant Rai, coordinator, Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation. (BAMCEF), adding that but this brotherhood should not be limited only to farmers protest but should continue.

Why is there bitterness among these two communities?

"Dalits have been working in the fields of the farmers (Jat Sikhs) since ages and when the awakening among the Dalits came it was not tolerated by the zamindars because they wanted to keep them under their control always, and still 'siri' system (farm labour) is still quite prevalent in Malwa region of the state," said an expert on Dalits, adding that this was one of the main cause of animosity between them. DAV College, Jalandhar, Prof G C Kaul, an expert on both Ad-Dharma and Ravidassia movements, said, "Because of the discrimination with Dalits by the upper casts including Jat Zamindars, they even started Ad-Dahram Mandal Movemnet in 1920s just to get the separate religion". In the recent past, *bitterness got enhanced following the Vienna incident when Sant Ramanand of Dera Sach Khand Ballan, the biggest Dera of Ravidassia having around 20 lakh followers across the world was killed and Dera Ballan head Sant Niranjnan Das had a narrow escape in the same attack, which was planned by some Punjabi people. Dera Ballan announced a separate religion called 'Ravidassia religion' in early 2010 at Banaras, the birthplace of Guru Ravidass. They started replacing Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh religious book) with New Granth Amritbani carrying 200 hymns of Guru Ravidass and several clashes took place between Sikhs and Ravidassis over this in Doaba. Ravidassias are divided over worshipping of religious books. While some are still worshipping Guru Granth Sahib, others are following the new Amritbani Granth. Even now different sects of Ravidassias are demanding a separate column for their religion in the 2021 census.* The singers of the Dalit community have even composed special songs based on their caste so that people of the community play them on their events and functions instead playing songs of singers from the Jat community.

How farmers' protest can bring two communities closer?

Experts said that joint celebrations of Guru Ravidass' birth anniversary by both communities will help in cementing the fractures that have crept among the communities in the state and mainly in Doaba region. He also said that this move will be like following the teachings of the Sikh Gurus only who never believed in caste system.

What could be the impact of these celebrations on the ongoing protests at Delhi's borders?

Experts said that along with minimising bitterness, this call by farmers' appears to be a strategy to reclaim the secular and unified credentials of the movement after the R-Day violence event. The detractors and critics of the movement got a shot in the arm as it helped them paint the movement as sectarian. Though Dalits of the Punjab are participating in the movement, but it will further boost



the agitation by bringing harmony in the society, broadening the base of the movement as it will lead Dalits from other states to participate in it, and make it a secular and more inclusive character of the movement.

Why is it important for Doaba region of Punjab?

Dalit community has a large population in Doaba region of Punjab, which includes Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Nawanshahr and Kapurthala districts. Doaba has hundreds of small and big Ravidassia deras (religious places) including the largest dera, Sach Khand Ballan located in Jalandhar's Ballan village. Doaba saw many small and big clashes between the two communities. This will bring peace. Also, it will enhance the brotherhood among Jats and the people of all SC communities, including Valmiki, Kabir Panthi, etc. as in Punjab alone there are 38 castes under the SC category.

SPURRING A REAWAKENING WITH NATIONAL SCIENCE DAY (AMITABHA BHATTACHARYA - FORMER IAS OFFICER WHO HAS ALSO WORKED IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND WITH THE UNDP)

National Science Day, which fell on February 28, commemorates a path-breaking discovery at the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, Calcutta in 1928, that came to be known as the Raman Effect. Three more physicists from Calcutta, namely Jagadish Chandra Bose who was C.V. Raman's senior, Satyendra Nath Bose and Meghnad Saha, both of whom were Raman's juniors, had by then made major contributions that were globally acclaimed. But Raman's discovery marks the pinnacle for which he would win the Nobel Prize in physics two years later, making him the most visible face of Indian science.

Pursuing scientific truth

It seems very thoughtful and rational that our National Science Day celebrates a discovery and not the birthday of its discoverer. Raman, as a person, was not beyond criticism. The circumstances of his exit from Calcutta where he spent his most productive years, the reasons for his relinquishing the post of Director of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore before completion of his term, differences with Meghnad Saha, and non-sharing of credit for his discovery with K.S. Krishnan make him appear as arrogant, and not above common human foibles. But none of these can diminish Raman's unquestioned scientific prowess and his life-long devotion to the pursuit of scientific truth (through physics).

Since history judges a person by the peaks of his achievement, Raman's standing as an outstanding physicist remains unscathed. India has progressed a great deal in about a century after the major advances made by the Bose(s), Saha and Raman. Even though none so far, working in India, has personally scaled those heights, our achievements, on the whole, on the application of science and technology in fields such as atomic energy, space research, agriculture and biotechnology have been impressive. Noted historians of science and practising scientists have also been articulating their views on how India can develop as a hub for world-class scientific and technological innovation. Two recent developments, namely the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) and the draft National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy 2020 (draft STIP), despite having limitations that characterise any government publication, underscore some of the pathways to this direction. The importance of languages has been highlighted in the NEP. S.N. Bose and others



had been advocating from the 1940s for the use of the mother languages for science teaching and popularisation. This is an area that requires serious attention. Similarly, the setting up of the National Research Foundation, for instance, to encourage and fund research and development activities, hopefully with much greater and intensive involvement of our university system than hitherto, seems to be a step in the right direction.

The celebration of National Science Day with the basic objective of spreading the message of science and its importance in improving the lives of people, must be taken forward in the days ahead and should spur a national reawakening instead of being just a ritual. India has a long history of secular enquiry and free thoughts. From Aryabhata, Varāhamihira and Bhāskaraċārya to the great scientists of modern India, the tradition of illuminating the world of science continues. Illustrious women like Janaki Ammal (botanist), Asima Chatterjee (chemist), Bibha Chowdhuri (physicist) and Gagandeep Kang (medical scientist) have kept this flame burning. Collectively, *we have to take forward the legacy instead of wasting our time indulging in obscurantism, unscientific and unsubstantiated claims*. It is only then that the purpose of observing the Day will be fulfilled and the spirit of Raman's unswerving dedication to science be honoured.

IN NAGALAND, AN ITCH TO REVIVE PRICKLY CAGES FOR LAWBREAKERS

Some villages in Nagaland are trying to revive a traditional form of punishment that seeks to check crime with an itch in time. Social offenders or violators of Naga customary laws have over the ages dreaded a cramped, triangular cage made from the logs of an indigenous tree that irritates the skin. The dread is more of humiliation or loss of face within the community or clan than of spending at least a day scratching furiously without any space to move. Such itchy cages are referred to as khujli ghar in Nagamese — a pidgin lingua franca — but each Naga community has its own name. The Aos, one of the major tribes of Nagaland, call it Shi-ki that means flesh-house. "A few villages where traditional practices are very strong still prescribe this form of punishment, a deterrent for offenders of various shades, including robbers and drug addicts. Many villages are trying to revive it," Sanen Pongen, the chairman of Chuchuyimlang village council in Mokokchung district, told The Hindu.

In full public view

The cage is usually placed at a central spot in the village, usually in front of the morung, or bachelor's dormitory, for the inmate to be in full public view. "The cage is made of the logs of Masang-fung, a local tree that people avoid because of the irritation it causes. It does not affect the palm but people who make the cages have to be careful," Mr. Pongen said. A prickly cage usually accommodates one offender — invariably a male — who barely has space to sit, for 24 hours or more than a week, depending on the gravity of the offence. He can be fed by relatives periodically and let out to answer nature's call during the punishment. "Some local modifications aside, customary laws of all the Naga tribes are similar. The khujli ghar too used to be common until lock-ups came up in police stations to house the offenders and some forms of punishment began clashing with those prescribed by constitutional laws," said Hesheto Chishi, a customary law and Naga folklore researcher based in Dimapur. As the founder of Indigenous Cultural Society, the only such in the northeast affiliated to the UNESCO, he has been working on codifying the customary laws and has co-authored Oral Narrative, a book on Sumi Naga laws published by the Ministry of Human Resources Development. "It is not proper to view the itchy cages from the prism of modern

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laws. They have served a purpose for ages and have often proved to reform offenders, as identity and family or clan reputation is very important to a Naga,” Mr. Chishi, also a community chieftain, said. Article 371(A) of the Constitution guarantees the preservation of Naga customary laws. The State also funds the customary courts in villages and towns where cases — mostly dealing with land litigation, money-lending and marital disputes — have a high rate of prompt disposal.

ANCIENT CHURCH, SET TO BE RAZED, GETS NEW LIFE

The centuries-old St. George’s Orthodox Church at Cheppad in Kerala faced demolition for widening of National Highway 66, but is now set to become a Centrally-protected monument of national importance with Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) recognition. Last month, based on the ASI Director General’s orders, a team from the ASI Thrissur circle inspected the church and recommended its preservation. K.P. Mohandas, superintending archaeologist, wrote to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) urging it to propose a new alignment for the NH. “It has been noticed that the church is one of the rarest in Kerala, having traditional Kerala church architectural pattern with rare and beautiful mural paintings on the walls of the altar. Considering the historic, art and architectural importance of the church, this office intends to protect the church as a Centrally-protected monument of national importance,” the letter said. The church is thought to date back to AD 950, but some experts say it was built in AD 1050. Though rebuilt in 1952, the old apse at the eastern end preserves the murals. There are 47 murals and the paintings are of St. Paul with a sword, the birth of Jesus Christ, resurrection of Lazarus, the kiss of Judas, the Last Supper, Christ bearing the cross, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, and Noah’s Ark. These paintings, blending Persian and Kerala mural art styles, draw enthusiasts from far and wide.

CLIMATE AND CONSCIOUSNESS (VINOD THOMAS - A VISITING PROFESSOR AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, AND FORMER SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT AT THE WORLD BANK)

It is common to hear policymakers and the public refer to natural disasters, such as this year’s Himalayan glacier flooding that overwhelmed Uttarakhand, or the cold snap that paralysed Texas, as “acts of God”. But what precipitated both events was not the hand of God, but human-made global warming. Unless climate change is tagged as a primary culprit, climate action will continue to falter. The melting of the Himalayan glaciers that prompted the floods and landslides in Uttarakhand have the fingerprints of global warming. In 2013, glacial flooding caused over 6,000 deaths in Uttarakhand during the monsoon months. The United States has already witnessed many deadly avalanches since the beginning of 2021. Furthermore, as glacier cover is replaced by water or land, the amount of light reflected decreases, aggravating warming — a contributor to the sweltering heat in cities like Delhi and Hyderabad, or the epic floods in Chennai or Kerala. The extreme cold weather in Texas, like the double-digit negative temperatures seen in Germany earlier this year, is connected to Arctic-peninsula warming, at a rate almost twice the global average. Usually, there is a collection of winds around the Arctic keeping the cold locked far to the north. But global warming has caused gaps in these protective winds, allowing intensely cold air to move south — a phenomenon that is accelerating. When the public connects cause and effect, responses are usually swift. But global warming is still seen as a danger that lies over the horizon. So, while COVID-19 triggered the mobilisation of trillions of dollars in financing, the equally frightening climate scenario has not. For India, the third-largest carbon emitter after China and

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



the United States, a decisive switch is needed from highly polluting coal and petroleum to cleaner and renewable power sources. China has announced carbon neutrality by 2060, Japan and South Korea by 2050, but India is yet to announce a target. The acceleration of hazards of nature should prompt countries to advance those targets, ideally by a decade. The stakes are laid out in alarming reports, which show that India is particularly vulnerable. While HSBC ranks India at the top among 67 nations in climate vulnerability (2018), Germanwatch ranks India fifth among 181 nations in terms of climate risks (2020). But public spending does not reflect these perils.

Budgetary allocations

A vital step should be explicitly including policies for climate mitigation in the government budget, along with energy, roads, health and education. Specifically, growth targets should include timelines for switching to cleaner energy. The government needs to launch a major campaign to mobilise climate finance. Even if major economies speed up climate mitigation, catastrophes like Uttarakhand will become more frequent due to the accumulated carbon emissions in the atmosphere. So, climate adaptation needs to be a priority. India's Central and State governments must increase allocations for risk reduction, such as better defences against floods, or agricultural innovations to withstand droughts. A big worry is that the Uttarakhand government and the Centre have been diluting, instead of strengthening, climate safeguards for hydroelectric and road projects. Studies had flagged ice loss across the Himalayas, and the dangers to densely populated catchments, but policy response has been lacking. Similarly, Kerala ignored a landmark study calling for regulation of mining, quarrying and dam construction in ecologically sensitive places, which contributed to the massive floods and landslides in 2018 and 2019. Sustainable growth depends on timely climate action. For that to happen, policymaking needs to connect the dots between carbon emissions, atmospheric warming, melting glaciers, extreme floods and storms. Events like Uttarakhand and Texas should be treated as lessons to change people's minds and for the public to demand urgent action.

HIMALAYAN SEROW SPOTTED IN ASSAM

A Himalayan mammal, somewhere between a goat and an antelope, has been confirmed as the newest creature to be spotted in Assam. A couple of nature guides had spotted the Himalayan serow, a goat-antelope, in the 950-sq.km Manas Tiger Reserve on December 3. The animal — a high-altitude dweller usually found 2,000-4,000 metres above sea level — was seen being chased by wild dogs. "We have now confirmed the animal as the Himalayan serow, spotted close to the border with Bhutan in Manas's Bansbari-Mathanguri forest. The sighting augurs well for the health of the tiger reserve," Anindya Swargowari, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest for areas under the Bodoland Territorial Council, told The Hindu on Tuesday. He said the serow has been spotted for the first time in the tiger reserve or anywhere else in Assam, but "this does not mean the animal never visited our forests before". According to Mr. Swargowari, the sightings of rare animals and birds in Manas is an outcome of better access to remote parts of the protected area where extremists and hunters once ruled. "There are chances of more faunal species, found in the higher reaches, being spotted in the park." The Reserve is contiguous with the 1,057-sq. km. Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan. The black-necked crane was also recently sighted in Manas. A pair each of such cranes was sighted on January 10 and February 18. The Buddhists revere the bird that nests in the Tawang region. Officials in Manas said the critically endangered white-



bellied hero was also seen a few weeks ago. In February, birders had sighted the colourful Mandarin duck in the Maguri-Motapung wetland near eastern Assam's Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. This duck was last spotted in Assam 118 years ago.

FOOTFALL IN THE FLURRY: TRACKING THE ELUSIVE SNOW LEOPARD IN HIMACHAL

Himachal Pradesh's high-altitude hilly terrain could be harbouring as many as 73 snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), says a recent study based on a scientific enumeration of the elusive animal. Snow leopards are one of the most endangered wildlife species. The study observed that local communities are the strongest allies in conservation. The first-ever such study on snow leopards, a top predator of the Indian Himalaya, was completed in January by the Himachal Pradesh Wildlife Department and the Mysore-based Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF). "We are the pioneers in getting snow leopards count done in a scientific manner in the country. Till now, it was only a guess work surrounding the population of snow leopards. But now we have numbers which are reliable. We detected 44 individual snow leopards on 187 occasions in this study. From this dataset of 44 individuals, we estimated that the snow leopard population size is likely to be 51 individuals and this population can be reliably estimated to be up to 73 individuals, excluding cubs. This is an encouraging count," Archana Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), told The Hindu. In Himachal Pradesh, the snow leopard's habitat covers a greater part of the districts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur. Its potential habitat also extends into the upper regions of the districts of Shimla, Kullu, Chamba and Kangra. The wildlife wing of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department commenced the snow leopard enumeration project in 2018, with techniques aligned to the protocols prescribed by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAII). "This project is the first systematic effort at a large regional scale that utilised a stratified sampling design to estimate the snow leopard population over an area of 26,112 sq. km. The entire snow leopard habitat of the State [of Himachal Pradesh] was first stratified into three categories — high, low or unknown snow leopard occurrence, based on questionnaire surveys of local communities residing in these areas. Camera trap surveys were then carried out in areas under each of the categories," Ajay Bijoor, assistant programme director of NCF's high altitude programme told The Hindu. The population of the primary wild ungulate prey of snow leopards — blue sheep and ibex — for the entire snow leopard habitat was assessed by using the double observer survey technique. "We found that the snow leopard density was positively correlated with the wild prey density, indicating that higher wild prey densities corresponded to higher snow leopard densities. Spiti and Tabo recorded the highest densities of both snow leopards and their prey, while Chandra and Bharmour recorded the lowest densities of both snow leopards and their prey," he said.

Local support

The entire camera trapping exercise was led by a team of eight local youth of Kibber village in Spiti, who have been working on such surveys across the upper Spiti landscape since 2010. 45-year-old Tanzin Thinley, who hails from Kibber village and has been associated with the NCF, firmly believes that conservation of the snow leopard would be easy with the participation of local communities. "Snow leopards at times attack the livestock of villagers. Over the past few years, NCF has tried to convince villagers to get their livestock insured. This has helped in a way that in case anyone has lost livestock to snow leopards, the sense of anguish against the animal is not



there, eventually helping in its conservation,” Mr. Thinley said. The results reiterate, the study said, that local communities are the strongest allies in conservation, if their concerns can be factored into conservation planning.

PM CALLS FOR E-MARKETING OF CHANNAPATNA TOYS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called upon Channapatna toymakers to explore the possibility of e-marketing their traditional wares across the country and the world. Interacting with a group of artisans from Channapatna while virtually inaugurating the India Toy Fair 2021 in New Delhi on Saturday, Mr. Modi suggested that artisans make use of the advanced technology to popularise the toys across the world and use the information technology workforce in Bengaluru for the purpose. Earlier, the artisans from Channapatna displayed a set of toys, including an abacus and a plane, to which Mr. Modi said he was being reminded of his childhood. The artisans said about 2,000 of them engaged in the Channapatna toy industry, which had a history of over 200 years old.

MEASURE OF CONFIDENCE

India's anti-COVID inoculation drive has received a boost with Bharat Biotech's Covaxin demonstrating more than 80 per cent efficacy in the final phase of clinical trials. The data on the trials, released on Wednesday, are the first interim efficacy figures on an anti-COVID vaccine being developed in the country. The vaccine developed by the Hyderabad-based firm is being used, along with the Serum Institute product, in the inoculation drive currently underway in the country. *But it was approved on a "clinical trial" mode — those administered Covaxin are monitored for serious adverse effects and the manufacturer is liable to pay compensation if an event is proved to be linked to the vaccine. This has created hesitancy about Covaxin, with states like Chhattisgarh requesting only Covishield from the Centre. The latest results could go a long way in removing these misgivings.* Efficacy is a crucial requirement during vaccine trials, but it's also a tricky concept. Experts caution against jumping to easy conclusions about percentages obtained during trials. For example, in the case of Covaxin, it would be wrong to conclude that about 20 per cent of people administered the jab would still be vulnerable to the novel coronavirus. This is because even the most stringent trials are conducted on a limited number of people — about 26,000 in the case of the Bharat Biotech product — and they can only help to arrive at an estimate. But experts do agree that an above 80 per cent result in the interim analysis puts Covaxin on a strong footing in the fight against the virus. As epidemiologist Gagandeep Kang told this paper, “Interim analyses actually test the vaccine much more, so if it has around 81 per cent efficacy, that means it is likely to maintain a high level of efficiency even when the full results are released”. *Covaxin has not been tested against the mutant strains of the virus that have found their way to the country in the last six weeks. Theoretically, however, vaccines such as Covaxin that rely on an inactivated virus are known to trigger robust immune responses against mutants.* This facet of the indigenously-developed vaccine is likely to become clearer in the coming weeks and months. Other data on its relative efficacy amongst different age groups, gender and people with comorbidities will help in arriving at a more comprehensive understanding about Covaxin, further easing the hesitancy around it.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

AMBANI TOPS INDIAN BILLIONAIRE LIST WITH \$83 BN

*The world added 607 new billionaires, or more than three billionaires in two days, while India added 55 new billionaires, or more than one billionaire every week, in 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, as per the 10th edition of Hurun Global Rich List 2021. Tesla's Elon Musk added \$151 billion to become the richest man in the world for the first time with a net worth of \$197 billion, followed by Amazon's Jeff Bezos (\$189 billion), the chairman and CEO of LVMH Moët Hennessy — Louis Vuitton, Bernard Arnault (\$114 billion), Microsoft's Bill Gates (\$110 billion) and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg (\$101 billion). Reliance Industries Chairman Mukesh Ambani, who emerged as the richest man in India with a net worth of \$83 billion, came in at number eight. "Despite the disruption caused by COVID-19, this year has seen the biggest wealth increase of the last decade. A stock-market boom, driven partly by quantitative easing, and flurry of new listings have minted eight new dollar billionaires a week for the past year. *The world has never seen this much wealth created in just one year, much more than perhaps could have been expected for a year badly disrupted by COVID-19,*" Hurun Report chairman Rupert Hoogewerf said. *India retained the third spot in the number of billionaires from a country with a total of 177 billionaires living in the country.* In the list of Indian billionaires, *Mr. Ambani was followed by Adani Group's Gautam Adani* and family with his wealth almost doubling to \$32 billion.*

IN A TENSE YEAR, INDIA-CHINA TRADE STAYED ROBUST

In 2020, even as relations with Beijing plunged to new lows and New Delhi took steps against Chinese-linked businesses, China reclaimed its position at the top of the list of India's major trade partners, replacing the United States that had climbed to number 1 in 2019.

2020 trade with China

Trade between India and China from January to December 2020 stood at \$77.67 billion. Though lower than the \$85.47 billion traded between the countries in the 2019 calendar year, this figure was still higher than the \$75.95 billion traded between India and the US last year. In the (ongoing) financial year 2020-21, provisional data for the April-December period show China ahead of the US in India trade – \$60.63 billion compared to \$55.00 billion.

Trends in China trade

While India has been trying to reduce its trade imbalance and dependence on Chinese imports for several years now, it was only in 2018 that the US surpassed the value of goods that China traded with India in a financial year. However, India's trade with the US took a major hit during the Covid-19 pandemic. China got back to the top of the trade partners' list in a year in which armies of the two countries remained locked in a tense standoff in eastern Ladakh. Also in 2020, India committed itself to self-reliance through the Atma Nirbhar Bharat campaign, and implemented measures to restrict Chinese investments in the country. Dozens of China-linked apps were banned, a major infrastructure contract awarded to a Chinese firm was cancelled, and the import of certain kinds of power equipment was banned. Production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes were



announced across sectors to reduce dependence on critical goods from China, even though building self-reliance in these critical sectors will likely take several years.

Exports and imports

Electrical machinery and equipment, at \$17.82 billion, and nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, and mechanical appliances, at \$12.35 billion, continued to top the list of goods imported from China in 2020 — even though the imports of these goods dropped by nearly 11 per cent in the last calendar year compared to one year previously. Exports of Indian iron and steel to China jumped by a massive 319.14 per cent over 2019, with shipments touching \$2.38 billion during January to December 2020. Iron and steel exports to China in 2019 were around \$567 million. Export of ores, slag, and ash increased by 62 per cent to \$3.48 billion in 2020 from \$2.15 billion in 2019. Overall, exports to China in 2020 were \$17.12 billion — around 10.70 per cent higher than in 2019. In the April-December period of the 2020-21 financial year, exports to China were \$15.26 billion, up from \$12.92 billion in the same period of financial year 2019-20. The increased exports, including those of iron and steel, could be the result of China's focus on domestic infrastructure projects. "The Chinese economy is undergoing a certain amount of change because China is focussed a lot on domestic demand... That way, it will need iron and steel for its infrastructure needs. Whenever infrastructure projects have been prioritised in China, India's exports of iron and steel to that country have gone up," Prof Biswajit Dhar of the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning at Jawaharlal Nehru University said.

FM SIGNALS 'DUTY' TO APPEAL THE CAIRN ARBITRATION AWARD

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday indicated the government's intent to appeal against an arbitration panel asking India to return \$1.4 billion to U.K.'s Cairn Energy Plc, saying it is her "duty" to appeal in cases where the sovereign authority to tax is questioned. Last year, the government lost two high-profile arbitrations over levy of taxes on British firms, using legislation that gave it the power to tax with retrospective effect. While the government has already challenged in a Singapore court an international arbitration tribunal verdict that overturned its demand for ₹22,100 crore in back taxes from Vodafone Group, it hasn't yet appealed an award asking India to return the value of shares seized and sold, dividend confiscated and tax refund stopped to adjust a ₹10,247 crore tax demand on Cairn. "We have made our position clear on retrospective taxation. We have repeated it in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, till now. I don't see any lack of clarity," she said, referring to the Modi government's stand of not raising any new tax demand using the 2012 legislation. "Where I find arbitration award questioning India's sovereign authority to tax... if there is a question about the sovereign right to tax, I will appeal, it's my duty to appeal," she said. "An arbitration award, which questions the authority of government to tax, I will appeal on that." She did not make any direct reference to the Cairn award. The statement comes days after officials held rounds of talks with Cairn executives to find a solution acceptable to both sides.

OPEC+ MOVE TO HIT RECOVERY

India, the world's third-biggest oil importer, on Friday said the decision by major producers to continue with output cuts as prices move higher could threaten the consumption led-recovery in



some countries. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies, a group known as OPEC+, agreed on Thursday not to increase supply in April as they await a more substantial recovery in demand amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Crude prices rose after the announcement and are up 33% this year. Brent crude futures for May on Friday rose to \$67.44 a barrel, and are on track for an almost 2% gain this week. "As one of the largest crude-consuming countries, India is concerned that such actions by producing countries have the potential to undermine consumption-led recovery and more so hurt consumers, especially in our price-sensitive market," Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan told Reuters. India, hit hard by the soaring oil prices, urged producers to ease output cuts and help the global economic recovery from the pandemic. "We were really hopeful that OPEC and OPEC+ would have eased the production cuts to some degree taking into account the fragile recovery of the global economy, particularly in developing countries," Mr. Pradhan said. Rising oil prices are posing fiscal challenges for India, where heavily-taxed retail fuel prices have touched record highs, threatening the demand-driven recovery. India imports about 84% of its oil and relies on West Asian supplies to meet over three-fifths of its demand.

'Use oil bought cheaply'

Responding to India's repeated request for an increase in output, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman responded on Thursday by saying India should start using oil it bought cheaply during the price collapse last year. "We will continue to work with each other... avoidance of volatility will help both producers and consumers," the Saudi minister said.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

After two quarters of a sharp contraction, India's economy is estimated to have rebounded out of a 'technical recession' to record feeble growth in the October-December 2020 period, with GDP rising by 0.4% and GVA by 1%. The overall numbers are not surprising. Just as the short-notice pandemic lockdown and the subsequent case surge took the wind out of mobility and economic activity in the first half of the fiscal year, the 'unlocking phase' that was largely complete by late September, brought back a semblance of normalcy, with pent-up and festival demand spurring spending, and helping reboot production lines. Agriculture remained the resilient bulwark in the third quarter as well, with farm GVA rising by 3.9% after being the sole sector to clock growth in the preceding two quarters. Manufacturing and construction resurfaced from a collapse to expand 1.2% and 6%, respectively. Both these sectors had been under stress even before the pandemic, posting contractions starting from the second and third quarters of 2019-20. Despite the Centre's push on government spending, public administration, defence and other services contracted 1.5% last quarter. However, investment demand is estimated to have rebounded, with fixed capital formation posting positive momentum after several quarters, driven perhaps by public spending. Most worryingly, retail, trade, hotels, transport and communication contracted by 7.7%. Despite the Q3 uptick, the second advance estimates of national income for the year project an 8% contraction in the GDP, wider than the - 7.7% estimated in January. This may partly be due to the NSO revising the first quarter's GDP shrinkage to 24.4%, from the 23.9% calculated earlier. The latest numbers also may be taken as an indicator at best, with the NSO stressing that the estimates are likely to undergo 'sharp revisions' as the pandemic affected data collection. Like the growth rate for 2019-20 was revised from 4.2% to 4% in January, the real GDP growth for the third quarter of the last



fiscal has been scaled down to 3.3%, from 4.1%. The base effect may well have helped nudge India's growth into positive territory, but it is an important psychological barrier to cross. Growth numbers alone may still not be capturing the tumult faced by swathes of informal and micro-enterprises, nor do they reflect a recovery in the job market. The continuing stress in employment- and contact-intensive services sectors is a worry, and the government must consider support measures. The second wave of infections in industrial hotspots such as Maharashtra, and the risk of infections rising in poll-bound States, do not bode well either for services or the fragile recovery in manufacturing. A smooth and expeditious roll-out of the vaccine, with the private sector drafted in to achieve scale, is an imperative to help India navigate the bumps ahead more deftly.

REVISING FOOD SECURITY ACT: WHY, HOW, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRE, STATES

Why a discussion on a revision?

The NFSA provides a legal right to persons belonging to “eligible households” to receive foodgrains at subsidised price— rice at Rs 3/kg, wheat at Rs 2/kg and coarse grain at Rs 1/kg — under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). These are called central issue prices (CIPs). A revision of CIPs is one of the issues that have been discussed. The other issues are updating of the population coverage under the NFSA, and beneficiary identification criteria. Under sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the Act, the term “eligible households” comprises two categories — “priority households”, and families covered by the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). Priority households are entitled to receive 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month, whereas AAY households are entitled to 35 kg per month at the same prices.

For how long are these prices valid, and how are they to be revised?

Under Schedule-I of the Act, these subsidised prices were fixed for “a period of three years from the date of commencement of the Act”. While different states began implementing the Act at different dates, the deemed date of its coming into effect is July 5, 2013, and the three-year period was therefore completed on July 5, 2016. However, the government has yet not revised the subsidised prices. The government can do so under Schedule-I of the Act, after completion of the three-year period. To revise the prices, the government can amend Schedule-I through a notification, a copy of which has to be laid before each House of Parliament as soon as possible after it is issued. Even the Economic Survey of 2020-21 had recommended a revision in the CIPs. The revised prices cannot exceed the minimum support price for wheat and coarse grains, and the derived minimum support price for rice.

What is the extent of coverage, and how is it to be updated?

The Act has prescribed the coverage under “eligible households” — 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population. On the basis of Census 2011 figures and the national rural and urban coverage ratios, 81.35 crore persons are covered under NFSA currently. This overall figure has been divided among the states and Union Territories, based on the NSSO Household Consumer Expenditure Survey 2011-12. Section 9 of the Act deals with an update of coverage of population under the Act. It states: “The percentage coverage under the Targeted Public Distribution System in rural and urban areas for each State shall, subject to sub-section (2) of section 3, be determined by the Central Government and the total number of persons to be



covered in such rural and urban areas of the State shall be calculated on the basis of the population estimates as per the census of which the relevant figures have been published.” Thus, the number of NFSA beneficiaries was frozen in 2013. However, given the population increase since then, there have been demands from the states and union territories to update the list by ensuring an annual updating system under NFSA, sources said. It was in this context that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution had asked the NITI Aayog to suggest an alternative methodology for “covering beneficiaries under NFSA, including prospective beneficiaries”.

What has the NITI Aayog proposed?

In its discussion paper, the NITI Aayog has suggested that the national rural and urban coverage ratio be reduced from the existing 75-50 to 60-40. If this reduction happens, the number of beneficiaries under the NFSA will drop to 71.62 crore (on the basis of the projected population in 2020). To make these changes in the law, the government will have to amend sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the NFSA. For this, it will require parliamentary approval. Besides the Food Ministry and the NITI Aayog, discussions on the proposed revisions include the Chief Economic Adviser and top officers of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. According to sources, several meetings have been held under the chairmanship of Prof Ramesh Chand, Member, NITI Aayog, to review the population coverage criterion.

What is the implication of the revision for the Centre and the states?

If the national coverage ratio is revised downward, the Centre can save up to Rs 47,229 crore (as estimated by the NITI Aayog paper). However, the move may be opposed by some of the states. On the other hand, if the rural-urban coverage ratio remains at 75-50, then the total number of people covered will increase from the existing 81.35 crore to 89.52 crore —an increase of 8.17 crore. This estimate by the NITI Aayog is based on the projected 2020 population, and, according to the paper, will result in an additional subsidy requirement of Rs 14,800 crore.

RBI SAID TO TELL BANKS TO LIMIT INSURER STAKES

India’s central bank wants banks to limit ownership stakes in capital-intensive insurance companies at a maximum of 20%, less than half of what the current regulations permit, three sources with knowledge of the discussions told Reuters. Reserve Bank of India (RBI) rules allow banks to hold up to 50% stakes in insurers and on a selective basis, equity holdings can be higher but must eventually be brought down within a certain period. The sources, who asked not to be named, however said the central bank in 2019 unofficially advised banks seeking to acquire stakes in insurers, to limit such stakes to a maximum of 30%, and more recently, directed them to cap stake purchases at 20%. “Unofficially, banks have been told that the regulator is not comfortable with lenders increasing their stakes because the insurance business is seen as a money guzzler,” one source said. The RBI wants banks to focus on their main areas of business instead of locking away capital in non-core sectors. The central bank did not respond to a request seeking comment.

CONCERNS ABOUT CREDIT

In its study on the “Sectoral deployment of bank credit in India”, the Reserve Bank of India has highlighted the sharp decline in bank credit to parts of the economy. The collapse is due to both



supply and demand-side factors — the pandemic has forced both borrowers and lenders to tread warily. In the first half of the year, demand for credit remained muted as economic activity was restricted due to the lockdowns. Subsequently, even though economic activity has rebounded, appetite remains subdued, as there is considerable uncertainty over the medium-term growth outlook. On the supply side, as the report notes, there is “a general reluctance on the part of bankers to lend” to large industries owing to stressed assets. This decline in credit to large industries, and the infrastructure segment, is a matter of concern. Bank credit, which grew at a healthy pace in 2018-19, had slowed down even prior to the pandemic in 2019-20 — GDP growth had slowed down from 6.1 per cent 2018-19 to 4 per cent in 2019-20. At the aggregate level, non-food credit growth was 6.1 per cent in March 2020, as compared to 13.4 per cent a year ago. Growth slid further to 5.9 per cent in November 2020, down from 7.8 per cent a year ago, the report notes. This decline is, in part, due to large industries — their share in the incremental credit flow was actually negative in the year ending November 2020. Retail credit (personal loans) and loans extended to the services sector accounted for the bulk of the lending during this period, highlighting the risk aversion of banks. The only bright spot is the rise in lending to medium-sized industries — this could be on account of policy measures such as the emergency credit line guarantee scheme (ECLGS) which aimed to provide credit to MSMEs. The economic shock from the pandemic will add greater pressure to bank balance sheets. The central bank now expects banks’ bad loans to rise to 13.5 per cent by September 2021, up from 7.5 per cent in September 2020 in its baseline scenario. Under more severe conditions, this may deteriorate to almost 15 per cent — underscoring the need to build adequate capital buffers to withstand this shock. This, as RBI governor Shaktikanta Das noted in an earlier speech, “will be crucial not only to ensure credit flow but also to build resilience in the financial system.”

CLEARING A LOW BAR

India’s latest auction of telecommunications spectrum is a qualified success from the Centre’s perspective, mainly because the winning bids cumulatively exceeded the government’s own low expectations for receipts from the sale of airwaves. *A total of 855.6 megahertz was successfully bid for — out of the 2,308.8 MHz that was on offer — as the three largest telecom services providers sought to optimise their purchases of radio spectrum by seeking to acquire only what they deemed essential airwaves, either as renewal or for strengthening their network, while entirely avoiding costlier bandwidth offerings.* The newest entrant to the industry, *Reliance Jio, was also the most acquisitive, accounting for close to 60% of the spectrum bought at 488.35 MHz and contributed almost three-fourths of the ₹77,815 crore that the Department of Telecommunications garnered from the sale. That Jio’s ₹57,123 crore by itself surpassed the government’s estimate of ₹45,000-₹50,000 crore for takings from the auction where the reserve price for the entire spectrum on offer across seven bands amounted to about ₹3.92-lakh crore, tells its own tale.* Clearly cognisant of the prevailing overall economic circumstances amid the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the high level of indebtedness in the industry, the government appears to have tempered its expectations to a more realistic level. Still, the Centre can hardly be sanguine about an outcome where a mere 37% of the airwaves on offer found takers. In a repeat of the 2016 auction’s outcome, the significantly *more efficient 700 MHz was yet again shunned by all bidders given its prohibitive reserve price.* It is a little hard to fathom the government’s approach to pricing this nationally valuable resource, especially given its avowed intention of accelerating the digitisation of the economy including the broadening and deepening of the digital delivery of the multitude of public services to India’s



farthest reaches. *The relatively low frequency 700 MHz, for instance, is considered as ideal for enhancing network availability and reach in the highly urbanised settings of large, densely built-up cities where the issue of poor signal penetration inside buildings is a perpetual bugbear for users and providers alike.* For all the brave talk on the auction's outcome providing assurance, the nation's telecom authorities need to take a hard look at the entire policy framework that has contributed a fair share to the current precarity in the industry. From auction formats that may no longer be relevant given the sharply reduced number of players, to grossly unrealistic pricing of spectrum, and regulatory norms and tax practices that threaten to tip the sector into a fractious duopoly, the government has its task cut out. It must now act quickly to ensure it does not end up hurting the very sector that has become a key multiplier of economic empowerment and progress.



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LIFE & SCIENCE

NEW SPACE

With the launch of Brazil's Amazonia-1 satellite last week from Sriharikota, a new chapter has begun in India's space history. The satellite, a 637-kilogram entity, was the first dedicated commercial mission of NewSpace India Limited, a two-year-old commercial arm of the Department of Space. This is not the first time that NSIL has organised a launch of foreign satellites aboard an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) launch vehicle. The organisation has had launches last November as well as in December 2019. However, the primary satellites aboard both these missions were Indian satellites — the RISAT-2BRI and the EOS-01 — with smaller satellites from several other countries, as well as India, piggybacking on them. The Amazonia mission also saw 18 other satellites being launched and was the first fully commercial mission. India has so far launched 342 foreign satellites from 34 countries using its Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle platform and many of them have involved ISRO's first commercial entity, the Antrix Corporation. There is still confusion on how exactly the responsibilities of NSIL differ from those of Antrix. But with the formation of the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Center (IN-SPACe) — a regulatory agency — as well as plans of an independent tribunal to adjudicate disputes among private space entities, there is a potential explosion of market opportunities from space applications on the anvil. Though the private sector plays a major role in developing launch and satellite infrastructure for ISRO, there are now several companies that offer myriad services. Many of these companies want to launch their own satellites, of varying dimensions, and the experience with ISRO has not been smooth always. The most conspicuous has been the controversy involving Devas Multimedia, to which the Government of India owes nearly \$1.2 billion going by an order of a tribunal of the International Chamber of Commerce and upheld by a United States federal court last year. NSIL, it is said, is also a move by India's space establishment to insulate the prospects of the space industry in India from repercussions of the Devas-Antrix imbroglio. Much like unfettered access to the Internet has spawned industries that were inconceivable, similarly, space applications and mapping have barely scratched the surface in terms of the opportunities that they can create. NSIL has a broad ambit and will be involved in collaborations spanning from launches to new space-related industries. NSIL is also expected to be more than just a marketer of ISRO's technologies; it is to find newer business opportunities and expand the sector itself. NSIL must endeavour to not be another Antrix but be continuously in start-up mode. It must conceive of ways to aid space start-ups reach out to rural India and facilitate more recruits from India's young to facilitate careers in space applications and sciences. It must see itself both as an Indian ambassador and disruptor in the space arena.

PERSEVERING WITH OUR MARTIAN FANTASIES (THE AUTHOR IS AN ADJUNCT PROFESSOR AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES, BENGALURU)

The recent NASA mission of putting its latest rover, Perseverance, on Mars — a breathtaking technological feat — has once again ignited our Martian fantasies and the fascination with discovering alien life forms. Ingrained in our minds is the idea that Mars holds some sort of wherewithal in the innumerable crannies within its rocks to support traces of life. The question that whether humans will be able to make use of even such modicum of habitability to utilise its



landscape is also significant, assuming that we will be able to deal with the moral question of whether to cordon off the planet from human interference in case we do find indigenous life forms there. Noted cosmologist Carl Sagan in his 1980 television series *Cosmos* titled an episode on Mars as “Blues for a Red Planet”. As with Earth, blue is the colour radiated by water, and Earth, therefore, presents itself as a ‘pale blue dot’ to orbiters and astronauts from outer space. Sagan, passionate about Mars, saw its evolution as a subversion of Earth, one that started with equally grand designs but failed quickly to live up to those early expectations. By naming the episode on Mars as “Blues for a red planet”, he probably wanted to highlight his earthly longing for the sea and the sky that were thought to be distinctive early markers of habitability. Thus, singing the blues for a dried-up red planet, Sagan, who was brought up on science fantasies by Edgar Rice Burroughs and H.G. Wells about Martian invaders of Earth, may have wanted to signal a lasting tribute to a possible glorious Martian life of the past. The Martian science fantasy of the 19th century was an offshoot of reports of canals on Mars. Nineteenth-century Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli had claimed that he saw water-filled canali, or channels, on the red planet. This topic assumed greater significance when a businessman-turned-astronomer, Percival Lowell, reported similar observations. After painstaking telescopic work that was set up on the desert of Arizona, Lowell, after years of observation, talked about hundreds of canals on the equatorial region of Mars. He propagated the idea that these were engineered structures used for channelising water from the polar regions to meet the requirements of a dehydrating planet, somewhat eerily reminiscent of a bleak hothouse Earth, triggered by the runaway greenhouse effect.

A backup planet?

Historically, Mars has always been depicted as a backup site for humanity to migrate to; it is now once again being promoted as such by avant-garde entrepreneurs like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. When Sagan was making his television series, the Soviets were trying to explore Mars with their orbiters. Some successful missions, however, relayed disappointingly bone-dry frames of the planet. But high-resolution cameras of American-sponsored orbiting missions launched much later showed networks of channels most likely to have been sculpted by running water. Thus, modern research informs us that Schiaparelli and Lowell were not completely off the mark in their interpretations, though Lowell was wrong in attributing those morphological features as being engineered by intelligent beings. A few weeks before his death, Sagan recorded a moving message for future explorers: “Maybe we’re on Mars because of the magnificent science that can be done there — the gates of the wonder world are opening in our time...” More surprises, as well as disappointments, were in store. In 2005, the Mars Express satellite found evidence of clays that may have formed after solid rocks were exposed to water, as analogous examples of Earth’s rock inventory would testify. But some scientists were not easily convinced as their Martian climate models failed to predict temperatures high enough for continuous generation of rain to have liquid water on the surface. So, it was concluded that any water on Mars would have been locked up in its polar regions with brief periods of melting and flooding that carve out the valley networks. Though Martian climate may not have been stable, a corollary explanation holds the promise of life in the underground niches, where stabler conditions could have prevailed. Such examples of subsurface life are plenty in Earth’s environment. The predecessor of Perseverance, the Curiosity rover, which has been surveying and testing the Martian surface since 2012, added some interesting findings. Most importantly, it detected carbon-containing compounds in Martian rocks



and shifting levels of methane molecules in the planet's atmosphere. Two papers published in the journal *Science* in 2018 concluded that these findings support the possibility of the existence of microbial life. Inge Loes ten Kate, an astrobiologist at the Utrecht University, in a commentary on the papers, said "the question of whether life might have originated or existed on Mars is a lot more opportune now that we know that organic molecules were present on its surface." Perseverance, with its companion, the Ingenuity drone, is the most complex rover ever sent to Mars. It has now reached its destination, the 45-km-wide Jezero Crater, where an old lake supposedly existed. The rover will roam around this crater and sample carbonate rocks that might host algal mats called stromatolites, as we find in the oldest carbonate rocks on Earth.

Still a mystery

But as a geologist, I will remain sceptical until I see some hard evidence on biogenic remains. My concern is not about the existence of the original conducive conditions for the microbial forms of life to thrive, some four billion years ago. It may have been a reality. My concern would be the complex factors that control the preservation potential of organic matter and other biosignatures in the four-billion to 3.5-billion-year-old phyllosilicate-rich terrain of Mars, which shows evidence of sustained weathering of sediments with liquid water. Like the rusty red and iron oxide-rich lateritic soil we see in the tropical regions of Earth, the weathered soil formation of Mars may be a poor medium to preserve biogenic signatures. That could be one reason why the Perseverance rover is programmed to seek carbonate rocks within the Jezero crater, where the pristine nature of the original biological and climatic signals is expected to be preserved better. We still do not understand the mechanisms of the formation of carbonates on Mars and whether they are comparable to Earth's processes, which are often related to oceanic settings. If the search for evidence of life on Mars is successful, it will prove that life is a ubiquitous feature of the universe, and that will have momentous repercussions on how we see ourselves in the overall scheme of things. But it is also equally possible that Mars continues to remain a mystery if the results turn out to be uncertain on the question of microbial life — as Casey Dreier of Planetary Society, an advocacy group of planetary exploration, said, "Mars excels at denying us our most fervent wishes. From not fitting into the epicycles of Ptolemy, to lacking the canals of Lowell, to supplying no organic material (yet) to the Curiosity rover team, the reality of Mars has consistently irritated humanity throughout history."

IISER KOLKATA SCIENTISTS SIMULATE MARS ON THE COMPUTER, SUGGEST HOW IT LOST ITS ATMOSPHERE

A new and exciting field in astronomy to study exoplanets and gauge whether they possess conditions that will favour the presence and sustainability of life. In this quest, an important part is looking at our own celestial backyard to gain insights – hence the many missions to Mars and Venus probing for signs of past life. One thing that astronomers search for in exoplanets, in the so-called Goldilocks zone of habitability, is the existence of liquid water and an atmosphere like that on Earth. In this context it is believed by many that Mars once had such an atmosphere. The mechanism as to why it lost its atmosphere has remained in doubt. Scientists from Indian Institution for Science Education and Research (IISER) Kolkata suggest that it was the planet's intrinsic magnetic dynamo which, by shielding its atmosphere from the sun's solar wind, protected its atmosphere. When the magnetic dynamo switched off, the atmosphere slowly was



eroded by the solar wind and eventually vanished, leaving the thin remnant we see today. These results have been published in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Two scenarios

In the simulation, the researchers build a computer model of a Mars-like planet interacting with the plasma wind from a Sun-like star. They study two scenarios. In the first one, the planet has a magnetic dynamo and an intrinsic magnetosphere surrounding it. The physics is described by Maxwell's equations – which describe electro-magnetic fields and their interactions with matter – in the presence of plasma. In a simulation, they mimic the Mars model with an intrinsic magnetosphere and allow a solar-wind like plasma to fall on the dayside of the planet. They run the model to simulate the interactions between the magnetized solar wind and Mars. In the second scenario, they modelled the same system but with no intrinsic magnetic field.

The right track

To ascertain that they are indeed on the right track, the researchers modelled the present day Mars, with no intrinsic magnetosphere. “We perform a simulation for present day Mars based on which we generate the magnetic environment around the planet. We find that this has good correspondence with observations from NASA Mars Global Surveyor and NASA Maven missions,” says Dibyendu Nandi from Center of Excellence in Space Sciences India (CESSI), in IISER Kolkata, in an email to The Hindu. From the study, the scientists infer that when Mars had an intrinsic magnetosphere, it enveloped the planet like a shroud and shielded its atmosphere from the stripping effect of the solar wind. When the planet lost its intrinsic magnetosphere, only the imposed one due to the pileup of the solar wind remained. “This imposed magnetosphere was made of the Sun's magnetic fields which slips past Mars when the solar wind flows past it after impacting the day side,” explains Prof. Nandi. “So, there is a continuous slippage of magnetised plasma from the day-side to the night-side of Mars which also strips away the atmosphere of Mars slowly.” The computational models being developed in CESSI, in IISER Kolkata can be used to simulate and predict the space environment around planets, according to Prof. Nandi. “Thus these are particularly important to complement and aid in the interpretation of data from planetary space missions,” he says. “These simulations can also help in understanding how astrophysical space environments determine atmospheric evolution and thus habitability of planets and exoplanets,” he adds.

PIXXEL INDIA'S DELAYED FLIGHT TO NEW SPACE FRONTIER

When the PSLV-C51 mission was announced, the most excitement was about a satellite that eventually could not be part of Sunday's launch. The launch vehicle successfully injected Brazil's Amazonia-1 satellite and 18 co-passenger satellites into their intended orbits in a predetermined sequence. The star that did not show up at the launch party was a satellite from Pixxel India, one of several new startups that are billed to do to India's space sector what SpaceX or Planet Labs have done in the United States. Bengaluru-based Pixxel India has planned a vast constellation of earth-imaging satellites that would continuously monitor every part of the globe and beam high-resolution imagery and other data that can be used for a variety of applications related to climate change, agriculture, and urban planning. The first of these satellites, called Anand, was supposed to be on the PSLV-C51 rocket that lifted off from the Sriharikota launching range on Sunday

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morning. "Certain software issues" had arisen during testing, the company has said. "Given the time and effort that has gone into making the satellite, it did not make sense to rush a satellite to launch in which we do not have complete confidence at this time," it said. ISRO chairman K Sivan had said that the launch of PSLV-C51 would be "special" because of Pixxel India's satellite, which would mark the beginning of a new age of private companies becoming partners in India's space sector. "The government...has initiated reforms, and within eight months, the first satellite Anand from a start-up called Pixxel India is going to be launched," Sivan had said after ISRO's last launch in December. "Definitely, PSLV-C51 is going to be a first of its kind in the country. It is going to initiate a new era of space reforms in India and I am sure that these private people would take this activity further and provide services for the entire country," he had said. The main payload in Sunday's mission, the Amazonia-1 earth observation satellite, is the first commercial venture for ISRO's two-year-old marketing arm, NewSpace India Limited. ISRO's earlier marketing company, Antrix, has been bogged down by long litigation in the controversial Devas deal. The sun-synchronous Amazonia-1 is the first satellite to be fully designed, integrated, tested, and operated by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research. It can generate images of any part of the world every five days, but will be used mainly to provide remote sensing data in order to monitor deforestation in the Amazon. Among the 18 other satellites on board the launch vehicle were 12 SpaceBEEs from the US, and a group of three satellites called UNITYsat developed jointly by students of Jeppiaar Institute of Technology, Sriperumbudur, GH Rasoni College of Engineering, Nagpur, and Sri Shakhti Institute of Engineering and Technology, Coimbatore. Also on board was a nano satellite developed by Space Kidz India, which will study space weather and demonstrate long-range communication technologies.

ENGINE TROUBLE

Regulatory moves have come into effect following an "uncontained engine failure" on a United Airlines Boeing 777 during a scheduled domestic flight in the United States. Dozens of Boeing 777 aircraft with a *Pratt and Whitney engine* variant have been grounded and subjected to further checks.

What happened to the United Airlines flight?

On February 20, 2021, Flight UA 328, from Denver to Honolulu, with over 200 passengers and 10 crew had just departed and was in the initial climb phase, when the inlet on the right turbofan engine, a Pratt and Whitney PW4077 build, separated in what is technically known as an engine failure event. The crew stopped the climb, levelled off the aircraft, and declared an emergency. The plane touched down safely within 25 minutes of take-off. The engine failure was a dramatic event with many eyewitnesses on the ground, as debris rained down on some neighbourhoods under its flight path. There were police reports of the debris field extending to over one nautical mile. This is being investigated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Some of the passengers also filmed the remains of the engine wobbling on the engine pylon in a fiery blaze. The FAA and the NTSB have determined that there was damage to the engine and the fuselage of the plane (a machine a little over 26 years old) as well as an inflight engine fire. The initial examination has shown up two stressed and fractured blades.



Given the technological advances made by engine manufacturers, the modern jet engine seldom fails, says a senior Boeing 777 pilot. Nevertheless, there have been events

What are the kinds of engine failure?

Engines are designed to handle issues such as damaged blades and bird hits. *Engine failure, in general, is classified as contained or uncontained. In the first, even if engine components disintegrate or separate, they remain within the engine, or as designed by the engine manufacturer, exit the engine case. In the second, there is a “random, violent event, and one that is usually beyond the design parameters”. Damaged components can pose a danger to the aircraft, its fuselage, and in some cases, as in a four-engine aircraft, threaten the adjacent engine. They can affect crucial flight and engine control systems and, in turn, passengers and crew and also people on the ground.*

After the United Airlines incident, what are the regulatory measures now?

On February 21, Boeing, the aircraft manufacturer, said it has recommended “suspending operations of the 69 in-service and 59 in-storage 777s powered by Pratt & Whitney 4000-112 engines until the FAA identifies the appropriate inspection protocol”. In an initial statement, FAA administrator Steve Dickson said the FAA had issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive that would need immediate or enhanced inspections of Boeing 777s with certain Pratt & Whitney PW4000 engine variants. In an Emergency Airworthiness Directive issued on February 24, the FAA now requires U.S. operators to conduct immediate *thermal acoustic image (TAI)* inspection of the engine blades for the PW4074/D, 4077/D, 4084/D and 4090/-3 engines. It says *TAI technology can detect cracks on the interior surfaces of hollow fan blades, or in areas that cannot be seen during a visual inspection. The hollow fan blades are unique to this engine model. Cracks in the blades can be a problem and airlines use technologies such as ultrasound to detect such fissures. So far, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have stopped operators using the Boeing 777 with this engine variant from entering their airspace.*

Will the directive affect India?

Flag carrier Air India, which is the only Boeing 777 operator in India, uses GE-manufactured engines (GE90). The two new Boeing 777 aircraft for the transportation of India’s VVIPs are also unaffected as they, too, have GE engines.

THE CARACAL, A FAVOURITE OF ROYALS, NOW CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

The National Board for Wildlife and Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change last month included the caracal, a medium-sized wildcat found in parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat, in the list of critically endangered species. Though not under grave threat in its other habitats, the animal is on the verge of extinction in India, some experts believe. The recovery programme for critically endangered species in India now includes 22 wildlife species.

The wildcat

Besides India, the caracal is found in several dozen countries across Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia. While it flourishes in parts of Africa, its numbers in Asia are declining. The wildcat has long legs, a short face, long canine teeth, and distinctive ears — long and pointy, with



tufts of black hair at their tips. The iconic ears are what give the animal its name — caracal comes from the Turkish *karakulak*, meaning 'black ears'. In India, it is called *siya gosh*, a Persian name that translates as 'black Ear'. A Sanskrit fable exists about a small wild cat named *deergha-karn* or 'long-eared'.

In history and myth

The earliest evidence of the caracal in the subcontinent comes from a fossil dating back to the civilisation of the Indus Valley c. 3000-2000 BC, according to a reference in 'Historical and current extent of occurrence of the Caracal in India', one of the few published studies on the animal. (Dharmendra Khandal, Ishan Dhar, and Goddilla Viswanatha Reddy, *Journal of Threatened Taxa*, December 14, 2020) The caracal has traditionally been valued for its litheness and extraordinary ability to catch birds in flight; it was a favourite coursing or hunting animal in medieval India. Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351-88) had *siyah-goshdar khana*, stables that housed large numbers of coursing caracal. It finds mention in Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, as a hunting animal in the time of Akbar (1556-1605). Descriptions and illustrations of the caracal can be found in medieval texts such as the *Anvar-i-Suhayli*, *Tutinama*, *Khamsa-e-Nizami*, and *Shahnameh*. The caracal's use as a coursing animal is believed to have taken it far beyond its natural range to places like Ladakh in the north to Bengal in the east. The East India Company's Robert Clive is said to have been presented with a caracal after he defeated Siraj-ud-daullah in the Battle of Plassey (1757).

Declining numbers

The caracal is an elusive, primarily nocturnal animal, and sightings are not common. Very few studies have been conducted on the wildcat, and there is no reliable data on populations now or in the past. In the absence of sightings, several experts fear the caracal could be on the verge of extinction in India — some estimates put their numbers at no more than 50; other experts say an accurate assessment is difficult. The caracal has historically lived in 13 Indian states, in nine out of the 26 biotic provinces. In the period before Independence, the animal roamed an estimated area of 7.9 lakh sq km; between then and 2000, however, this habitat shrunk by almost a half. After 2001, sightings have been reported from only three states. "From 2001 to 2020, the reported extent of occurrence further decreased by 95.95%, with current presence restricted to 16,709 sq km, less than 5% of the caracal's reported extent of occurrence in the 1948-2000 period," according to Khandal et al. The caracal could be earlier found in arid and semi-arid scrub forest and ravines in Rajasthan, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. Today, its presence is restricted to Rajasthan, Kutch, and parts of MP. The caracal is rarely hunted or killed — in recent years, cases have been detected of the animal being captured to be sold as exotic pets — and the decline of its population is attributable mainly to loss of habitat and increasing urbanisation. Experts point out that the caracal's natural habitat — for example the Chambal ravines — is often officially notified as wasteland. Land and environment policies are not geared towards the preservation of such wasteland ecology, rather they seek to 'reclaim' these areas to make them arable. Infrastructure projects such as the building of roads lead to the fragmentation of the caracal's ecology and disruption of its movement. The loss of habitat also affects the animal's prey which includes small ungulates and rodents. The listing of the caracal as critically endangered is expected to bring central funding to conservation efforts. It is likely to ensure that the animal is studied comprehensively for the first time, including its home range, population,



prey, etc. Such study will also throw light on the much neglected “wastelands” in the country, which are home to a large number of animal and bird species, including leopards, Asiatic wild cats, rust spotted cats, sloth bears, wolves, wild dogs, civets, etc.

MAN’S OLD FRIEND

A bone fragment discovered from southeast Alaska has now answered a few questions on dog migration into the Americas. Researchers found that the thigh bone belonged to a dog that lived in the region about 10,150 years ago. Scientists say the remains represent the oldest confirmed remains of a domestic dog in the Americas. Analysis of the mitochondrial genome revealed that the dog belonged to a lineage of dogs that diverged from Siberian dogs. Researchers (Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences) say in a release that this study provides not only the timing but also a location for the entry of dogs and people into the Americas. The study also supports the theory that this migration occurred just as coastal glaciers retreated during the last Ice Age. The researchers from University of Buffalo, New York, who studied the bone say that canines did not arrive in the Americas all at once. The researchers did not set out to study dogs. They came across the femur fragment while sequencing DNA from a collection of hundreds of bones excavated years before in southeast Alaska by other researchers. The bone fragment, originally thought to come from a bear, was quite small, but when the DNA was studied, the team realised it was from a dog. “Our early dog from southeast Alaska supports the hypothesis that the first dog and human migration occurred through the northwest Pacific coastal route instead of the central continental corridor,” Flavio Augusto da Silva Coelho notes in the release.

NEW LIGHT ON RISE OF MAMMALS

Scientists have documented the earliest-known fossil evidence of primates, an advance which sheds light on how life on land recovered after the extinction event 66 million years ago that wiped out the dinosaurs and led to the rise of mammals. The researchers, including those from the University of Washington in the US, analysed several fossils of Purgatorius – the oldest genus in a group of the earliest-known primates called plesiadapiforms.

Ancient mammals

According to the study, published in the journal Royal Society Open Science, these ancient mammals were small-bodied and ate specialised diets of insects and fruits that varied by species. “This discovery is exciting because it represents the oldest dated occurrence of archaic primates in the fossil record,” said Stephen Chester, co-leader of the study from Brooklyn College in the U.S. “It adds to our understanding of how the earliest primates separated themselves from their competitors following the demise of the dinosaurs,” Chester said. The scientists analysed fossilised teeth found in the Hell Creek area of northeastern Montana in the U.S. which are now part of the collections at the University of California Museum of Paleontology.

Mass extinction event

They are estimated to be 65.9 million years old, about 1,05,000 to 1,39,000 years after the mass extinction event. Based on the age of the fossils, the scientists said the ancestor of all primates, including the plesiadapiforms and modern day primates such as lemurs, monkeys and apes, likely



lived alongside large dinosaurs. "It's mind blowing to think of our earliest archaic primate ancestors," said study co-author Wilson Mantilla, a University of Washington (UW) professor of biology.

First to diversify

"They were some of the first mammals to diversify in this new post-mass extinction world, taking advantage of the fruits and insects up in the forest canopy," Mantilla said.

NANOSHEETS HELP IN THE DETECTION OF URIC ACID IN URINE, ALCOHOL IN BREATH

The device could detect alcohol concentrations of even less than 3% in breath

Mass spectrometry is an important tool and has helped win several Nobel Prizes. It provides valuable information about the composition and structure of molecules and has found applications from drug testing to carbon dating. Using this, researchers can ionise or break down the compound into simple ions and then identify the molecules based on their masses. The current process of ionisation requires electrical potential of a few kilo volts, heat or high energy ultraviolet lasers (UV-lasers). But now, researchers have developed a new method of soft ionisation using nanosheets which eliminates the need for external energy sources completely.

Sheet-like structures

The team used a simple filter paper as a support material and coated this with 2D molybdenum disulphide (MoS₂). "The 2D materials are sheet-like structures and graphene is a perfect example. You pull out sheets of carbon and create graphene. Similarly, this molybdenum disulphide was created as a thin sheet and spread on a paper. This modified paper produces an electric current when liquids flow over it," explains Thalappil Pradeep from the Department of Chemistry at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras. He is the corresponding author of the work published last week in ACS Nano. The team observed that a flow of pure methanol over the nanosheet generates a record-high current of 1.3 microampere. The sample to be tested can be mixed with this methanol, and the induced current helps make ions of the compound to be tested. The team then tested the device to measure uric acid. By simply flowing raw urine (about 5 microlitre) over the nanostructured surface and measuring the corresponding current (with no other stimulus), the team detected the uric acid in the urine of a healthy individual. They also demonstrated that the device can be used as a self-energised disposable sensor for breath alcohol detection. The device was modified in such a way that the breath of a drunken person can interact directly with the flowing liquid on the MoS₂-coated surface. A volunteer who had consumed 650 mL of beer containing 9% (v/v) alcohol blew over the paper, and the corresponding current was measured. While standard breath analysers detect breath alcohol concentration above 5%, this device could detect even less than 3%.

Many applications

"The device can find many more applications: check glucose in blood, toxic chemicals in any liquid, pesticide or any contaminants in drinking water. The main plus point is that it can even detect very low levels. The current wet chemical or reagent-based methods are lengthy and require skilled labour. The new method is cost-effective, and all you need is simple paper coated with

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nanostructures. By just flowing the liquid and studying the spectrum, molecular detection has now been made simple and easy,” adds the first author of the paper Pallab Basuri, a PhD scholar at the institute.

SUPER-SPREADERS AND RISE IN COVID-19 CASES

Is the recent spike in infections indicative of a ‘second wave’ and will it be as severe as the first one?

Experts remain divided on the question of whether the slow yet steady rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country over the last week of February is indicative of the onset of a ‘second wave’. But the Centre and some State governments are on the alert against the rising numbers and are reinforcing aggressive testing and proper social and hygiene protocols. In several States, some restrictions have come back into play, though in a watered-down form.

What is happening around the globe?

Globally, nations in Europe that witnessed a spike in May 2020 have slowly started emerging out of the grip of COVID-19. As the number of cases dropped, countries also let their guard down, opened up the economy, and resumed travel and near-normal activity. In the summer of 2020, people started travelling across Europe, eager to be released from the confinement and stress of the lockdown. In November, the second wave struck. Experts said every country in Europe that had managed to get away lightly with the first wave was nearly crippled by the second one. Even nations that had suffered badly initially, including Italy, were hit hard again. Hospitals started filling up, beds went scarce again, and the death rate started climbing. Stricter lockdowns were introduced, with curfews and restrictions on gatherings in public places; schools were shut down again, as governments struggled to cope with this new wave. In late 2020, the emergence of newer, mutated strains of the virus in Britain and South Africa meant a faster-spreading variant had established dominance in some countries. However, scientists said there was no evidence to show that the new British strain caused a more severe disease.

Are cases growing in India?

After infections peaked in September last year, cases across the country had been steadily declining, with the exception of Kerala, an outlier State that continued to see high numbers after having seen initial success in flattening the curve. However, in the last week of February this year, the trend reversed, with some States beginning to report higher numbers. While the overall rise was rather gradual, the average was skewed by high spikes in some districts in the States — particularly in Maharashtra and Punjab. The average increase was around 14,000 new infections per day and the upward trajectory began around the last week of February. Two States, Maharashtra and Punjab, led the increase in the number of cases, even as their testing numbers had dipped over the past few months. The Union Health Ministry said on Saturday nearly 86% of the over 16,400 cases recorded in the previous 24 hours were from six States and one Union Territory. The Cabinet Secretary chaired a review meeting with eight States and UTs that have shown a surge in infections recently, namely *Telangana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab, West Bengal and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir*.



What is causing the spike?

“The spikes in Maharashtra were caused by a series of super-spreader events, or clusters,” said V. Ravi, nodal officer for Genomic Confirmation of SARS-CoV-2, government of Karnataka. He was speaking at a seminar organised recently by Neuberg Diagnostics on “Coronavirus — Variants and Vaccines”. The rise in the number of cases was not due to a variant of the virus with a tendency to transmit faster, but because of select super-spreader events, he said. V. Ramasubramanian, infectious diseases specialist at Apollo Hospitals and part of the Tamil Nadu task force on COVID-19, says, “With common sense, and looking at a little bit of history globally, a second wave could be down the line for India. I don’t see any reason why India shouldn’t have a second wave. However, the severity this time round may be milder.” *In general, there seems to be an impression among people that the country is over the worst phase of the pandemic, and hence, many are letting their guard and masks down. During the previous surge, strict regulations imposed by States along with fines and penalties for violating protocols helped ensure compliance. However, with the seeming let-up in virus activity in terms of the number of positive cases being reported daily, safety measures were overlooked, possibly leading to the clusters that have pushed the numbers up again.* There are others who believe that a ‘second wave’ is not really a wave, but more of a blip. In an interview to The Hindu, Manindra Agrawal, deputy director at IIT Kanpur and a leading mathematician involved with the National ‘Super Model’ initiative, said India is unlikely to see a second wave. He said based on the model, the cases would “at most rise to 11.3 million or 11.5 million infections by April 2021 — or about 300,000-500,000 new confirmed infections over the next 10 weeks (approximately)”. One reason for this, he said, could be the fact that 60% of India’s population had already been exposed to the virus and the country may have approached herd immunity. But the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), according to the third national serological survey conducted from December 17, 2020 to January 8, 2021, had reported that around 21% of Indians were estimated to have been exposed to COVID-19. Earlier, T. Jacob John, former Professor of Clinical Virology at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, had cited the consistently low number of cases in Tamil Nadu despite poor compliance and said that fewer people may be susceptible or vulnerable to catching the infection.

What is the way ahead?

“There are only two ways of getting immunity from the virus, one is getting infected, and the other is via a vaccine,” says Dr. Ravi. It is important to fast track the vaccine programme across the country, but testing is equally important. “Testing is the most powerful tool in our hands,” he says, and adds that contact tracing is key for disrupting the chain of transmission. The number of tests must go up again and contact tracing, ideally 20 persons for every case, should be taken up intently, he recommends. Experts call for a renewed emphasis on following safety protocols, such as wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining physical distance to fend off a possible ‘second wave’ or a sustained hike in the numbers. Draconian total lockdowns are no longer necessary, they add.

COVID-19 CAN BE TRANSMITTED VIA LUNG TRANSPLANT

The coronavirus can linger in the lungs even when swab tests of the back of the nose and throat are negative, doctors reported after unknowingly transplanting infected lungs into a patient who later died of COVID-19. University of Michigan surgeons obtained the lungs from a deceased donor

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



who had tested negative for the virus and had reportedly never been exposed to it. Soon afterward, the transplant recipient and one of the surgeons developed COVID-19.

Comparative study

The team collected a fluid sample from the patient's new lungs and compared it to a sample taken from the lungs immediately after removal from the donor, as well as to swab samples from the infected surgeon. Genetic analyses showed the patient and surgeon had both acquired virus from the donor lungs, the doctors reported in the American Journal of Transplantation. The surgeon had worn only a surgical mask when preparing the lungs for transplant, rather than full personal protective equipment, because both donor and recipient had tested negative. Potential lung transplant donors should all have specimens collected from deep within the lungs to be tested for the coronavirus, the report's co-author Dr. Daniel Kaul said. The virus is less likely to be transmitted by other donated organs, such as liver or kidneys, he said.

SOFTWARE SHOWS PROMISE OF VACCINE AGAINST INFLUENZA, POSSIBLY CORONAVIRUS TOO

A novel computer algorithm, which could create a broadly reactive influenza vaccine for swine flu, also offers a path toward a pan-influenza vaccine and possibly a pan-coronavirus vaccine as well, according to a new paper published in Nature Communications. The algorithm, Epigraph, has already been used to predict therapeutic HIV vaccine candidates, and it has also shown promising potential as a vaccine against highly diverse Ebola and Marburg viruses, protecting against disease when tested in an animal model. Vaccination with the Epigraph-designed product led to the development of a strong cross-reactive antibody response in mice, the study showed. In swine, it induced strong cross-reactive antibody and T-cell responses. The research was conducted in a collaboration of researchers from the Nebraska Center for Virology at the University of Nebraska, St Jude Children's Research Hospital, and Los Alamos National Laboratory. Los Alamos, which functions under the US Department of Energy, describes itself as a multidisciplinary research institution engaged in strategic science. On its website, Los Alamos quoted computational biologist Bette Korber, co-author on the new study, as saying: "We developed the Epigraph strategy for this kind of problem, and it can, in theory, be applied to many diverse pathogens. The tool creates a cocktail of vaccine antigens designed to maximize efficacy across a highly diverse population" *Korber created the algorithm in partnership with her husband, James Theiler, a Los Alamos Fellow.* She was quoted as saying: "This work takes us a step closer to a pan-swine flu virus vaccine. The hope is to eventually be prepared with an effective and rapid response if another swine flu epidemic begins to spread in humans, but this swine flu vaccine could also be useful in a veterinary setting." The immune responses to the vaccine showed very promising breadth against diverse viral variants. "The same basic principles may be applicable to developing a pan-coronavirus vaccine to enable a rapid vaccine response to future coronavirus cross-species jumps," said Korber. Pigs are susceptible to swine, avian, and human influenza viruses, making them the perfect "mixing vessel" for novel reassorted influenza viruses, the authors note. These novel reassorted viruses have significant pandemic potential if zoonosis (transfer from pigs to humans) occurs, as seen with 2009 H1N1 swine flu pandemic. The research was supported by the US National Institutes of Health. Los Alamos said the Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Disease (BEI) Repository provided the Influenza A virus isolates repository for reagents used in the study.



SHOULD THE GAP BETWEEN COVID-19 VACCINE DOSES BE STRETCHED?

In India's vaccination programme, the prescribed interval between the two doses of Covishield is 28 days. In the wake of global studies, several scientists have called for stretching the interval to up to three months.

The India regimen

Regulatory studies in the country have said the interval should be four to six weeks. These findings are based on Phase 3 studies. Till date, India's vaccination coverage has crossed 1.43 crore. Of 66.69 lakh healthcare workers who have received the first dose, 24.56 lakh have got the second and final jab. The second dose started on February 13 for those who had completed 28 days after the first dose.

Global findings

The WHO's advisory group SAGE on February 10 suggested an 8-12-week interval between doses. And on February 19, The Lancet published results of a study that showed a three-month interval between doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine results in higher efficacy than with a six-week interval, with the first dose offering 76% protection in the three months between doses. Covishield is a version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. "The cumulation of evidence around the world shows there is 20% to 30% greater efficacy by stretching the interval between two doses. So why would we not want to do that," leading vaccine scientist Dr Gagandeep Kang told The Indian Express. Oxford Professor Andrew Pollard, lead author of the study in The Lancet, has said: "Where there is a limited supply, policies of initially vaccinating more people with a single dose may provide greater immediate population protection than vaccinating half the number of people with two doses."

To stretch interval...

"The government should very seriously consider this. A 20% increase in efficacy when you give it to millions of people is tens of thousands of new infections prevented. You can give more doses to more people, export vaccines to more places. Yes, Covid infections are showing a rise but we need to plan. Where there is little disease one can stretch the interval of doses," Dr Kang said. "There is ample evidence from the Lancet paper that one gets pretty good short-term protection from the first dose," she said. Scientists at Serum Institute of India (the Covishield manufacturer) also noted that the longer the interval between doses, the better the protection observed, and it happens with all vaccines. Dr Shashank Joshi, expert on Maharashtra's Covid-19 task force, noted that several doubts have been raised about the interval. "A gap of four weeks is reasonable but ideally the 8-12 weeks is better. Recent data suggests that the immune response is better with a gap of 8-12 weeks as adopted by the UK government. The Indian government may also implement this strategy," Dr Joshi said.

... Or not to

Prof Sanjay Rai, president of Indian Public Health Association, said the vaccine is precious and there is a need for judicious use. He said clinical trials were the best evidence and had more weightage than observational studies, and felt it was better to give both doses within the time



frame laid down by the Centre's drug regulator until such time that more robust evidence can be generated.

ADVANTAGES OF JOHNSON & JOHNSON'S COVID-19 VACCINE CLEARED BY US

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Saturday authorised Johnson & Johnson's single-shot Covid-19 vaccine for emergency use, beginning the rollout of millions of doses of a third effective vaccine that could reach Americans by early next week. The announcement arrived at a critical moment, as the steep decline in coronavirus cases in the US seemed to have plateaued, and millions of Americans were on waiting lists for shots. As of Sunday night (India time), the US had 28.55 million confirmed cases and 512,000 deaths, the Johns Hopkins University database showed. J&J has pledged to provide the US with 100 million doses by the end of June. When combined with the 600 million doses from the two-shot vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna slated to arrive by the end of July, there will be more than enough shots to cover any American adult who wants one. Dr Anthony S. Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, advised Americans on Saturday to not concern themselves needlessly over the J&J vaccine's 72% efficacy rate in the US clinical trial site, less than the roughly 95% in studies testing the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines. "Don't get caught up, necessarily, on the number game, because it's a really good vaccine, and what we need is as many good vaccines as possible," Dr Fauci said in an interview. "Rather than parsing the difference between 94 and 72, accept the fact that now you have three highly effective vaccines. Period." The J&J vaccine, known as JNJ-78436735 or Ad26.COV2.S., has been developed by Janssen Pharmaceutica, a Belgium-based division of the company, in collaboration with Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School in Boston. The vaccine is based on the SARS-CoV-2 virus's genetic instructions for building the spike protein that it uses to enter human cells. But unlike the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, which store the instructions in single-stranded RNA, the J&J vaccine uses double-stranded DNA. Also, the J&J vaccine is adenovirus-based, which is a more rugged type than the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna. DNA is not as fragile as RNA, and the adenovirus's tough protein coat helps protect the genetic material inside. As a result, the J&J vaccine can be refrigerated for up to three months at 2-8°C. Again, unlike the Pfizer, Moderna, Oxford-AstraZeneca (a variant of which is being manufactured under licence as Covishield by Serum Institute of India) and even the Bharat Biotech (Covaxin) vaccine, the J&J vaccine is given as a single dose. On Sunday, a committee of vaccine experts who advise the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention were to meet to discuss whether certain population groups should be prioritised for the vaccine. J&J began work on its coronavirus vaccine in January 2020, and received \$456 million in assistance from the US government in March. Phase 1/2 trials began in July, and in September, the company began phase 3 trials.