

CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

28TH MARCH TO 3RD APRIL, 2021

DREAMIAS



INTERNATIONAL

LINKING THE EAST WITH THE WEST

The last time the Suez Canal was closed for navigation was in 1967, after the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab nations broke out. Prior to that, the channel had been shut for less than a year during the Suez War of 1956 when Israel, France and Britain invaded Egypt. What wars did in the past was done by a container ship now. M.V. Ever Given got stuck in a dust storm and strong winds on March 23 and ran aground in the channel blocking off traffic. *The 193-km-long canal across Egypt's Isthmus of Suez connecting the Mediterranean Sea in the north and the Red Sea in south — thereby bringing the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean closer — has been a critical artery for global trade since the mid-19th century. If the channel is blocked, ships from Europe will have to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa to reach Asia, and vice versa.* Unsurprisingly, this single incident has turned the global spotlight to this man-made channel connecting two continents. *The idea of linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Erythraean Sea (today's Red Sea) had excited both Egypt's rulers and colonisers from ancient to modern times.* Pharaoh Senausret III (1887-1849 BC) built the first canal linking the Erythraean Sea in the south to the Nile river in the north and thereby opening a waterway to the Mediterranean. *Pharaoh Necho II*, who died in 595 BC, started building another canal from the Nile to the south. *It was Persian Emperor Darius I who completed the canal.* Over the centuries, the canal would be ignored by leaders particularly as navigation becomes impossible due to silt and reopened by some, including *Ptolemy II Philadelphus in second century BC.* Many geologists believe that the Red Sea receded over the centuries and its coastline moved southward away from the lakes in Suez. This, coupled with persistent accumulations of silt, made it difficult to keep the waterways open. So for centuries, the canal was abandoned by Egypt's rulers — until the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte. *Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 as part of his global campaign to weaken the British Empire. He wanted to build a canal across Suez under the French control because he thought it would leave a twin blow to the British. One, it would provide the French a quicker and easier access to the Indian Ocean. Two, by opening a new trade route from Europe to Asia, France could hurt the British who controlled the existing route around the Cape of Good Hope. But a miscalculation in the geological study of the region prompted Napoleon to abandon the project. Napoleon gave up the project but the idea of the Suez canal outlived the emperor. In the mid-19th century, French diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps won permission from Egypt's Ottoman-appointed ruler Said Pasha to start building the canal.* In 1858, *Universal Suez Ship Canal Company* was formed to execute the project and construction work began a year later. Britain, which controlled the route around the African continent, continued to oppose the project as a new waterway would hurt its interests. *But in 1869, the canal was officially opened for traffic.* Britain would move from being an adversary of the project to a key beneficiary in six years when the *Egyptian government, straddled with financial problems, sold its stake in the canal to London in 1875. Since then, France and Britain operated the canal, until Egypt's socialist President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised it in 1956.*

The Suez crisis

On October 29, 1956, three months after Nasser nationalised the canal, Israeli troops attacked the Egyptian Sinai. French and British troops joined in later. The plan was to retake control of the canal and remove Nasser, who was being emboldened by the Soviet support. But the invasion did not go



ahead as planned. *Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev threatened Israel, Britain and France with rocket attacks unless they withdrew troops from the Sinai.* U.S. President *Dwight D. Eisenhower, partly upset that the British went ahead with the invasion without American approval and partly out of strategic concern that the invasion would play into the hands of the Soviet Union, threatened Britain and others with economic sanctions unless they withdrew the troops.* By March 1957, the invading troops were fully withdrawn and Egypt's authority over the canal was recognised. Interestingly, the Suez crisis also marked Great Britain's dwindling influence in West Asia, a region it controlled since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the arrival of the U.S. as the new great power in the region. The canal was closed again during the 1967 war. It would be reopened only in 1975 after Egyptian-Israeli relations started warming following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who came to power through a coup in 2013, launched an ambitious \$8.5-billion expansion project at the canal in 2014 as part of which a second line was dug along its northern section, allowing two-way traffic. The canal is an important source of revenue for Egypt's battered economy. Last year, Egypt generated \$5.61 billion in revenues from the canal and the authorities expect this to double by 2023. About 19,000 ships passed through the channel in 2020 carrying 1.2 billion tonnes of cargo, according to the Suez Canal Authority. *As much as 13% of all maritime trade, from oil to automobiles, pass through the canal every year.* So a delay in reopening the channel will have a huge impact on export businesses, commodities, ship and cargo companies and even Egypt's national economy.

BIDEN ALLOWS H1-B VISA BAN TO EXPIRE

The White House has allowed a 2020 ban on H1-B skilled worker and certain other temporary visas to expire on March 31. H1-B visas, used more by Indian professionals than any other nationality, were suspended by President Donald Trump in June last year, ostensibly to protect American jobs, already reeling under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Visas for intra-company transfers (L1), exchange visitors (J1), temporary non-agricultural workers (H-2B) and dependents of H1-B holders (H4) were also impacted by the expiring ban.* The White House did not make an official statement on the suspension's expiration, as President Joe Biden travelled to Pittsburgh on Wednesday to unveil his \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan — a massive, eight-year infrastructure plan. While the stated reason for Mr. Trump's suspension was protecting American jobs in the face of unprecedented unemployment last year, the ban did not have its intended impact, according to the preliminary findings of a Wall Street Journal study. *The analysis found that businesses employing foreigners "struggled to fill jobs" despite very high domestic unemployment.* The ban, which was opposed by several prominent industry bodies, was litigated last year. *The American Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers had won a preliminary injunction against the ban for their members from a federal court last October (the start of the U.S. fiscal year).* Indian IT industry body NASSCOM said it applauded the decision to let the visa ban expire. "Allowing the suspension to lapse makes great sense for the United States. As the courts seemed to agree, there was no credible evidence that the visa holders do harm to the U.S. labour market. Quite the contrary, these individuals are a vital part of the U.S. workforce and their presence enhances and helps enable the U.S. economy, innovate, and grow jobs across the country. NASSCOM believes this will help U.S. businesses access talent critical to the economic recovery phase in the post-COVID world," the NASSCOM statement said. The Information Technology Industry Council, an IT and tech industry association with members such as Amazon, Google, Cognizant and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), also said it welcomed the ban expiration.

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



Immigration reforms

“ITI welcomes the expiration of the prior administration’s H1-B visa ban today, and we look forward to working with @POTUS and the U.S. Congress on advancing sound immigration reforms moving forward,” a tweet from the organisation read. *U.S. Senator Josh Hawley, a member of the right flank of the Republican Party, wrote to Mr. Biden asking him to consider a ban extension. “I urge you to extend the temporary foreign worker entry suspension until the national unemployment rate has meaningfully declined, and until your administration has conducted a thorough review of non-immigrant visa programs to ensure that American workers are fully and effectively protected from harm,” he said. U.S. joblessness claims fell to 6,84,000 in March – the lowest since the pandemic began a year ago.* While the ban has expired, some workers wanting to travel to the U.S. will not be able to due to pandemic-related U.S. travel restrictions on regions and countries, including South Africa, most of Europe and Brazil.

THE AMBASSADORSHIPS FOR SALE IN US

Imagine this conversation. U.S. Senator: “Good morning, Ambassador designate. I see that you have been nominated as our Ambassador to Sri Lanka. Have you ever been to Colombo? Ambassador designate: “Yes, Senator. But I am going to Sri Lanka, not to Latin America.” U.S. Senator: “Colombo happens to be the capital of Sri Lanka. Have you heard of Bandaranayake? Ambassador designate: No, Senator. But I assure you, as soon as I arrive in Sri Lanka, I shall visit that place.”

Money counts

This conversation may be apocryphal. *But given the way the Presidents of the United States appoint ambassadors out of those who have paid big financial contributions to the Democratic party, even more bizarre conversations may take place during the Senate confirmation hearings; the qualification is not knowledge of history or geography, but the weight of the money bags deposited. This is part of the ‘spoils system’, except that, over the years, a price tag has been fixed for ambassadorships. U.S. President Richard M. Nixon had once even suggested that a floor price of \$250,000 should be suggested for ambassadorships.* Now that U.S. President Joe Biden is in the process of filling up thousands of high-level posts, and the Senate has begun considering the various names for confirmation, the ambassadorial aspirants, who had paid money to the party, have also begun to assert their claims. Making the right appointments is crucial for Mr. Biden to clean up the mess created by his predecessor, Donald Trump. *Mr. Biden has appointed Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a retired career diplomat as Ambassador to the United Nations and she has been confirmed by the Senate, but many heavy contributors are waiting in the wings.* Anticipating that Mr. Biden will offer ambassadorial positions to some of his major donors — most of who are not particularly suited for such assignments — a member of the editorial board of The New York Times, Michelle Cottle, has made a fervent plea to Mr. Biden, in an article (March 18, 2021, *“Stop letting rich people buy ambassadorships”*; <https://nyti.ms/3wbbdIA>) to *“jettison the skeezy practice of rewarding big campaign contributors with Ambassadorships”*.

Entrenched as a ‘tradition’



This is not the first time that a torch is being shone on this unfair practice. A study, some years ago, by some legal experts had recommended that rich people buying ambassadorships should be stopped. *In 1980, a decision was taken that most ambassadors should be career foreign service officers. Still, succeeding Presidents have filled from a minimum of 30% to a maximum of 57% (under Mr. Trump) of the posts with donors.* Since such a tradition has been established, Mr. Biden may not be able to stop it either. The crucial question would be on what to do with those who had made donations for diplomatic stardom. *The appointments have solid backing of the U.S. Constitution. Article II provides that the President "shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint ambassadors." (https://bit.ly/3fxBWmE). The President enjoys wide latitude in selecting a nominee and the Senate is comparably free to choose whether to advise and consent. The onus for the quality and integrity of the nominees rests on the President, but the Senate has the right to hold back confirmation of any nominee, including career diplomats.*

Complicated process

The path to ambassadorships for donors is not at all smooth. *The Senate confirmation is quite a complicated process in which the investigating agencies examine their entire past to see whether they have ever been guilty of any misdemeanour, which disqualifies them for the high appointment. Anything adverse that comes to the notice of the agencies will be conveyed to the nominee concerned. It is then up to him to decide whether to face the charges or quietly withdraw his candidature.* There is an example of an *Indian-American having been considered as Ambassador to Fiji and some other Pacific island states but who had to withdraw his nomination after the Federal Bureau of Investigation had communicated to him that it would be in his interest to withdraw rather than face an investigation into his past.* There was another example of a donor ambassador, a rich businessman from Buffalo, who had apparently paid a huge sum for the U.S. Presidential campaign. He made no secret of his having been appointed on the strength of his financial contribution. *He had his own grievances such as being denied permission by the State Department to bring his own private aircraft to Fiji.* When he figured out that he would be accredited to six island states from Fiji and that there were only weekly flights from Fiji to the other capitals, he thought his own plane would be a great asset. *The ambassador spent his own money to refurbish the Embassy residence and to entertain well, with the choicest food and wines flown in from the U.S. He did not bother much about the politics of the South Pacific as he knew that he was there not to pursue a career but to enjoy a well-earned holiday. He went to an island state called Tuvalu, which has a total population of 5,000 to present his credentials. He saw a little store at the airport which sold local handicrafts and asked the owner how much it cost. The bewildered owner asked which item he was looking for. "The whole shop," he said. The owner said that he would not be able to sell the whole shop as it would take several months to get the stock replenished and there would be no handicrafts shop at the airport.*

The Indian way

India has a more sophisticated system of appointing "political" ambassadors, not for donation to political parties, but as an avenue to recognise and reward talent. Till very recently, career diplomats could not aspire to ambassadorial posts in London, Washington or Moscow as distinguished people from different walks of life were appointed to add weight to the positions. In the early years, Maharajas were appointed to several posts. And later, politicians were sent abroad when they had to be kept away from the country. *The Government apparently has the discretion of*



appointing political ambassadors in up to 30% of the posts. But now, the number of political ambassadors is small, if at all, and the senior posts are open to career diplomats. India has had some very distinguished and successful political ambassadors, who had access to the Prime Minister back home and to high levels in the host countries. Examples are three political ambassadors in Moscow (*Dr. K.S. Shelvankar, D.P. Dhar and I.K. Gujral*) and one in Washington (*Naresh Chandra*); *all of them fulfilled certain criteria set by the Government, which included greater acceptability of political ambassadors in major capitals. Senior career diplomats were assigned to these posts as Deputy Chiefs of Mission, often with ambassadorial rank, to do much of the work, leaving the political ambassadors to deal with high policy. The most celebrated political ambassador was Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, a Buddhist monk from Ladakh, who was appointed to Mongolia. He is credited with reviving Buddhism in Mongolia. The Head of State himself used to pay obeisance to him as the Mongolians followed the same Mahayana Buddhism practised in Ladakh.* Even after he completed his diplomatic assignment (January 1990 to October 2000; <https://bit.ly/2PK55A4>), *Kushok Bakula Rinpoche retained strong ties with Mongolia till he died in his eighties.*

False notion

In recent years, career ambassadors are occupying those posts which were considered political in nature. *But the practice continues in many countries because of the general feeling that long careers in the Foreign Service are not necessary to be effective ambassadors.* In other words, diplomacy is not considered a profession for specialists, a notion as ridiculous as appointing a politician as the Surgeon General or a General. We do not know whether Mr. Biden will heed the advice not to appoint donors as ambassadors. But if he does, there will be many frustrated donors in Washington and one source of political funding will dry up. On the other hand, the credibility of Biden diplomacy will increase and career diplomats will have better prospects.

KERRY TO VISIT INDIA IN APRIL AHEAD OF BIDEN'S CLIMATE MEET

U.S. President Joe Biden will host a virtual 'Leaders Summit on Climate' on April 22 and 23, with 40 world leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the run up to this, U.S. Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry will visit India in early April, sources told The Hindu. Other guests at the climate summit will include President Xi Jinping of China and President Vladimir Putin of Russia, both of whom have a challenging relationship with Mr. Biden. With America's re-entry into the Paris Agreement on climate, the summit seeks to put Mr. Biden's stamp on the fight against climate change, after the U.S. largely took itself out of the international dialogue on climate action when Mr. Trump, a climate-change sceptic, withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Agreement. The U.S. summit will highlight the urgent need to address climate change and the economic benefit of doing so, the White House said in a statement on Friday. *It is also a prelude to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), which will be held in Glasgow in November, the White House said.* The statement also sought to link climate action to better paying jobs and advancing the technological frontier — one of the themes of the Biden campaign. Mr. Kerry's visit to India is part of the U.S.'s planning for Glasgow — he had said as much in February. "I look forward to coming to India before too long, COVID notwithstanding, and be able to plot and plan with the leaders of India how we are going to make Glasgow a success," he had said at the (virtual) World Sustainable Development Summit, organised by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). The former Secretary of State had also



said he intends to work “very, very closely” with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Prime Minister Modi and others in India on climate change.

Working with India

Other U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have talked about working closely with India on climate. In July last year, Mr. Blinken had said that common global challenges cannot be solved “without India as part of the deal”. Earlier in March, the Quad leaders’ summit — also hosted by Mr. Biden — had set up a climate working group, one of whose objectives is to strengthen the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The climate summit will also bring Mr. Biden face to face (virtually) with Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin, a first since he assumed office (Mr. Biden has only had phone calls with these leaders since January 20). When asked on Friday if he had invited them, Mr. Biden said, “I haven’t yet, but they know they’re invited.” The two countries were on the list as per the White House statement. The Biden administration, which had an acrimonious diplomatic exchange with Chinese officials on March 18 at their first bilateral engagement, held in Alaska, has said it will cooperate where necessary with China, repeatedly citing climate action as an example. The long-term strains in the U.S.-Russia ties were reinforced in March when Mr. Biden agreed in an interview that he thought Mr. Putin was a “killer”, resulting in Moscow recalling its Ambassador to Washington. The Summit’s guest list is indicative of the priority the administration places on climate action and clean technology. “In his invitation, the President urged leaders to use the Summit as an opportunity to outline how their countries also will contribute to stronger climate ambition,” the White House said, adding the U.S. will announce a new “ambitious” 2030 emissions target as its Nationally Determined Contribution — all signatories of the Paris deal are required to update their targets before the Glasgow conference. Bhutan and Bangladesh are two other South Asian countries that have been invited to the summit. Bangladesh is a low-lying nation and at high risk due to climate change. Some island nations — such as Jamaica and the Marshall Islands — are also on the guest list.

BIDEN VOWS SUPPORT TO KIEV AFTER RUSSIAN BUILDUP

U.S. President Joe Biden affirmed his “unwavering support” for Ukraine in a call to President Volodymyr Zelensky on Friday after Kiev accused Moscow of building up military forces on its border. The call, which was Mr. Biden’s first conversation with Mr. Zelensky since the US leader’s inauguration in January, came after Russia warned the West earlier Friday against sending troops to Ukraine to buttress its ally. It also came as tensions between the U.S. and Russia have hit rock bottom after Mr. Biden last month infuriated Moscow by agreeing with a description of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin as a “killer”. The White House said in a statement that Mr. Biden “affirmed the U.S.’ unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression”. Mr. Zelensky, who this week accused Russia of amassing troops on Ukraine’s border, said in a video released by his office that “President Biden assured me that Ukraine will never be left alone against Russian aggression.”

Tensions raised

Weeks of renewed frontline clashes have shredded a ceasefire and raised fears of an escalation of the simmering conflict in eastern Ukraine. Speaking to reporters on Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would be forced to respond if the U.S. sent troops. “There is no doubt



such a scenario would lead to a further increase in tensions close to Russia's borders. Of course, this would call for additional measures from the Russian side to ensure its security," Mr. Peskov said. He declined to specify which measures would be adopted, while insisting that Russia was not making moves to threaten Ukraine. "Russia is not threatening anyone, it has never threatened anyone," he said. On Friday, Russia said its armed forces would hold military exercises close to Ukraine's border to practise defence against attack drones. More than 50 battalion combat teams comprising 15,000 people will take part in those , the military told reporters. Kiev has been battling pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions since 2014, following Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula after an uprising that ousted Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly president Viktor Yanukovich.

U.S., IRAN AGREE TO INDIRECT NUCLEAR TALKS

The U.S. and Iran said on Friday that they would begin negotiations through intermediaries next week to try to get both countries back into an accord limiting Iran's nuclear programme, nearly three years after President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal. The announcement marked the first major progress in efforts to return both countries to the 2015 accord, which bound Iran to restrictions on its nuclear programmes in return for relief from U.S. and international sanctions. President Joe Biden came into office saying that getting back into the accord was a priority. But Iran and the U.S. have disagreed over Iran's demands that sanctions be lifted first, and the stalemate threatened to become an early foreign policy setback for the Biden administration. *State Department spokesperson Ned Price called the resumption of negotiations, scheduled for Tuesday in Vienna, "a healthy step forward". But Mr. Price added: "These remain early days, and we don't anticipate an immediate breakthrough as there will be difficult discussions ahead."* Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the accord in 2018, opting for a "maximum pressure" campaign of stepped-up U.S. sanctions and other tough actions. Iran responded by intensifying its enrichment of uranium and building of centrifuges, while maintaining its insistence that its nuclear development was for civilian and not military purposes. Iran's moves increased pressure on major world powers over the Trump administration's sanctions and raised tensions among U.S. allies and strategic partners in West Asia. Agreement on the start of indirect talks came after the EU helped broker a virtual meeting of officials from Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and Iran, which have remained in the accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Mr. Price said next week's talks will be structured around working groups that the EU was forming with the remaining participants in the accord, including Iran.

Primary issue

"The primary issues that will be discussed are the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to return to compliance with the terms of the JCPOA, and the sanctions relief steps that the U.S. would need to take in order to return to compliance as well," Mr. Price said. The U.S., like Iran, said it did not anticipate direct talks between the U.S. and Iran now. Mr. Price said the U.S. remains open to that idea, however. In a tweet, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said the aim of the *Vienna session would be to "rapidly finalize sanction-lifting & nuclear measures for choreographed removal of all sanctions, followed by Iran ceasing remedial measures."* Iranian state television quoted Abbas Araghchi, Iran's nuclear negotiator at the virtual meeting, as saying during Friday's discussions that any "return by the U.S. to the nuclear deal does not require any negotiation and



the path is quite clear". "The U.S. can return to the deal and stop breaching the law in the same way it withdrew from the deal and imposed illegal sanctions on Iran," Mr. Araghchi was quoted as saying. Russia's Ambassador to international organisations in Vienna, *Mikhail Ulyanov, said "the impression is that we are on the right track, but the way ahead will not be easy and will require intensive efforts. The stakeholders seem to be ready for that"*. Any return of the United States would involve complications. Iran has said before it resumes compliance with the deal, the U.S. needs to return to its own obligations by dropping the sanctions.

CHINA, IRAN SIGN A 25-YEAR 'STRATEGIC PACT'

The agreement covers 'political, strategic and economic' components and seeks to deepen cooperation

China and Iran on Saturday signed what was described as a 25-year "strategic cooperation pact", during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's ongoing six-nation tour to West Asia. The deal, which has been in the works for five years, was signed between Mr. Wang and his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif, AFP reported from Tehran. Mr. Wang is visiting Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman.

Five-point initiative

While details of the new 25-year pact were not immediately available, it includes "political, strategic and economic" components, AFP reported, quoting Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh as saying "this document can be very effective in deepening" relations and would establish a blueprint for "reciprocal investments in the fields of transport, ports, energy, industry and services". In Riyadh, Mr. Wang proposed "a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East" advocating "mutual respect, upholding equity and justice, achieving non-proliferation, jointly fostering collective security, and accelerating development cooperation." *He said China was keen to deepen its Belt and Road Initiative in the region, "expand areas of growth such as high and new technologies", as well as "look forward to early conclusion of a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council"* with China's trade with Arab States reaching \$240 billion last year, establishing it as the region's largest trading partner and a major buyer of crude oil that counts on the region for half of its imports.

SPECIAL NO LONGER

Hong Kong, China's Special Administrative Region (SAR), has served as the mainland's most important gateway to the world for the past 24 years. Since its handover from British rule in 1997, the SAR has defied expectations that it would lose its unique identity. Unlike the mainland, the unique "one country, two systems" model guaranteed a high degree of autonomy and freedoms, including a free press, the right to protest, and a rambunctious political scene with a noisy pro-democracy opposition. Perhaps, most importantly, for the hundreds of multinationals, it also enjoyed an independent judiciary, a stark contrast from the Communist Party-controlled courts across the border. This week, Beijing dealt a blow to many of those unique freedoms. *On March 30, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress (NPC), approved sweeping changes to Hong Kong's electoral system that will reduce significantly the share of directly elected*



representatives in the SAR's Legislative Council (LegCo). President Xi Jinping signed orders to promulgate amended annexes to Hong Kong's Basic Law, the constitution that has governed the SAR and ensured its autonomy, marking the biggest change since 1997. *While previously 35 of LegCo's 70 members were directly elected, that number has now been reduced to 20, even as the size of the legislature has been expanded to 90. The remaining 70 will be nominated from broadly pro-establishment groups, thereby ensuring a majority for the pro-Beijing camp in perpetuity.* The most controversial change is the establishment of *a Candidate Eligibility Review Committee to decide the eligibility of candidates and deem whether they are "patriotic" enough. Its verdicts cannot be challenged in the courts, the only standing independent institution.* Beijing has justified the changes to ensure "patriots" were administering Hong Kong and as a response to the 2019 protest movement, which was silenced by last year's stringent national security law. *The protesters had demanded universal suffrage, promised in the 1997 handover. That the protest movement had wide backing was clear in the 2019 district council elections, after which the pro-democracy camp ended up with 90% of the seats.* That will now count for little, as the amendments no longer give district councillors a place either in LegCo or in the Election Committee. With the new change and the national security law in place, Beijing's grip on Hong Kong is tighter than ever. While Beijing may succeed in assuaging the business community's concerns with the continued attraction of the mainland's market, it remains no closer to winning the hearts and minds of Hongkongers. By reducing the space for democratic representation, Beijing appears to have given up efforts to do so, at least for now. That the changes are being framed by China as a historic political victory does little to change the perception.

PHILIPPINES DEPLOYS AIRCRAFT AS CHINA SHIPS SPARK TENSIONS

Over 200 vessels refuse to leave waters off Whitsun Reef

The Philippines on Sunday said it has started deploying its Air Force to carry out daily patrols over a flotilla of Chinese vessels that has sparked fresh tensions in the South China Sea. The latest dispute, Manila said, was triggered by what it described as a swarm of more than 200 Chinese fishing vessels that have refused to withdraw from waters off the *Whitsun Reef, near the disputed Spratly Islands, in an area located within Manila's Exclusive Economic Zone. China, which claims almost the entire South China Sea, has said the ships were sheltering there because of weather conditions, a claim that Manila, which has lodged a protest with China over what it called an incursion, has rejected. Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the Air Force has now begun daily patrols over the fishing vessels, Agence France-Presse reported from Manila on Sunday.* The Navy and Coast Guard have also been deployed in the vicinity of the Chinese ships, sparking a stand-off near the reef. "We are ready to defend our national sovereignty and protect the marine resources of the Philippines," Mr. Lorenzana said. The stand-off follows a similar incident in 2019 triggered by Chinese fishing vessels near another disputed island in the Spratlys. As it did then, Manila has called on Beijing to acknowledge the 2016 arbitration case which recognised many of its claims. President Rodrigo Duterte mentioned the ruling in a meeting with the Chinese envoy in Manila this week, his spokesperson said. Beijing has rejected the arbitration, emphasising its sovereignty over the South China Sea.



IN GENEVA FACE-OFF, OUTRAGE VERSUS HOPE (RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY - FORMER UNDER SECRETARY GENERAL AND SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT)

The Human Rights Council is where Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms meet and confront each other

“Hey Geneva” laments Ajith Kumarasiri (musician, songwriter, and composer in Sri Lanka) in powerful Sinhala rhythm and blues. “We no longer kill.” “We don’t shoot anymore.” “Give us our island back.” Geneva as an idea is firmly embedded in the Sri Lankan consciousness. For many Sri Lankans, especially the Sinhalese, it is an attack on national honour, a place where their vulnerability as a small island is exploited. For many Tamils and now Muslims, it is a place of hope. For human rights activists the world over, it is their forum.

The setting

The Human Rights Council in Geneva is a place where Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms meet, confront each other and fight countless shadow battles. In some of the side events of the Council, before the novel coronavirus pandemic, people have fainted, come to fisticuffs and been removed by UN security. It is the place where both communities have large demonstrations next to the legless chair that reminds the Palais de Nations of the consequence of war. There are heated, blood-chilling speeches aimed at the supporters. For bystanders, much of this drama is quite unsettling. The government playbook with regard to the Geneva process at the UN Human Rights Council is to present it as an enormous power play full of double standards. It is seen as western countries ganging up on Sri Lanka for its closeness to China. Imperialism and neocolonialism remain in the frame. There is no government recognition that there may be any grievance or a victim. This just compounds the insensitivity. The government’s aim this year was to have no resolution at all, while the major Tamil groups wanted the Human Rights Council to begin a pathway to the International Criminal Court. In the end, the resolution decided to create capacity at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to collect, preserve and consolidate evidence not only on war crimes but also on other gross violations of human rights and serious violations of humanitarian law. There is no date or time period.

Geopolitics ‘plus’

Though geopolitics is the framework for decision making at the Human Rights Council, the actual process is more nuanced and may be described as geopolitics “plus”. Unless one acknowledges this “plus” factor, one will never understand the actual workings of the Human Rights Council. The activism, agitation and the momentum around a resolution created by this “plus” factor spills over and creates the atmosphere in which the resolution is adopted. The “plus” factors around the Sri Lankan resolution were easy to identify. First came the legal experts of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as the Special Rapporteurs and procedures who took very strong positions. The pivotal input by the Office was the Report of the High Commissioner on “Promoting Accountability and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka”. Michelle Bachelet as a High Commissioner, a torture victim, President, and a Minister of Defence, put her full weight behind the report. More than anything else, her report and words made the resolution inevitable. In



addition to the work of OHCHR, the Tamil groups nationally and globally were extremely active. But, it was Muslim civil society and the Muslim diaspora that made the difference for this resolution. Their passion, energy and sense of injustice filled the spaces. Despite heavy lobbying from Pakistan, (the Coordinator on Human rights and humanitarian issues in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, at Geneva), and from Bangladesh, after Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit in March, despite pressure from China and after the Rajapaksas made personal calls to OIC members, the large majority of Muslim countries still decided to abstain.

Elements to a global cause

Though the diasporas are always active, it is an international civil society made up of a whole array of disparate groups that dominate the agitational space of the Human Rights Council. These groups are often at odds with each other but act in solidarity when it comes to global causes. Sri Lanka has again become a global cause. Once you get on the agenda of international civil society, it is difficult to get off. As Christine Schöwebel-Patel, the academic in international law and political economy, has recently written, there is a kind of "branding" in a communications sense that takes place and has severe consequences for country and community. The events unfolding in Geneva are particularly disturbing because of their shortsightedness. In 2014, Sri Lanka faced a hostile Council and was an outlier in the international system very much like today. Most people have conveniently forgotten this history. The Resolution of the Human Rights Council in 2015 (<https://bit.ly/3md0P8x>) that Sri Lanka cosponsored after the government changed was to pull Sri Lanka out of the rut that it had fallen into. If that resolution were not passed, Sri Lanka would have had the evidence collection and preserving mechanism in some form by 2016. The 2015 resolution accepted international best practices, an office for missing persons, an office for reparations, a truth commission and a judicial process for those guilty of serious crimes. At that time, the focus was on the need for a system that gave confidence to the victims. Victim groups were clear that a purely domestic process had failed them before. As a result, it was agreed to have a framework with an element of foreign participation. International, resolution 30/1 became a great success though victim groups thought it was a failure due to a lack of implementation. International hostility disappeared; Sri Lanka was dropped from international punitive agendas, became open to GSP plus (or the European Union's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus) and other trade and financial benefits and was welcomed back into UN peacekeeping. Despite its international success, 30/1 was reviled nationally as a resolution that "sold out the soldiers" — blurring the lines between the few who have committed war crimes and the large majority who have not. Fundamentally, there was also a lack of understanding of what "co-sponsorship" meant and the enlightened self-interest that it entailed. Co-sponsorship has always meant accepting international standards while keeping control of the national process — the legislation to be enacted and the personnel to be appointed. By arbitrarily withdrawing from the resolution, Sri Lanka created the space for the Human Rights Council to create a new mechanism to collect and preserve evidence. This process is now independent of the Colombo government and will eventually have a life of its own.

The two sides

With this dedicated capacity at the OHCHR, the human rights issues regarding Sri Lanka will not go away. For many Sri Lankans, especially the Sinhalese, this is an outrage of double standards. There is real fury at what they see as global inequity. For many members of the minorities,



opposition leaders, journalists, lawyers, victim groups and civil society activists who claim they are being harassed, prosecuted and intimidated on a daily basis by a surveillance state, there is relief to know that someone will be watching.

JAILED BARGHOUTI BACKS CHALLENGE TO ABBAS

He endorsed a list of opponents to the President for the first polls in 15 years

Imprisoned Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti has endorsed a list of challengers opposing President Mahmud Abbas's Fatah movement in legislative elections next month, the head of the dissident list said on Thursday. *Mr. Barghouti, who is serving multiple life sentences in an Israeli jail and is described by some as the "Palestinian Mandela," has been a closely watched figure ahead of the first Palestinian elections in 15 years. The deadline for submitting candidate lists for the May 22 legislative polls expired on Wednesday.* Mr. Barghouti's wife Fadwa is the second candidate on the "Freedom" list headed by Nasser al-Kidwa, nephew of the late iconic Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Freedom "is supported by Marwan Barghouti, and the proof of course is the presence of his wife" on the list, Mr. Kidwa said, adding that Mr. Barghouti's input helped shape the movement. Mr. Kidwa was expelled from Fatah earlier this year after announcing his intention to run for the Palestinian presidency in a July 31 vote, a move seen as a direct affront to the Mr. Abbas, 85. There remains widespread speculation that Mr. Barghouti may mount a presidential run from prison. Israel has convicted him of orchestrating deadly attacks during the 2000-2005 second Palestinian intifada, or uprising. *Mr. Barghouti refused to recognise the court during his trial. A recent poll showed that 22% of Palestinians support him as their next President. Leader of the Hamas Islamist movement that controls Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, polled second with 14% support, followed by Mr. Abbas at 8%.*

BIMSTEC MEET SKIRTS MYANMAR VIOLENCE

Jaishankar takes part in online event

India on Thursday expressed commitment about taking the Bay of Bengal community to "new heights". *The statement was made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at the ministerial meet of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), which was held virtually.* The meeting drew participation from all the seven-member States, including Myanmar which is witnessing a large-scale crackdown against anti-military protesters. "Our National Security Advisers have met thrice since 2017. They have been working closely and have moved forward in several aspects of security cooperation including counter terrorism, intelligence sharing, coastal security, cyber security, etc in a tangible manner," said Dr. Jaishankar highlighting the common security challenges facing the member countries. *Cohesion among the members has been difficult to achieve mainly because of the Rohingya refugee crisis which created bitterness between Myanmar and Bangladesh.* This affected the working of the organisation to some extent as it could not develop a common charter. However, Mr. Jaishankar announced that the organisation will soon have the common set of rules and goals. "I am also delighted to note that the text of the BIMSTEC Charter has been finalised. We hope that all member states will timely complete their internal procedures for its adoption at the fifth BIMSTEC summit," said Mr.



Jaishankar. *Thursday's meeting, the 17th BIMSTEC Ministerial, chaired by Sri Lanka, however, avoided any reference to Myanmar's current crisis.*

MANIPUR RETRACTS LETTER ON MYANMAR REFUGEES

The letter drew sharp reactions from various sections on social media. A State government official said the government was now supporting those seeking refuge.

Mizoram move

Rajya Sabha member from the ruling Mizo National Front (MNF) M. Vanlalvena told The Hindu that the refugees living in Mizoram would have to work to earn a living till the situation improved. "More than thousand refugees have come; they are living in villages across the State. Work will be allocated to them under NREGS," Mr. Vanlalvena said. The MGNREGS is a Central scheme meant only for Indian citizens, but the rules are notified by the State government. Asked if providing work would violate the norms, Mr. Vanlalvena said, "The State government can decide the projects and the people who can be employed through the scheme. We do not know for how long they [refugees] will have to stay here. They cannot live here for free so this decision has been taken." He added that Chief Minister Zoramthanga has granted ₹1 lakh from the CM relief fund to provide for food and relief to the refugees. "The civil society groups, with the help of local television channels have so far raised more than ₹16 lakh to help the people. India is a good country, we cannot let them down. If they go back they will be killed," the MP said.

IS ATTACK SURVIVORS STRANDED AROUND MOZAMBIQUE TOWN

Jihadists launched raid on coastal town Palma last week

Thousands of Palma residents remained stranded on Tuesday, hiding around the besieged northern Mozambique town and scrambling to escape the area overrun by violent jihadist militants last week, sources said. Insurgents affiliated with the Islamic State group (IS) launched a raid on the coastal town last Wednesday, ransacking buildings and murdering and beheading civilians. Dozens have been killed in what witnesses describe as a coordinated attack, just 10 km from a multi-billion dollar gas project led by France's Total. Shaken survivors have since streamed into the neighbouring town of Mueda and regional capital Pemba. But sources told AFP thousands were still wandering around Palma, desperate to find refuge.

Total ferries 1,400

Some trudged days through surrounding forest, walking west towards Mueda and north to reach the Tanzanian border. Hundreds more travelled to the Afungi peninsula, the site of the gas exploration project, where they gathered outside Total's fortified complex, UN workers said. Total ferried around 1,400 people, including both gas and government workers, to Pemba on Sunday, but has since been accused of turning its back on desperate residents. Only a few dozen other survivors have reached the regional capital, mainly on small fishing boats, raising concern among humanitarians on the ground. "That's very little compared to the thousands that are reported stranded in Palma," said one aid worker who did not wish to be named. "We are worried that so far very few are coming," she said, adding that 5,000 escapees had reportedly assembled close to



a lighthouse on the peninsula. “Those are probably not the only ones,” she added. Total said it has organised “emergency support”, including food and water, for people arriving at its site.

ENTER THE PEACE PROCESS

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's comment that India supports talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban signals a subtle shift in New Delhi's approach towards the Afghan crisis. At the 9th Heart of Asia Conference in Tajikistan, he said India has been supportive of all efforts being made to “accelerate the dialogue” between the Afghan government and the Taliban, in a rare direct reference to the insurgent group. In the 1990s and 2000s, India was steadfastly opposed to any dealings with the Taliban. But its position seems to have evolved over the years. In 2018, when Russia hosted Afghan and Taliban talks, India had sent a diplomatic delegation to Moscow. In September 2020, at the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Mr. Jaishankar was present at the inaugural session via a video link, reaffirming the long-held Indian position that any peace process should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. His latest comments come close on the heels of a new peace push by the Joe Biden administration of the U.S. The Biden plan includes two key proposals — a unity transition government between the warring parties and a UN-led multilateral conference of envoys from India, China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S. India has supported the UN-led process, in an apparent climbdown from its earlier position, and now shown willingness to deal with the Taliban. The evolution of India's position is in sync with the evolution of the reality in Afghanistan. The Taliban, no longer an untouchable force, control much of the country's rural territories. The U.S. has already signed a deal with the Taliban, wherein American troops are scheduled to pull back from Afghanistan by May 1. China had long ago reached out to the Taliban. Russia has hosted talks between the two sides. European powers have also shown interest in sponsoring talks. So, India has to be more flexible and adapt to the new strategic reality. Since the fall of the Taliban, India has cultivated deep ties with the Afghan people and the government, with investments in multiple projects dealing with education, power generation, irrigation and other infrastructure development. The first batch of vaccines Afghanistan got was from India, in February. Recently, India signed an agreement to build the Shahtoot dam near Kabul. Thus, its economic, strategic and security ties could be disrupted if the Taliban were to take over. The question India faces, like the other stakeholders, is how to help Afghanistan end the violence without a total capitulation to the Taliban. India joining the peace process could strengthen the hands of the Afghan government, which is negotiating from a position of weakness. New Delhi should, using its regional clout as well as its deep ties with both the U.S. and Russia, strive for what Mr. Jaishankar called “double peace”, both inside Afghanistan and in the region.

NEIGHBOURLY TOUCH

The March 26-27 visit to Dhaka by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his first trip abroad since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, has conveyed that India attaches great importance to the relationship with its eastern neighbour. Bangladesh is the region's fastest growing economy, with social indicators that other countries, including India, can learn from, and a vital link without which Delhi cannot realise the full potential of either the economic or strategic underpinnings of its Look East policy. India was instrumental in the birth of Bangladesh, but ties between the two countries, though at their historic best over the last 12 years under Sheikh Hasina, remain complicated. Most recently, the ruling BJP regime's political rhetoric at home, including its use of the “illegal immigrant”

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trope, and unsavoury references to Bangladesh in the public conversation on the Citizenship Amendment Act, had spread frost on the ties and threatened to strengthen the hands of Islamist groups opposed to PM Hasina, who see her as too close to Delhi. PM Modi's visit, to participate in the 50th anniversary commemoration of Bangladesh's independence day and the 100th birth anniversary celebrations of Mujibur Rehman, the father of Bangladesh, coincides with the West Bengal elections, and could not escape a whiff of the sulphurous poll campaign. That 10 people were killed in protests in Bangladesh against the visit, led by an *extremist Islamist group called Hefazat-e-Islam*, is shocking. The responsibility for not allowing this to negate the achievements of the visit lies in both capitals. A joint statement has listed several outcomes from the visit, from connectivity and "people-oriented" border management to anti-COVID-19 vaccines and nuclear energy. But for Bangladesh, the outcome that matters most remains elusive — the finalisation of the agreement to share the waters of the Teesta river, a draft of which was drawn up by both governments in 2011. *India's inability to deliver on this promise is a fallout of the differences between the Centre and West Bengal on the issue.* Irrespective of the outcome of the elections in that state, however, it is necessary that Delhi does whatever it takes towards arriving at a pact that can be a win-win for both sides. This will convey to Bangladesh, where India is vying with China for influence, that Delhi can take difficult decisions to help out a neighbour. PM Modi drew a vision of a shared future for India and Bangladesh through the "power of democracy", and utilisation of opportunities of trade, commerce and connectivity to "progress together" and stay united against the challenge posed by terrorism. There were references to "fraternal ties" based on equality, trust and understanding that "transcend a strategic partnership". *But while all countries desire to be recognised as equal, they also want bigger countries to take more responsibility for protecting this equality.* This is probably what PM Hasina meant when she said that, as the biggest country in South Asia, India must "play a pioneering role". Delhi must hold up its end of the pact with Dhaka.

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war of liberation and the centenary year of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his meetings with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina showcased the deep history the two nations share, their future plans and the challenges ahead. At the events, which included an emotive ceremony in Dhaka, a cultural programme, *India's conferring of the Gandhi Peace Prize posthumously on Mujib*, and a visit by Mr. Modi to the Bangabandhu (Mujib) memorial at his *hometown in Tungipara*, the leaders paid homage to the nation's founders, millions massacred by the Pakistani military regime in 1971, and those who died fighting for Bangladeshi freedom, including nearly 4,000 Indian soldiers. *India's role in the creation of Bangladesh was highlighted by Ms. Hasina as she thanked India for its aid, and later, for providing her shelter when members of her family, including her father Mujib, were assassinated.* Mr. Modi wrote in an editorial of the hope for a Shonali Adhyaya (Golden Chapter) in South Asia that Bangabandhu may have brought about had he not been killed. The two leaders built on their December 2020 (virtual) meet by bolstering plans for connectivity and infrastructure projects with a framework for cooperation on trade, along with other MoUs on sports, education and disaster management. India-Bangladesh ties in the past 15 years, since Ms. Hasina was elected, have been marked by new areas of cooperation and an ability to resolve specific differences. *Ms. Hasina's decision, beginning 2009, to shut down anti-India terror camps and to hand over nearly two dozen of India's "most wanted", reversed mistrust.* Mr. Modi's push to

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conclude the long-pending *Land Boundary Agreement in 2015*, and to *accept an international tribunal verdict in favour of Bangladesh that resolved a 40-year-old maritime dispute*, built confidence as well. Other issues, if unresolved, could pose challenges. The joint statement noted the need to resolve the *dispute over Teesta water sharing*, and six other rivers. The problem of Bangladeshi civilians being killed at the border has dented relations. *The Modi government's concerns over the treatment of Hindus, an impetus for the CAA, were highlighted as the PM performed two temple pujas and addressed a rally of minority Matua Hindus*. The visits raised eyebrows in India as they took place even as West Bengal went to vote, but it became clear they will have repercussions in Bangladesh as well: protests against Mr. Modi's visit turned violent, with at least 11 members of the *Hefazat-e-Islam* shot dead by police, and reprisal violence against the Hindu minority by Islamist mobs. The events only underline the need for a deeper understanding on both sides of the sensitivities of the India-Bangladesh relationship, even as its many successes are counted and celebrated.

MILLIONS DEPEND ON TEESTA

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reiterated Bangladesh's long-pending request for concluding the interim agreement on the sharing of the waters of Teesta river. She underscored that to alleviate the sufferings and save the livelihoods of millions of people dependent on the Teesta river basin, it is necessary that Bangladesh receives its fair share of the waters, the draft agreement of which has already been agreed upon by both governments in January 2011," declared a joint statement issued at the end of bilateral discussions between the two delegations. The two leaders also instructed their Ministries of Water Resources to firm up the Framework of Interim Agreement over the six common rivers — *Monu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar*. Sharing of water resources has been a contentious issue between the two neighbours because of the number of stakeholders. The two Prime Ministers also agreed that the incidents of killings along the settled Indo-Bangladesh borders is a matter of concern and instructed their respective border guards to initiate "people-oriented" border management. The Joint Statement said the leaders have expressed their desire to bring the number of such incidents involving civilians to 'zero'. *The killing of citizens of Bangladesh along the borders has been at the centre of bilateral ties over the last decade*. India reiterated its *demand for completion of border fencing by Bangladesh* "at the earliest". Bangladesh has called upon India to revive the jute sector with investment and through public private partnership. In this regard, *Dhaka urged Delhi to withdraw the duties that were imposed on jute products of Bangladesh since 2017*. Both sides reviewed a slew of measures that have been under way over the last several years that will ease connectivity between the northeastern States of India and West Bengal. *The two Prime Ministers on Saturday inaugurated the Mitali Express, a new AC train that will connect Jalpaiguri with Dhaka. Bangladesh also offered the airports of Sylhet and Chittagong for the passengers of the Northeastern States, especially of Tripura saying these airports will help in improving connectivity in the region.*

AMID BANGLADESH LIBERATION ANNIVERSARY, ROLE OF INDIA, U.S. IN 1971 IN SPOTLIGHT

"To all hands, don't squeeze Yahya at this time," wrote the then U.S. President Richard Nixon in his own hand in a memo that crystallised Washington's policy during Bangladesh's liberation war. The memo, dated April 28, 1971, came a month after Pakistani troops had launched *Operation*

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Searchlight that targeted Bangladeshi freedom fighters, the minority Hindu population, teachers, students, and activists brutally, with millions of casualties. As Bangladesh commemorates 50 years of its Liberation movement, that began with the *declaration of Independence by the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters) led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 26, 1971*, the spotlight also turns to events at the time in India and the United States, that were recounted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka, and through a special remembrance in the U.S. Congress last week. *A few days after the Mujib declaration, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi moved a resolution in Parliament condemning the Pakistani crackdown as "genocide". On April 3, she met Tajuddin Ahmed, Mujib's nominee for PM of the provisional government, and promised support, including an office in Calcutta that belonged to the RAW intelligence agency. Mrs. Gandhi insisted on secrecy, however, until she was able to garner international support for the cause. While the U.S. was deadset against India's stand, Mrs. Gandhi found some support in Moscow, and the Indo-Soviet treaty of Peace and Cooperation was signed in August 1971.*

Back in 1971, far from the public eye, *the government's plans for Bangladesh's liberation, the diplomatic outreach and training and arming the Mukti Bahini cadres, were all already under way by August of the year. The Soviet treaty dented India's non-aligned policy, but Soviet naval support and military supplies assisted New Delhi in the war that followed.* Approximately 2 to 3 million people were killed, over 200,000 women were raped in organised rape camps, and over 10 million people were displaced, most finding refuge in India. U.S.'s strategy during the year, that eventually led to it moving *its "Seventh fleet" into the Bay of Bengal in an attempt to deter the Indian Army from advancing towards Dhaka (Dacca) during the two-week war in December 1971.*

HEFAZAT-E-ISLAM, THE GROUP BEHIND BANGLADESH PROTESTS

At least 11 people were killed in Bangladesh over the weekend as protesters clashes with police during demonstrations called by Islamist groups against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Dhaka visit. Mr. Modi was in Bangladesh to attend the country's Golden Jubilee celebrations of independence. *The main group behind the violent protests was Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh that had in the past clashed with the Awami League government.*

Roots of Hefazat

Hefazat-e-Islam, literally 'protector of Islam', was formed in 2010 when the country was taking gradual measures to undo the Islamisation of its polity by the military rulers in the late 1970s and 1980s. In 2008, the military-backed caretaker government had proposed the *Draft National Women's Development Policy Bill*, promising equal rights to women in property. In the December 2008 election, the secular Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina was brought to power. *The secularists had demanded repealing the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, which had made sweeping changes to the country's original Constitution during the years of military rule (Later in the year the Supreme Court ruled the amendment was illegal).* *The Islamist groups saw these developments as a threat to their core interests, and came together on one platform to form Hefazat-e-Islam. In February 2010, Hefazat called a demonstration in Chittagong against the Women's Bill and the bid to cancel the Fifth Amendment.* They clashed with police, injuring over a dozen, and announcing the arrival of a new Islamist group in Bangladesh.

What do they want?

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Headquartered in Chittagong, Hefazat is a platform of the Sunni clerics of the country's vast Quami madrassa network and their students. If in 2010, they demonstrated their street power by staging the anti-Women's Bill protests, in 2013, they would expand their demands to a 13-point agenda. Their demands included enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provision for death penalty, cancellation of the women's development law, a ban on erecting statues in public places, a ban on mixing man and woman in public and declaration of Bangladesh's Ahmadiyas, a persecuted minority in Islam, as "non-Muslims". The Awami League government initially ignored the protests. But Hefazat members organised many marches to the capital to push for their demands. When the pressure mounted, the government acted swiftly. In the early hours of May 6, 2013, security forces launched a crackdown on Hefazat activists to oust them from Dhaka. At least 11 people were estimated to have been killed.

Pressure group

Since the failed "Dhaka siege", Hefazat was careful not to run into a direct showdown with the government. But it remained an important hardline voice that often put pressure on the government with its Islamist agenda. For example, when the Fifth Amendment was repealed, the government restored secularism and some other articles of the original Constitution but Islam continued to remain the state religion. The government had also made changes in school texts under pressure from Hefazat and other Islamists. In 2017, giving in to Hefazat's demands, the government removed the statue of the Greek Goddess Themis from the premises of the Supreme Court. In 2018, the Hasina government passed a Bill recognising Dawra-e-Hadith, a top degree of Hefazat-controlled Quami madrassas, as equivalent to a Master's degree in Islamic studies and Arabic. Ms. Hasina's government may have found Hefazat a lesser problem than Jamaat e Islami, the militant religious party. The government did not give in to Hefazat's key demands that would alter the secular character of the state, but offered small concessions to the group to avoid trouble. These concessions, however, appeared to have made them stronger over the years. And the protests they carried out against the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, at a time when both countries are trying to deepen ties, pose a new challenge to both Dhaka and New Delhi.

MOUNTBATTEN'S BRACELET, OTHER ARTEFACTS AUCTIONED

A diamond bracelet and jewelled decorative elephants from Jaipur are some of the Indian heirlooms that made up a collection of 350 personal items belonging to Patricia Mountbatten, the eldest daughter of Lord Louis Mountbatten — the last Viceroy of India, which fetched over £5.6 million at Sotheby's auction in London. Patricia Edwina Victoria Mountbatten was the Second Countess Mountbatten of Burma and had a strong royal connection as the great-great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria and first cousin to Prince Philip, the 99-year-old husband of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. The Indian heirlooms up for auction included a diamond set and enamelled gold bracelet made in India, that once belonged to Queen Victoria.

NATION

PAKISTAN FREEZES PLAN TO ALLOW IMPORTS FROM INDIA



Just a day after announcing its plan to allow import of cotton and sugar from India, the Pakistan government on Thursday said it was “deferring” the decision and linked any “normalisation” in ties to moves by New Delhi on Jammu and Kashmir. The U-turn was seen as an embarrassment for the Imran Khan government and, in particular, for the newly appointed Finance Minister Hammad Azhar, who had addressed a press conference on Wednesday announcing clearances by the Economic Coordination Council (ECC) for imports from India, which have been suspended since August 2019. Significantly, Mr. Khan holds the Commerce Ministry portfolio, which moved the proposal at the ECC on Wednesday.

‘More debate needed’

Speaking to the media earlier, Mr. Azhar said the move was a commercially based *need for Indian sugar and cotton due to the high prices and low yield in Pakistan last year.* The reversal of the ECC’s decision on Thursday was announced by Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who, in a taped video statement, said the matter *needed “further debate”.*

THREE MORE RAFALE JETS ARRIVE IN INDIA

The fourth batch of three Rafales landed on Wednesday evening flying directly from the Istres Air Base in France, the IAF said. This takes the number of Rafales in service to 14. “Rafales were refuelled in-flight by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Air Force tankers. This marks yet another milestone in the strong relationship between the two air forces,” IAF said on Twitter. The IAF is also set to raise the second Rafale Squadron at Hasimara in West Bengal by mid-April. More are expected to arrive shortly completing the first squadron, a defence official said. Last September, the IAF inducted the batch of five Rafales of 36 jets contracted from France under a €7.87-billion Inter-Governmental Agreement signed in September 2016. The second batch of three arrived last November, also flying non-stop with three in-flight refuellings.

RAWAT LAUNCHES JOINT LOGISTICS HUB

Move to boost tri-service integration

As part of measures to boost tri-service integration and resource optimisation, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat on Thursday operationalised the third joint logistics node (JLN) in Mumbai. “These JLN’s will provide integrated logistics cover to the armed forces for their small arms ammunition, rations, fuel, general stores, civil hired transport, aviation clothing, spares and also engineering support in an effort to synergise their operational efforts,” a Defence Ministry statement said. The initiative would accrue advantages in terms of saving of manpower, economise utilisation of resources, besides financial savings. “Establishment and operationalisation of JLN’s is a very important first step in the direction of logistics integration of our three Services. Acceptance of each other’s limitations and learning from each other’s strengths and best practices is essential to help improve the functioning and efficacy of these nodes,” Gen. Rawat said. He also released the standing operating procedure of the JLN. The government sanction letter for the establishment of the JLN’s in Mumbai, Guwahati and Port Blair was signed on October 12, 2020. The JLN’s in Guwahati and Tri-Services, Andaman and Nicobar Command, Port Blair, were operationalised in January this year.



AN ANTIDOTE TO ISLAMOPHOBIA, WITHIN AND BEYOND (A. FAIZUR RAHMAN - SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE ISLAMIC FORUM FOR THE PROMOTION OF MODERATE THOUGHT)

If Islamist terror is a major international issue today, so is the response to it. For instance, the UN 'Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief' flagged the "epidemic proportions" of anti-Muslim hatred with the lament that member states responded to security threats "by adopting measures which disproportionately target Muslims and define Muslims as both high risk and at risk of radicalization".

Exploring the reasons

In fact, the spread of Islamophobia across the globe has been so rampant over the last couple of decades that it is now considered an industry and a subject of study in psychiatry. Springer, one of world's leading scientific publishers, brought out a volume in 2019 titled Islamophobia and Psychiatry: Recognition, Prevention, and Treatment. The Cambridge dictionary describes Islamophobia as an "unreasonable dislike or fear of, and prejudice against, Muslims or Islam." But the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPG) goes further and equates it with racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness. The APPG has a point because long before the term gained currency, Frantz Fanon, the celebrated anti-colonial writer and psychoanalyst, had engaged with Islamophobia without mentioning it, and saw it as an expression of religious racism of the colonising West. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, which Fanon wrote in the context of the French occupation of Muslim Algeria, he described "the church in the colonies," as "the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor."

The West's fear

Despite this depressing reality, the West's fear of Islam or Muslims has little to do with religion and everything to do with cultural frictions and political rivalries as Graham E. Fuller rightly concluded in *A World without Islam*. In the case of India too it was the tussle for power that made *people like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Chandranath Basu, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bhai Parmanand suspect the Muslims. If in Ananda Math, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee fictionalised Hindu nationalistic sentiments by narrating how "everyone was angry with the Muslims for the anarchy and lawlessness of their reign", in the early 1900s, Rai and Parmanand floated the idea of territorially separating Hindus and Muslims long before Jinnah imagined Pakistan. Even B.R. Ambedkar was not sure about the political stability of an undivided India. In his book Thoughts on Pakistan he wanted the Hindus to concede Jinnah's demand for a separate Muslim state because without Pakistan, India would have to contend with 65 million Muslims, while after its creation, this number would fall to 20 million thus greatly reducing the proportion of Muslim to Hindu seats in central and provincial legislatures, which would further fall once weightage was cancelled.* It is this same unfounded fear of Muslim numbers that reflects in the recent enactment of laws against "love-jihad" by several Indian States, and raucous calls for a population regulation law in India to "tackle the problem of declining Hindu population and to stop the rise of non-Hindu population".

The Muslim contribution



But what is inexplicable is, more than seven decades after Partition, anti-Muslim sentiment not just exists but continues to surge in India. Why is this so if Muslims have consciously stayed away from terrorism and never betrayed the faith reposed in them by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who in September 2014 had said, “Indian Muslims will live for India. They will die for India. They will not want anything bad for India.”? Apart from the aforementioned reasons, the answer lies in the fact that Muslim religious leaders have done nothing to encourage the community to win the trust of other people, a basic requirement for peaceful coexistence. Unlike political trust in liberal democracies which according to British author Marek Kohn is founded upon the suspicion that the powerful will be tempted to abuse power, social trust (as argued by American political scientist Eric Uslaner) is based on the optimistic premise that although people may follow different religions or secular ideologies, they hold fundamental values in common. The Muslim clergy has miserably failed on this front. *It saw the illegal demolition of the Babri Masjid as condemnable act of religious extremism but remained a mute spectator when a Hindu temple was burnt down in Pakistan a few months ago. And when Pakistan’s Supreme Court ordered its reconstruction, no Muslim religious organisation welcomed the decision. However, provocative televangelist Zakir Naik issued a statement that non-Muslims in a Muslim state do not have the right to construct their places of worship even with their own funds. The unIslamic conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque was also greeted with either deafening silence or quiet support. Similar clerical hypocrisy prevails when it comes to condemning draconian laws in Muslim countries such as those pertaining to blasphemy and apostasy in Pakistan whose blatant misuse has resulted in the murder of both Muslims and non-Muslims.* The Islamically baseless concept of ghazwa al Hind (war against India) is another issue on which the Indian ulema are silent. The issue continues to be invoked by the Hindu right to question the loyalty of Muslims, and thus, is yet another reason for Hindu-Muslim mistrust.

Overcoming the suspicion

If this climate of suspicion has to be overcome, the Indian ulema must emphatically declare the concept of ghazwa al-Hind to be unIslamic apart from clarifying that India is not darul harb (abode of war). They must also announce that the word kafir has no pejorative overtones and does not refer to non-Muslims. Apostasy and blasphemy have also got to be removed from the list of capital crimes under Islamic law. In short, what is needed is a radical rethink of Muslim theology. As *this is not possible in India with the outdated madrasa system in existence, it is up to the Muslim laity to shed its deferential docility and start challenging the self-proclaimed epistemological supremacy of “religious authorities” and pressurise them into completely revamping the madrasa curriculum to harmonise it with the pluralistic teachings of Islam and modernity.* There is no other antidote to Islamophobia from within.

4 POLL PERSONNEL SUSPENDED IN ASSAM FOR ‘LIFT’ IN BJP VEHICLE

The Election Commission has suspended four polling personnel, including a presiding officer and an armed escort officer, besides ordering a re-poll at a booth in southern Assam’s Ratabari Assembly constituency, after electronic voting machines (EVMs) were found in a vehicle linked to a BJP candidate contesting the adjoining Patharkandi seat. Both constituencies are in Karimganj district. Officials said the polling personnel were unaware they had — after their car broke down near Nilambazar, 20 km short of district headquarters Karimganj — taken a lift in a vehicle



registered in the name of Madhumita Paul, the wife of Patharkandi BJP candidate Krishnendu Paul. The team was returning from 149-Indira MV School under the Ratabari constituency, about 70 km away.

The seals of the EVMs were found intact, but the EC decided to conduct a re-poll at the polling station concerned. The panel also sought a report from the special general observer, who found armed escort officer Luhit Gohain guilty of leaving the stranded polling party behind and not ensuring its safe arrival at the destination. Mr. Paul did not take calls. But his party members said the Opposition had blown a “minor” incident out of proportion.

HC SEES SERIOUS BREACH BY BJP

It asks UIDAI, EC, Puducherry police to probe alleged leak of phone numbers

The Madras High Court on Thursday granted six weeks’ time for the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Puducherry cybercrime cell to continue their inquiries into allegations of the BJP having accessed mobile phone numbers, provided by voters while obtaining Aadhaar cards, to send SMS to them with a link to join polling booth-level WhatsApp groups created by the party. Passing interim orders on a public interest litigation petition, Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy wrote that there appeared to be a serious breach by the BJP on how it conducted its election campaign in Puducherry. Stating that a “credible allegation” had been levelled of messages having been sent only to voters’ phone numbers linked with Aadhaar, the court said it was up to the UIDAI to provide an adequate answer to the claim. The judges observed that it would do well for the authority to conduct an inquiry to ascertain the source of leak, if any. “The UIDAI is required to answer how details and particulars furnished to it in confidence by citizens and in the hope that the confidentiality would be preserved, may not have been adequately protected,” they said. The Bench also refused to accept the claim of the BJP that its ‘karyakartas’ (field workers) had obtained the mobile phone numbers by undertaking a door-to-door information collection exercise and pointed out that senior counsel R. Vaigai, representing the PIL litigant A. Anand of the Democratic Youth Federation of India, had found such submission to be laughable.

Criminal probe

After recording her submission that no voter would readily share personal information such as phone numbers with the political parties, the judges ordered that the Puducherry cybercrime cell should continue the criminal investigation into the issue and the ECI too should not put a lid on the matter until the issue of the bulk messages having been sent in breach of the model code of conduct in force in the Union Territory was dealt with in accordance with law. “It is completely within the domain of the Election Commission to deal with the issue ... Apart from the unfair mileage that the sixth respondent [the BJP] may have gained in resorting to a form of campaign without obtaining prior permission there for as required, there is the more serious matter of the privacy of the citizens being breached. This huge aspect of the matter should not be lost in the politics of the season or the hullabaloo of the attendant campaigning,” the Bench said. The court called for reports from the UIDAI, the ECI as well as the police after six weeks. When Ms. Vaigai insisted that the recognition of the BJP should be suspended before the elections since the party had blatantly violated the code of conduct, the judges said such a direction could not be issued to



the ECI which enjoyed primacy during elections. They pointed out to a constitutional bar to interference by courts in electoral matters under Article 329 of the Constitution.

BETTER LATE

Rajinikanth, the reigning demigod of Tamil filmdom, richly deserves the Dadasaheb Phalke award, Indian cinema's highest recognition, bestowed by the jury this year. The film world has few parallels to his success story. His *transition from Shivaji Rao Gaekwad, a Marathi-born struggling bus conductor in Bengaluru*, to a worshipped superstar in the Dravidian heartland, was made possible only by his undimmed passion and sustained hard work. From early on, he introduced novelty to his screen characters. He has kept innovating on his unique styles of tossing a cigarette or a mint, twirling his sunglasses and walking with a swagger. While style remains his hallmark, it would be an injustice to dismiss him as just a mass hero. He had excelled as an actor with sensitive portrayals in films such as Mullum Malarum and Aarilirindhu Arubadhu Varai before getting trapped in superstardom with Billa and donning larger than life roles. He is among the rare heroes who handle comedy scenes with ease, his dual roles in Thillu Mullu being an example. *His charisma has attracted three generations of fans, with a following even in Japan where he is lovingly called 'Odori Maharaja' (The Dancing Maharaja).* He is also the only Indian actor to have featured in black and white, colour, 3D and motion capture films. But despite Rajinikanth's demonstrable body of work, given his active inclination for a foray into "spiritual politics" until last year, *inevitable questions are being raised if the award is a calculated choice to influence poll-bound Tamil Nadu.* While Rajinikanth lent support during elections to the DMK-TMC (1996, 1998) and AIADMK-BJP (2004), in recent years he has made no secret of his admiration for BJP leaders. *Not only did he hail Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah as 'Lord Krishna and Arjuna' — after the scrapping of special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 — he targeted Dravidian icon Periyar E.V. Ramasamy while recalling the alleged attacks on Hindu deities during a 1971 anti-superstition rally. He backed the Citizenship Amendment Act.* To be fair, since his 'no show' in politics, the actor has remained politically withdrawn, though previously he indirectly targeted the DMK and the AIADMK. He has not responded to appeals from 'neutral' observers to lend his support for "honest, dynasty-free politics". Whether the award's timing would influence the voting choice of his legion of fans is difficult to say as he remains an untested electoral force. However, had the jury put off the announcement of the award by just a week till polling was over, everyone would have unconditionally welcomed the choice. *The giver has done the recipient a disservice through the timing of the announcement.*

TRINAMOOL ACCUSES EC OF BIAS

Provision for appointing polling agents was relaxed to benefit BJP, it says

Calling the Election Commission order relaxing the rule for the appointment of polling agents "arbitrary, motivated and biased", the Trinamool Congress has written to the Commission, urging it to withdraw the order. According to a March 2009 rule, polling agents who are appointed by the contesting candidates shall have to be electors in the same polling stations or from neighbouring polling stations falling in the same constituency. However, the provision was amended recently to allow an elector from any part of an Assembly constituency to be appointed a polling agent. The Trinamool claimed that this change was brought about on the directions of the BJP. The party also



released an alleged conversation between BJP leader Mukul Roy and another BJP functionary, where the Trinamool claims that this was discussed. The Trinamool said that no other party was consulted. The commission, the Trinamool alleged, changed the rule based on inputs and for the convenience of the candidates.

'Ambiguous reasoning'

"Such reasoning is not only ambiguous in nature but also leads us to a conclusion that it has been implemented to help certain political parties, namely the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), due to them not possessing the strength to muster enough polling agents," the party alleged in a letter to the EC dated March 26. It released the letter on Sunday. The party claimed that the new instructions were made with a "mala fide intention" to benefit the BJP candidates. "Such instruction passed by the Election Commission of India just before the scheduled date of election to take place in West Bengal is arbitrary, motivated and biased," it alleged, and urged the Commission to withdraw the direction and restore the earlier rule. A delegation led by MP Sudip Bandyopadhyay had on Saturday raised the issue at a meeting with Chief Electoral Officer Aariz Aftab in Kolkata.

WHY THE ELECTORAL BONDS SCHEME HAS BEEN CHALLENGED IN SUPREME COURT

On Friday, the Supreme Court dismissed petitions seeking to stay the sale of fresh electoral bonds ahead of Assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and Puducherry. Although the court said there is no justification to stay the current sale, the larger constitutional challenge to the electoral bonds scheme filed in 2017 is still pending.

What is the pending challenge?

It was filed by the Association for Democratic Reforms, which works for electoral transparency and accountability, along with Common Cause, another non-profit. The court had admitted the plea and sought responses from the government and the Election Commission of India (EC). However the case has not been heard in detail since then. Apart from challenging the constitutionality of the electoral bonds scheme, *the petitioners had asked the court to declare all political parties as public offices to bring them under the ambit of the Right to Information Act and compel political parties to disclose their income and expenditure.* Friday's ruling came on another plea by the petitioners seeking a stay on the current sale, until the court decides on the pending petition.

What are electoral bonds?

Announced in the 2017 Union Budget, electoral bonds are interest-free bearer instruments used to donate money anonymously to political parties. A bearer instrument does not carry any information about the buyer or payee, and the holder of the instrument (which is the political party) is presumed to be its owner. *The bonds are sold in multiples of ₹1,000, ₹10,000, ₹1 lakh, ₹10 lakh, and ₹1 crore, and State Bank of India is the only bank authorised to sell them. Donors can buy and subsequently donate bonds to a political party, which can encash the bonds through its verified account within 15 days.* There is no limit on the number of bonds an individual or company can purchase. *If a party hasn't encashed any bonds within 15 days, SBI deposits these into the Prime Minister's Relief Fund.* A total of 12,924 electoral bonds worth ₹6534.78 crore have been sold in 15 phases between March 2018 and January 2021. *When first announced in then Finance Minister*



Arun Jaitley's Budget speech of 2017, electoral bonds were understood to be a way for companies to make anonymous donations. However, the fine print of the notification has revealed that even individuals, groups of individuals, NGOs, religious and other trusts are permitted to donate via electoral bonds without disclosing their details.

Why have they been challenged?

The point of contention is the anonymity provided to donors of electoral bonds. Through an amendment to the Finance Act 2017, the Centre has exempted parties from disclosing donations received through electoral bonds. In other words, they need not disclose these details in their mandatory contribution reports to the Election Commission every year. This means voters will not know which individual, company, or organisation has funded which party, and to what extent. Before the introduction of electoral bonds, parties had to disclose details of all donors who have contributed more than Rs 20,000. According to transparency activists, the change infringes the citizen's 'Right to Know' and makes the political class even more unaccountable. "Moreover, while electoral bonds provide no details to the citizens, the said anonymity does not apply to the government of the day, which can always access the donor details by demanding the data from the State Bank of India (SBI). This implies that the *only people in dark about the source of these donations are the taxpayers*. It may also be noted that *the printing of these bonds & SBI commission for facilitating the sale and purchase of the bonds is paid from the taxpayers' money by the central government*," the ADR said in a recent statement.

How popular are these bonds?

By virtue of the anonymity they offer to donors, electoral bonds have become the most popular route of donation. *More than half the total income of national parties and the regional parties analysed by ADR for the financial year 2018-19 came from electoral bonds donations. The BJP is the biggest beneficiary, having received ₹1,660.89 crore, or 60.17% of the total ₹2,760.20 crore received by parties via electoral bonds in 2017-18 and 2018-19.*

What is the EC's stand?

In its submission to the Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice in May 2017, the EC had objected to amendments in the Representation of the People Act that exempt political parties from disclosing donations through this route. In a letter to the Law Ministry the same month, the EC had asked the government to "reconsider" and "modify" the above amendment. Asking the government to withdraw the new proviso, the EC had written, *"In a situation where the contribution received through electoral bonds are not reported, on perusal of the contribution report of political parties, it cannot be ascertained whether the political party has taken any donation in violation of provision under Section 29(b) of the RP Act which prohibits the political parties from taking donations from government companies and foreign sources."*

THE ELECTION COMMISSION'S NEW RULE FOR POLLING AGENTS AND THE TMC'S OBJECTIONS TO IT

As per the new regulations, a political party can now nominate a polling agent for any booth within the assembly segment where he/she is a voter of.



The Election Commission's recent decision to change the rules for appointing polling agents has sparked off a debate in West Bengal. As per the new regulations, a political party can now nominate a polling agent for any booth within the assembly segment he/she is a voter from. Earlier, the polling agent had to be a voter of the booth or an adjoining booth that he/she is working at. The Trinamool has been opposing the change in rules, calling it "arbitrary, motivated and biased" and has also written to the Election Commission seeking withdrawal of the order. The BJP, on the other hand, has been supporting the move saying it ensures free and fair elections.

Who is a polling agent?

A polling agent is a person appointed as a representative of a political party as it is not possible for a candidate to be physically present at every polling booth on the day of the elections. Therefore, the Election Commission allows a candidate to appoint a polling agent who keeps an eye on the voting process.

What is the role of a polling agent?

As per the Election Commission's rules, a polling agent should be familiar with the rules and procedures to conduct elections using EVMs and VVPATs, and with the working of these machines. Towards this end, a polling agent attends the demonstrations arranged by the Returning Officer, where the functioning and operation of these machines are explained.

How were they appointed earlier?

As per the earlier practice, polling agents had to be voters of the same polling stations or at least the neighbouring polling stations of the booth where she has been posted at.

What does the new rule say?

The Election Commission of India, revising the rule, has allowed a party to nominate a polling agent for any booth within the assembly segment where the person is an electorate of. So, any voter from within an Assembly constituency can be a polling agent of any booth within that constituency.

What is Trinamool's objection?

The Trinamool Congress has alleged that the poll body has formulated the new rule to favour the BJP. "It has been implemented to help certain political parties, namely the Bharatiya Janata Party as they do not have enough organisational strength to appoint polling agents for every booth," the letter sent by TMC to the Election Commission on March 26 read. The Mamata Banerjee-led party also said that the new instructions were formed with "mala fide intentions".

What is the Election Commission's stand?

The poll body has defended the change in rule saying that the new norms have been formulated so that every political party gets to appoint polling agents as it is difficult to convince people to sit at the booths amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Sources said that the Commission had revised the rules about 7-10 days ago.



WHY POLITICAL PARTIES ARE INVOKING RHINOS IN ASSAM

Recently, at a rally in Bokakhat, the constituency under which a major part of the Kaziranga National Park falls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress of nurturing poachers who kill rhinos, and said the BJP has curbed the menace.

With the BJP frequently invoking Assam's world-famous one-horned rhino to connect with the people of the state, the animal has now become a part of poll rhetoric, with promises to save "the pride of Assam". Recently, at a rally in Bokakhat, the constituency under which a major part of the Kaziranga National Park falls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress of nurturing poachers who kill rhinos, and said the BJP has curbed the menace.

Pride of Assam

For long, rhinos have been an emotive issue for the people of the state. "The projection of rhino as the pride of Assam began during the Assam Movement (1979-85)," says Kaustubh Deka, Assistant Professor, Political Science, Dibrugarh University. "Popular culture, including a number of Bihu songs on the rhino, further built on this." Uttam Saikia, an honorary wildlife warden of Kaziranga, says people of Assam are emotionally attached to the rhino. "Especially when a rhino is killed," he adds. "Earlier, people would not find out about it but now, with social media, it immediately becomes news."

Political plank

Deka says rhino started emerging as a player in the political narrative of Assam as "its poaching was linked to the control of indigenous people over land, resources and influx of immigrants". "While empirically it may not be true, somehow it was clubbed with that." This has been especially true of the BJP's political campaigns. "While statistically poaching has come down, you cannot really say whether the government should be credited, or numerous NGOs which have been working actively on the ground to raise awareness," says Saikia. Several cases of rhino poaching in Kaziranga were reported in the years leading up to 2013. The highest figures in a decade were in 2013 and 2014, with 27 incidents each year. The figure decreased to 17 in 2015 and 18 in 2016. In 2017 and 2018, there were six incidents while 2019 reported three incidents. "In 2020, there were two cases and there have not been any cases so far in 2021," said a senior park official, adding that the figures had drastically reduced in the last two years. According to the rhino census of 2018, there are 2,413 rhinos in Kaziranga alone. Deka says the rhino is now seen as an "Assamese resource" and rhino protection as a "sign of good governance." "If a government is able to protect sanctuaries and national parks, it is seen as control over law and order."

Challengers this election

It is common for every party contesting in Bokakhat and Kaliabor, the two constituencies that cover most of Kaziranga (the park spreads over six constituencies), to say that they will protect the rhino. However, this year, there is a departure from the traditional election rhetoric as local, regional players have entered the scene — Rajjor Dal and independent land rights activist, Pranab Doley (who is backed by the Congress-led Mahajoth), who are not just speaking about the preservation of the rhino, but also about the land rights of the locals, which are often ignored as



the Park extends in area, with new additions added to it. When the park was first notified in January 1974, it measured 430 square kilometres. With nine new “additions”, the park is now 914 square kilometres, with the latest three additions, notified in September by the state government. As a result, it is often said that local communities, living in the fringes of the park, get evicted at the cost of rhino preservation.

RAJNATH, YECHURY SPAR OVER KERALA PROBE

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and CPI (M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury on Sunday clashed over the Kerala government's decision to institute a judicial inquiry against Central agencies investigating the UAE consulate-linked gold smuggling case. Both leaders were in Kerala for electioneering and met the press separately. Mr. Singh said the LDF government's move was unconstitutional in bringing the Central law enforcement agencies within the ambit of a judicial commission of inquiry. It reflected a certain uneasiness that the investigative and regulatory agencies were edging closer to the truth, he said, adding that the bogey of a judicial probe would not deter them. Mr. Yechury countered Mr. Singh and said the States were well within their rights to limit cooperation with the Central government on issues that infringed on their constitutional rights. “The Defence Minister must re-read the Constitution. No Central agency can interfere or work in any State without the concurrence of the State concerned. If the State is not willing to give the concurrence, then it has to get a judicial intervention. It cannot be a direct intervention like what is being done now.” *The LDF government's decision on Friday to set a panel to probe the alleged jurisdictional overreach and political bias of Central agencies has reignited the debate on the BJP-led administration's perceived trespasses on federalism. The Kerala government arguably required the ECI's permission to set the judicial probe in motion.* The commission's terms of reference and the agencies that would come under the ambit of its investigation were not immediately known. Since January last, an Assembly election-eve showdown with the Central government has been brewing. First, *Kerala joined ranks with 11 other States to halt work on the National Population Register.* Soon thereafter, the State government *withdrew the general consent to the CBI to voluntarily operate in Kerala after the agency booked Life Mission officials on the charge of violating the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act.* (Life Mission is Kerala's flagship programme to provide free housing to low-income families). *The decision to bring central agencies under the ambit of a judicial enquiry comes barely two weeks after the Kerala police booked unnamed Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials on the charge of conspiring to implicate Mr. Vijayan in the smuggling case dishonestly.* Earlier, the Customs had said in a court filing that the woman suspect in the gold smuggling case had stated with clarity about the “smuggling of gold” at the instance of the Chief Minister and Speaker (P. Sreeramakrishnan). The submission marked a further low in the already fraught Centre-State relations. It also prompted LDF activists to lay siege to Customs offices across the State in protest. *The LDF has made an election issue out of the Centre's alleged trespasses against federalism. BJP and Congress, on the other hand, have attacked the LDF for hobbling the Central law enforcement agencies to save the face of its political leadership.* Meanwhile, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said in Delhi on Sunday that the Kerala government's move to register a case against Enforcement Directorate officials was a “face saving exercise” as the principal secretary of the State government had been arrested in a gold smuggling case.

DISTURBING STILLNESS



The assault, allegedly by a group of farmers, against BJP MLA Arun Narang, at Malout in district Muktsar of Punjab on Saturday, has been rightly condemned by all the main parties and leaders.

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has done well to reiterate his government's firm commitment to take strict action against those who disturb the peace. At the same time, he has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene for an early resolution of the continuing farmers' crisis to prevent the situation from escalating further. The Punjab CM makes a point that needs to be amplified and heard as the farmers' protest against the Centre's three farm laws enters its fifth month — the attack points to a disquieting backdrop that the Centre may have turned away from, but that hasn't gone away. The leaderless protests that began last year against the farm laws have attracted wide support in a border state that still bears the scars from the battle it fought and won against terrorism in the 1980s.

Violence, like on January 26, or the beating up of an MLA, undermines the movement, dents its legitimacy and allows lumpens to take over. For its part, the Centre must realise that no one, neither state nor nation, gains from this political standstill. Especially in a state that is headed to polls next year, it is time for the politicians to pick up the threads, and as the people's representatives, speak to the farmers again. The unnatural political silence must be broken in Punjab.

WHY INDIA IS NO COUNTRY FOR WORKING WOMEN

The percentage of working-age women who are economically active in the country is far lower than the global average

A few days ago, a comment by the BJP's newly-appointed Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat about women wearing ripped jeans created massive outrage in social media. But, from the perspectives of the economy and public policy, perhaps the more salient comment was made by Rawat's cabinet colleague Ganesh Joshi, who reportedly said: "Women talk about all the things they want to do in life, but the most important thing for them is to look after their family and kids." Joshi was not voicing a rare sentiment. In 2013, the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Mohan Bhagwat had said: "A husband and wife are involved in a contract under which the husband has said that you should take care of my house and I will take care of all your needs...Till the time the wife follows the contract, the husband stays with her; if the wife violates the contract, he can disown her." To be sure, this understanding of a woman's role in Indian society is not limited to any one group or political party. Such conservative/orthodox beliefs, as well as violence against women, are often held as the main reasons why very few women seek any employment. That is why India has one of the worst labour force participation rates (LFPR) by women. The LFPR basically tells what percentage of the total women within the working-age are seeking work; it includes both those who are employed as well as those who are as yet unemployed but seeking work. As the chart below shows, at 21% India has one of the lowest female participation rates in the world. In other words, 79% of Indian women (aged 15 years and above) do not even seek work. Countries with which Indian typically compares itself — such as China, the US, Indonesia, and Bangladesh — have two-to-three times higher participation rates for women. Worse still, it is not the case that India is behind just a handful of countries. As the chart below shows, no matter which cluster of countries one compares with — high income or low, highly indebted or least developed — India comes off worse. India's 21% female LFPR is not even half the global average



(47%). The bottom of this chart further underscores the poor company India keeps in terms of freedom for women. However, the truth about women's participation in India's economy is more complicated. In a recent paper, titled "Paid work, unpaid work and domestic chores: Why are so many Indian women out of the labour force?", Ashwini Deshpande, professor of economics at Ashoka University, makes a couple of nuanced but significant points. One, she argues that the LFPR does not accurately capture the participation of Indian women in the economy. She says that the majority of women in South Asia are between the two extremes — namely, those women who work outside their homes for a salary and those who are exclusively involved within their own homes (caring for their family) of their own volition. "These are women whose involvement in economic work (activities that are within the standard boundaries of the System of National Accounts, that is counted as economic activities when national income or GDP is measured) lies in a grey zone," she states. "These are women who might work in the house or outside, and whose work might be paid or unpaid, and whose work might be continuous throughout the year or seasonal, and it might be full-time or part-time...For example, she could be involved in livestock rearing or farming or helping the kirana shop, or involved in artisanal activity, such as making baskets, weaving or pottery. If these are family activities, then her contribution to economic work (over and above her 'care' work) would not be paid. In such a case, it is highly likely that she would not be seen as a worker, neither by her family nor by herself," explains Deshpande, as she lists out several jobs where women's contribution to economic work is missed by the formal surveys that calculate LFPR. The other point Deshpande makes is that "the whole focus on labour force participation reduces the issue of women's involvement to a labour supply issue". In other words, while there are factors such as social norms or violence against women that hold them back from joining the labour force, little is said about the demand for their work. To better understand this, she points to the urban and rural break-up of female LFPR. As the chart below shows, the fall in India's overall female LFPR is almost fully because of the fall in rural India. It is another matter that urban female LFPR was always pretty low but the dip has been caused by fewer women in rural India being counted as part of the labour force. "The fall in rural women's LFPR should make us turn the spotlight on the nature of work availability, especially non-farm opportunities," she states. "Education levels of Indian women are rapidly increasing (faster than those for men), and while the share of agriculture work has declined for both men and women, men have been able to find employment in other sectors. But this is not the case for women," says Deshpande. "A man with class 10 education can be a postal carrier, a truck driver or a mechanic; these opportunities are not open to women. Hence, it is not surprising that education is associated with a lower WPR for women," Deshpande quotes Sonalde Desai, professor of Sociology, University of Maryland. Some people may still wonder why it matters whether women "work". They may find the Bhagwat kind of social contract quite efficient. To them, I would suggest reading "The Double X Economy" by Linda Scott, professor emeritus of entrepreneurship and innovation at the University of Oxford and a senior consulting fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Much like the title itself, the book is a spirited and, indeed, triumphant argument against excluding women from the economy. Let me just share some lines from its last chapter, titled "The path to redemption", as she succinctly explains how excluding women hurts the whole society and how including them helps. "...the Double X Economy's exclusions also incur huge costs for entire societies. High adolescent fertility and infant mortality result from selling young daughters into marriage. Widows who have been left with nothing constitute the largest segment of the extreme poor. Food insecurity and world hunger are both worsened because women can't own land. After decades of unequal earnings, elderly women are more likely to depend on government assistance. Where

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



women have no autonomy, the costs in death, property destruction, disease, and trauma are incalculable. Children go hungry, sick, and uneducated because their mothers have no economic power. There is also a hefty opportunity cost. Women who work are the most reliable source of economic growth. When they are kept home because there is no affordable childcare—or because their husbands won't let them out of the house—they lose and so do their countries. Many societies invest heavily in female education, especially in the West, and then push women out of the workforce—wasting a valuable resource, losing a chance at sustained growth, and widening a skills gap that already threatens their future. With a deliberate global effort to lift the constraints on the Double X Economy, some of the world's most tragic problems can be solved. Women's economic empowerment has been shown, many times, to be the best available weapon against poverty. Economically autonomous women can walk away from abuse. Providing young women with the means to earn shields them from human trafficking. Gender equality reduces violence of all kinds. The beneficial effects of full inclusion for women would be visible at the institutional and national levels. Including women in the financial system contributes to institutional profit and also reduces risk, increases transparency and also adds stability for the entire economy. Allowing women to participate in international trade increases a nation's resilience and innovation," states Scott. "Because of its power to generate growth and reduce costs, the Double X Economy, when included, pays for itself. Investments made in affordable childcare, for instance, would be offset by an influx of women into the labor force who otherwise would have to stay home, leading to a rise in GDP, and therefore an increase in tax revenues. Yet data shows that men will not lose jobs if women come into the workforce, because the resulting growth drives the creation of more jobs. Men benefit in other ways when they share economic responsibilities with women: overwork, male-dominant workplaces, and the lone responsibility to provide take a profound toll on men worldwide. Economic results are best when men and women work in a gender-balanced way, whether at work or at home. Studies show consistently that teams of males and females make better investments, produce better products, generate higher returns, and have fewer failures. At home, couples who share housework and paid work have closer relationships with children, more egalitarian values, less interpersonal tension, and more productivity," writes Scott.

TACKLING THE PERIOD TABOO (SHIVANI VIJ, AN ADVOCATE, IS PURSUING A MASTERS DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

Abhorrent practices discriminating against menstruating women should be considered abnormal

In February 2020, college authorities, including the principal, of the Shree Sahajanand Girls Institute (SSGI) in Bhuj, Gujarat, allegedly forced over 60 girls to remove their undergarments to check if they were menstruating. This shocking act, which rightly caused outrage, followed complaints that the girls had entered the temple and kitchen in the premises while on their period, which is against the institute's rules. Four persons were later arrested.

Notions of purity and pollution

The stigma attached to menstruation and restrictions in the private and public sphere for the duration of menstruation have long been part of women's lives in India. The stigma finds its roots in the notion of purity and pollution attached historically to menstruation. This was explained



exceptionally by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud in *Indian Young Lawyers Association v. The State of Kerala* (2018), known popularly as the Sabarimala case, a decision that India is still struggling to accept. He reasoned — and rightly so — that any social practice which excludes women from participation in public life as a result of their menstruation is discriminatory on the ground of their sex. This is because it is drawn from the notion of menstruating women being “impure”, a notion which targets the physiological feature of being women. The first ground for rejecting such practices is thus differential treatment, which directly discriminates women on the ground of their sex and is impermissible under Article 14 of the Constitution. Viewed from another lens, it is also against the notion of substantive equality adopted by the Constitution. In fact, it supports a more formal notion of equality of ‘separate but equal treatment’. Women are treated differently because they have distinct physiological features than men but are nevertheless equal to men. An attractive explanation also used to justify caste discrimination previously is nothing but a guise to perpetuate and exacerbate regressive patriarchal notions of our society and must also be readily dismissed under Article 14. That apart, such social exclusion can be attacked on the ground of privacy. Incidents such as what took place in SSGI not only attack the ‘sex’ of women, but also impact a deeply personal and an intrinsic part of their privacy, namely, their menstrual status. Restrictions of movement imposed on these students are one of the many attempts of state and non-state actors to take control of their person. It is an outrageous exercise of power to prevent them from leading a dignified life during their period. It is undoubtedly an excessive invasion of a biological feature that makes them women. This surely cannot be the intent of our Constitution and its values we adopted, and needs to change.

Court intervention

Taking cognisance of the incident at SSGI, the Gujarat High Court, in early March this year, proposed to introduce a set of guidelines that prohibit the social exclusion of menstruating women from private, public, religious and educational places. The court also emphasised on the negative impact created by such practices on a woman’s emotional state, lifestyle and, most significantly, her health. While surely a ray of hope, the effect of court intervention is yet to be seen in a society where previous decisions of courts categorically holding menstruation to be a part of the fundamental right to (private) life have failed to change societal notions surrounding it. The hope for women is that society will slowly but surely get past the taboo around menstruation, and abhorrent practices discriminating against menstruating women will be considered abnormal. That will be a society where no exclusion will be practiced and tolerated, and no discrimination will be perpetrated. It will be a society where women can freely live dignified lives, nurturing all facets of their womanhood. And it will be a society where women will be considered neither polluted nor impure during their menstruation, but will be treated with respect.

PERMANENT COMMISSION FOR WOMEN IN ARMY

Why has the Supreme Court issued fresh directions on the process of evaluation?

The Supreme Court in *Secretary, Ministry of Defence vs. Babita Puniya* last February directed the government to ensure that women officers in the Army are granted permanent commission (PC) as well as command postings in all services other than combat. Later, questioning the compliance of the Army with the directions in the judgment, around 80 women short service commission



officers approached the Supreme Court challenging the arbitrary process, including unjust medical standards, applied to deny permanent commission to women officers. On March 25, the Supreme Court in Lt. Col. Nitisha vs. Union of India held that the Army's selective evaluation process discriminated against and disproportionately affected women officers seeking permanent commission.

What did the Supreme Court observe?

A Bench led by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud observed that the pattern of evaluation inherently caused economic and psychological harm to women short service commission officers. The judgment, authored by Justice Chandrachud, said the evaluation criteria set by the Army constituted "systemic discrimination" against the petitioners. The Bench found several deviations in the standards adopted by the Army for evaluating women officers. "This disproportionate impact is attributable to the structural discrimination against women, by dint of which the facially neutral criteria of selective ACR [annual confidential reports] evaluation and fulfilling the medical criteria to be in SHAPE-1 at a belated stage, to secure PC [permanent commission] disproportionately impacts them vis-à-vis their male counterparts," the court said in its judgment. Fitness is assessed under five categories, under the code letter SHAPE that includes psychological including cognitive function abnormalities, hearing, appendages, physical capacity and eyesight. The court observed that the reliance placed on women officers' ACRs for determining the grant of permanent commission was unfair.

What is the procedure for granting permanent commission?

In 1992, the Union Government issued a notification making women eligible for appointment as officers in select non-combat branches. In 2008, the government extended the permanent commission to women in two branches — Judge Advocate General (JAG) and Army Educational Corps (AEC). In a long legal battle for equality, 322 women officers had approached the top court for granting permanent commission, and the Supreme Court delivered its landmark verdict in February 2020. In July 2020, the Defence Ministry issued the government sanction letter, specifying grant of permanent commission to women officers in all streams in which they are presently serving — Army Air Defence (AAD), Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME), Army Service Corps (ASC), Army Ordnance Corps (AOC) and Intelligence Corps.

How did the Army respond to the sanction letter?

Following the sanction letter, the Army constituted a special selection board for screening women officers for grant of permanent commission who joined the service through the Women Special Entry Scheme (WSES) and Short Service Commission Women (SSCW). Of the 365 optee officers who were considered fit for permanent commission by the Special No. 5 Selection Board, 277 women short service commission officers (WSSCOs) were granted permanent commission after medical scrutiny. However, some petitioners said the process followed was arbitrary and challenged it in the top court.

What are the fresh directives?



The Supreme Court noted that the Army's process of benchmarking women officers against the officers lowest in merit in the corresponding male batch is "irrational and arbitrary", and said this requirement should be removed. All women officers who have fulfilled the cut-off grade of 60% in the Special Selection Board held in September 2020 shall be entitled to the grant of permanent commission, the judgment said, subject to their meeting the prescribed medical criteria and receiving disciplinary and vigilance clearance. "In the spirit of true equality with their male counterparts in the corresponding batches, the WSSCOs must be considered medically fit for grant of PC by reliance on their medical fitness, as recorded in the 5th or 10th year of their service," the court said. Other than "non-optees", the cases of all WSSCOs, including the petitioners who have been rejected on medical grounds, shall be reconsidered within a month and orders for the grant of permanent commission must be issued within two months. Further, the court directed that the method of evaluation of ACRs and the cut-off must be reviewed for future batches to assess a disproportionate impact on WSSCOs who became eligible for the grant of permanent commission in the subsequent years of their service. Also, for the Babita Puniya case, the court held that for officers within the service bracket of 10 to 14 years who have been denied permanent commission, it has allowed them to continue in service till they attain 20 years of pensionable service.

WHAT IS THE 2006 SC RULING ON POLICE REFORMS; HOW STATES CIRCUMVENT IT TO INFLUENCE POSTINGS?

The ruling issued a series of measures that were to be undertaken by the governments to ensure the police could do their work without worrying about any political interference.

Political interference in police postings continues despite the landmark Prakash Singh judgment nearly decade-and-a-half ago that addressed the issue and was pegged to be a watershed moment in police reforms. The latest episode of allegations of lobbying by several IPS officers in Maharashtra and of 'power brokers' deciding on postings in cahoots with the government shows little has changed in the system.

What is the SC's Prakash Singh judgment on police reforms?

Prakash Singh, who served as DGP of UP Police and Assam Police besides other postings, filed a PIL in the Supreme Court post retirement, in 1996, seeking police reforms. In a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court in September 2006 had directed all states and Union Territories to bring in police reforms. The ruling issued a series of measures that were to be undertaken by the governments to ensure the police could do their work without worrying about any political interference.

What measures were suggested by the Supreme Court ?

The seven main directives from the Supreme Court in the verdict were fixing the tenure and selection of the DGP to avoid situations where officers about to retire in a few months are given the post. In order to ensure no political interference, a minimum tenure was sought for the Inspector General of Police so that they are not transferred mid-term by politicians. The SC further directed postings of officers being done by Police Establishment Boards (PEB) comprising police

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officers and senior bureaucrats to insulate powers of postings and transfers from political leaders. Further, there was a recommendation of setting up State Police Complaints Authority (SPCA) to give a platform where common people aggrieved by police action could approach. Apart from this, the SC directed separation of investigation and law and order functions to better improve policing, setting up of State Security Commissions (SSC) that would have members from civil society and forming a National Security Commission.

How did states respond to these directives?

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), in its report on September 22, 2020 that tracked changes made in the police force following the 2006 judgment, found that not even one state was fully compliant with the apex court directives and that while 18 states passed or amended their Police Acts in this time, not one fully matches legislative models.

How has Maharashtra's track record been ?

The Maharashtra government under former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis passed the Maharashtra Police (Amendment and Continuance) Act, 2014 that was meant to incorporate the changes suggested in the Prakash Singh judgment. Recently, former Maharashtra State Intelligence Department Commissioner Rashmi Shukhla forwarded a document to Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray alleging rampant political interference in transfers.

If the Maharashtra government made the necessary changes, why has the situation not improved?

The new Maharashtra Police Act had been criticised for being "flawed" and only making piecemeal changes to save themselves from the ire of the Supreme Court that was pulling up states that had not followed its directives. However, Prakash Singh told The Indian Express that the state Acts were deliberately formulated in such a way that "it just gave legal garb to the status quo that existed before".

How did the Maharashtra government circumvent the SC directives to continue controlling the police?

A government official told The Indian Express that in the updated Maharashtra Police Act of 2014, a section 22(N)(2) had been added that gave the CM special powers to transfer officers at any point in case of 'administrative exigencies'. Thus, while the SC directive was that an officer should not be transferred before the given tenure, CM's have used this section for mid-term transfer thereby maintaining control on transfers. The recent transfer of the former Mumbai Police Commissioner Param Bir Singh too was done under this section.

How has the government interfered in postings and transfers when there are Police Establishment Boards (PEB)?

Several senior officers, some of whom have been part of the five-member PEB, told The Indian Express that the officers on the committee are 'unofficially' informed by the government about which officer would be preferred for which post. "Either that or in meetings to decide postings of senior IPS officers, when even the Additional Chief Secretary (home) is present, the officers go with what the ACS Home says. They believe that his say is what the government wants. Among five officers, even if one or two do not agree, the majority usually sides with what the postings that



the government of the day is interested in,” a senior official said. Thus in spite of PEB’s in place, the system has continued as before, several officers said.

What about the State Police Complaints Authority (SPCA) that was set up in Maharashtra as per the SC court directive?

In January 2017, the SPCA was set up by the Maharashtra government and former IPS officer PK Jain was one of the members. While the complaints body did receive several complaints at their office in Mumbai, the SPCA was struggling to set up offices in rural areas. Several activists had alleged that the SPCA was toothless as it could recommend action against any officer found guilty. The decision on whether any action was to be taken eventually rested with the government. Over the past years, however, the body has struggled due to lack of staff members.

What has been the response of the Supreme Court to these issues?

Prakash Singh said that he has followed up on these issues and has had nearly five contempt petitions issued in the past decades to states found to be non-compliant. Singh said that bigger states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and UP have been the worst when it comes to bringing about systemic changes in line with the judgment and that it is only the North-Eastern states that have followed the suggested changes in spirit. Singh said states like Maharashtra make their own laws that are not effective. The need of the hour is an all-India Act that all states have to follow and small changes can be made in exceptional cases relating to the situation in a particular state.

CENTRE MULLS UNIQUE ID FOR ALL PLOTS OF LAND BY MARCH 2022

ULPIN database to be linked with revenue court records

The Centre plans to issue a 14-digit identification number to every plot of land in the country within a year. It will subsequently integrate its land records database with revenue court records and bank records, as well as Aadhaar numbers on a voluntary basis, according to a parliamentary standing committee report submitted to the Lok Sabha last week. The Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) scheme has been launched in 10 States this year and will be rolled out across the country by March 2022, the Department of Land Resources told the Standing Committee on Rural Development. An official, who did not wish to be named, described it as “the Aadhaar for land” — a number that would uniquely identify every surveyed parcel of land and prevent land fraud, especially in rural India, where land records are outdated and disputed. The identification will be based on the longitude and latitude of the land parcel, and is dependent on detailed surveys and geo-referenced cadastral maps, according to a presentation by the Department in September 2020. This is the next step in the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), which began in 2008 and has been extended several times as its scope grew. It’s due to come to an end next week, but the Department has proposed a further extension to 2023-24, to complete its original targets as well as expand its ambit with a slew of new schemes. “This Department has taken new initiatives under the programme like NGDRS [or the National Generic Document Registration System], ULPIN, linking of court to land records, integration [of] consent based Aadhaar number with land records etc. which necessitated its further extension beyond 2020-21 till 2023-24,” the Department told the parliamentary panel. “Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) is proposed to be rolled out in 10 States



during FY 2020-21 and by 2021-22 in the entire country,” it added. The Department’s presentation to the parliamentary panel listed the proposed cost for some of the new initiatives. Linking Aadhaar with land records through ULPIN would cost ₹3 per record, it said, while seeding and authentication of landowner Aadhaar data would cost ₹5 each. It added that the integration of the Aadhaar numbers with the land record database would be done on a voluntary basis. Creating a modern land record room in every district would cost ₹50 lakh per district, while the integration of land records with the Revenue Court Management System would cost ₹270 crore. It also added that DILRMP’s next phase would include “linkage of land record database with banks”. “These components will enhance the service deliveries to the citizen of the country and will also function as inputs to the schemes of the other sectors like Agriculture, Finance Disaster Management etc,” the Department told the panel, adding that ULPIN has been recommended by the Sectoral Group of Secretaries.

AAI’S PLAN TO BUY BODY SCANNERS HITS ROADBLOCK

It withdrew tender bagged by China firm

The Airports Authority of India’s plan to procure 198 body scanners for its airports across the country has hit a roadblock after it had to withdraw a tender bagged by a Chinese company, Nuctech, following the stand-off at the Line of Actual Control last year. Nuctech is dominant in border-control and security screening technologies globally and is partly owned by the Chinese government and once run by former Chinese President Hu Jintao’s son, Hu Haifeng, according to international media reports. In April 2019, the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) — the aviation security watchdog — issued a circular requiring 84 hypersensitive and sensitive airports to install full body scanners within a year to replace walk-through metal detectors. The same year, following a global tender, AAI decided to award the tender to Nuctech.

New proposal soon

“After a government advisory last year barring purchases from bordering countries, we have withdrawn the earlier tender. A new proposal has been sent for seeking financial approval after which a fresh global tender will be floated,” according to an official of the Ministry of Civil Aviation. With Nuctech out of the picture, the government’s procurement cost per equipment is likely to double. As a result, AAI will only be able to buy half of the scanners it had initially planned to buy.

Three companies

“There are only three other companies in the world that sell this technology — Smiths and L-3 from the U.S. and Rohde & Schwarz of Germany. The cost of a Nuctech body scanner was ₹1.5 crore per equipment. But now the revised estimate stands at nearly ₹3 crore per machine. So, we will invite tenders for 98 body scanners instead of the earlier figure of 198,” a source said. The U.S. banned Nuctech from airports in the country in 2014 and accused the company last year of passing on passenger information to Beijing.

27 MIGRATORY BIRDS FOUND DEAD AT WILDLIFE SANCTUARY IN HIMACHAL

Officials suspect avian influenza, reports awaited

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As many as 27 migratory birds have been reported dead on account of avian influenza in the Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary area of Himachal Pradesh since March 25, setting off alarm bells and forcing authorities to shut down the sanctuary. Archana Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (wildlife), told The Hindu on Sunday that 14 migratory birds, mostly bar-headed geese, were found dead at the sanctuary on March 25. "Another 12 birds were found dead over the next two days. We have sent the samples to the Regional Diseases Diagnostic Laboratory in Jalandhar. Any confirmation about the presence of avian flu could be ascertained only after the reports come," she said. "At this time of the year, migratory birds are on their way back to their breeding grounds in central Asia. Some of them may be infected because immunity levels are low as they are coming from different wetlands. We are assuming that it could be avian influenza — H5N1 or H5N8 — but until the reports come nothing can be confirmed," she said. "As a precautionary measure, we have closed the sanctuary area for now. The wildlife wing of the Forest department is working actively to monitor the situation and field staff have been directed to maintain strict vigil and active surveillance on the situation," added Ms. Sharma. Earlier in January this year, avian influenza (H5N1) led to the death of over 5,000 migratory birds in the Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary area in Kangra district of the State.

REMINDER TO SELF

Re-burial of a Tamil Nadu doctor shows a reckoning is needed: With the shortfall of humanity during pandemic

Over the last year, exponential graphs and dashboards have been deployed to make sense of the novel coronavirus's furious journey through the planet and the toll it has taken on health, economy and equality. But what has not been reckoned with enough is the damage done to humanity. In April last year, for example, the first doctor to die of COVID-19 in Tamil Nadu could not be buried as paranoid groups of local residents stopped his last rites at several places. He was not alone. Similar hostility and fear were on display at several COVID funerals, as many people responded to the fear of an unknown, rampaging virus — with more fear. The police had to step in to ensure Dr Simon Hercules was buried in a cemetery of a different faith. The Madras High Court, however, has now ordered that his body be exhumed so that he gets the burial he deserved. It isn't only that people turned against doctors and health workers fighting to contain the disease. The virus also activated the pathogen of communal hate. The Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi, accused of being a superspreader, provided the "enemy". A year later, with the evidence of pandemic-weary permissiveness all around, in streets, temples and beaches, the minority-baiting campaign has been exposed for what it is. Unlike the reburial for the doctor, entire neighbourhoods that had been profiled and stigmatised as deviants, resulting in job losses and hunger, have found no recompense. True, the world had few weapons at the start of the pandemic. But the knowledge of a shared mortality, of empathy and kindness has always defined humans. As new waves of pandemic break upon the world, it is important to measure by how much people fell short of basic humanity — and resist walking down that road again.

INDIA SENDS 2 LAKH DOSES OF VACCINE TO UNPKF

India on Saturday delivered on its promise of 2,00,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines for the United Nations Peacekeeping Force (UNPKF) worldwide, sending a shipment bound for Copenhagen. The

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cargo of AstraZeneca Covishield vaccines produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII) in Pune was sent despite the government's decision to reduce exports in view of the need for vaccines domestically, honouring a commitment made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at a UNSC meeting in February. Officials said that the Indian donation, combined with a Chinese commitment for 3,00,000 doses of vaccines would ensure that the entire force of more than two lakh soldiers, which comprises about 91,000 active personnel and 1,11,512 uniformed personnel, receives the requisite two doses each.

India's donation to the UNPKF will also benefit Indian soldiers, who make up one of the largest contingents of peacekeeping troops and police, with more than 5,000 men and women deployed in the Congo, South Sudan and Lebanon, among other countries. "[India's] important donation will allow us to ensure that UN peacekeepers are able to remain healthy and deliver in some of the most difficult environments in the world without relying on already stretched national health systems or ongoing COVAX efforts," Under Secretary General for Operations Atul Khare said.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

INDIA GDP TO GROW 7.5%-12.5% IN FY22, SAYS WORLD BANK

'New wave, variants part of risk factors to the outlook'

India's economy is expected to grow at 10.1% for the year starting April 1, 2021, as the vaccine roll-out drives activity in contact-intensive sectors, as per the World Bank's South Asia Economic Focus South Asia Vaccinates report. However, given the significant uncertainty around epidemiological and policy factors, real GDP growth could range from 7.5% to 12.5%, stabilising at 6-7% in the medium term, it said. "It is not normal to talk about these wide ranges in the forecast," Hans Timmer, Chief Economist for the World Bank's South Asia region, said on a briefing call with reporters. "The reason is that we are really in unprecedented circumstances," he said. Fiscal year 2021 is expected to register the worst economic damage due to the pandemic, the report said (the economy contracted 8.5% in FY20-21 as per the World Bank's estimate). The Bank expects public consumption to contribute positively, but pent-up private demand to fade by end 2021, as investment will pick up very gradually as a result of a large government capital expenditure push. Negative spillovers from financial sector distress (particularly concessions to debtors) are a risk to the growth outlook, the report warned. However, the Reserve Bank of India is expected to maintain an accommodative monetary policy stance during FY22. "So a big bounce back in India, but not completely out of the woods yet," Mr. Timmer said. As to the second wave that is possibly under way now in India and its impact on the economic outlook, Mr. Timmer said that these new waves and new variants of the virus were part of the risk factors to the outlook.

GST MOP-UP HITS A RECORD HIGH

The gross GST collections in March hit a record of ₹1,23,902 crore, the Union Finance Ministry said on Thursday. This is the sixth month in a row that GST revenues have remained above ₹1 lakh crore. The indirect tax collections in March were 27% higher than that in March 2020, with revenues from import of goods 70% more than a year ago, and the revenues from domestic transaction, including import of services, 17% higher. Apart from a recovery in the economy, GST



collections were also bolstered by closer monitoring against fake-billing, deep data analytics using data from multiple sources, including GST, Income Tax and Customs IT systems, and effective tax administration over the past few months, the Ministry said.

OVERSEEING OVERSIGHTS

India's small savings instruments witnessed unprecedented overnight volatility in rates this week. On Wednesday evening, the Budget division in the Department of Economic Affairs revised downwards the interest rates *payable on small savings instruments for the April-June 2021 quarter, by 40 basis points (0.4%) to 110 basis points (1.1%). The return on the most popular PPF scheme was pegged at 6.4%, the lowest level in 46 years. The government had refrained from tweaking these rates for the last three quarters after effecting a similarly sharp cut in Q1 of 2020-21, when the PPF interest was pruned from 7.9% to 7.1%.* However, by early Thursday, the rate cuts had disappeared and the status quo reinstated, following a tweet by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The only explanation: 'Orders issued by oversight shall be withdrawn.' It is not clear whose 'oversight' led to the rates being cut. In the process, the intent has been revealed even if the impact is deferred. Surely, Wednesday's order, approved by the competent authority, was not based on random numbers keyed in and notified inadvertently amidst a flurry of last-minute economy-related government notifications on the last day of the financial year. *It is difficult to believe that the oversight is on the bureaucracy's part, for it simply executed the stated policy decision to link small savings rates to the interest paid on government securities of a comparable tenure every quarter. So one must deduce the oversight is on the political executive's part on the timing and implications of executing the required decision as per the extant policy.* The clinching factor — *the five Assembly polls.* The government, that has brazened it out on Opposition jibes about rising unemployment, high inflation along with soaring fuel prices, could ill afford to yield a fresh talking point — the squeezing of the middle class and senior citizens, even as they brace up for the fresh tax on provident fund incomes. *This rollback is not the first instance of post-haste policy ad hocism, but it may make the government's ₹12.05-lakh crore borrowing plan for the year harder as the central bank has been complaining of high small savings rates as a deterrent to lower interest rates.* Another instance is *the mysterious practice of oil companies freezing pump prices during electoral campaigns, even though oil prices are deregulated.* The PM, as part of his 'One Nation, One Election' pitch, has often said that the virtually perennial poll season hits development. *On the same note, if governments need permission to announce initiatives while the model code of conduct is in force, any deviation or reversal from routine administrative decisions should also attract the Election Commission's scrutiny.*

GOVT. ASKS PSU REFINERS TO REVIEW SAUDI OIL DEALS

Amid tensions with Saudi Arabia over oil production cuts, India has asked its state refiners to review contracts for buying crude oil from the West Asian nation and negotiate more favourable terms, a top official said. *Keen to break the producers' cartel dictating pricing and contractual terms, the government has told Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPCL) to look for supplies from outside the region and use collective bargaining power to get favourable terms.* India imports 85% of its oil needs and is often *vulnerable to global supply and price shocks.* When oil prices started to rise in February, it wanted Saudi Arabia to relax output controls but the Kingdom ignored its calls. This has led to the

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government now pressing for diversification of the supply base. “Traditionally, Saudi Arabia and other OPEC producers have been our mainstay suppliers of crude oil,” the official with direct knowledge of the discussions said. “But their terms have often been loaded against the buyer,” the official added. *Indian firms buy two-thirds of their purchases on term or fixed annual contracts. These contracts provide assured supplies of the contracted quantity but the pricing and other terms favour the supplier*, he said. *“While buyers have an obligation to lift all of the contracted quantity, Saudi and other producers have the option to reduce supplies in case OPEC decides to keep production artificially lower to boost prices. Why should the consumer have to pay for decisions of OPEC? If we commit to offtake, they should also supply no matter what,”* he said. More importantly, the buyer has to indicate at least six weeks in advance of their intention to lift quantity out of the annual term contract in any month and has to pay an average official price announced by the producer. “In an ideal market, the pricing should be of the day when the loading is taking place. That way we can get the advantage of any drop in international oil rates. But that is not the case. They (Saudi and other OPEC suppliers) insist on selling at their official selling price only,” the official said.

West Asia accounts for 60% of oil bought by India. Latin America and Africa are the other big supplier blocks.

WHY AUTO-PAYMENT FOR OTT PLATFORMS MAY NOT GO THROUGH FROM APRIL 1

Even though credit card customers may have given standing instruction for recurring payments to various service providers such as Airtel, Netflix, Hotstar, Amazon Prime among others, beginning April 1, 2021, they may have to make payment to their service provider directly as banks and merchants are still working to adhere to RBI guidelines on e-mandate on cards for recurring transactions. Bankers say that while they are ready to offer the service and have complied with RBI guidelines, *the merchants are not ready yet* and hence it may lead to some inconvenience on payment till such time that the service providers adhere to the norms.

What has happened?

Over the last few days, banks have started sending messages or emails to their credit card users intimating them that since they are working on meeting the requirements laid down by RBI on e-mandate on cards for recurring transactions, any standing instruction for recurring transactions on the card will not be approved by the bank beginning April 1, 2021.

What does this mean?

This means that if you had provided an e-mandate for your Airtel mobile bill payment or Netflix monthly subscription fee etc and it was getting automatically debited to your credit card every month, the payment will not go through beginning April 1. Customers will have to make payments directly to the service providers for the bills as and when they become due in order to continue to receive the service. *One will have to make the payments directly until such time that banks and service providers meet all the requirements laid down by the RBI for e-mandate on cards for recurring payments.*

What are the key guidelines that RBI wants card issuers and merchants to adhere to?

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Among the key guidelines, the RBI has now asked banks to send a pre-debit notification to the credit card users 24 hours before actual debit to the credit card. This can be either through SMS or email as chosen by the customer. *The pre-transaction notification shall, at the minimum, inform the cardholder about the name of the merchant, transaction amount, date/time of debit etc. Also, on receipt of the pre-transaction notification, the cardholder shall have the facility to opt-out of that particular transaction or the e-mandate.* There has to be a validity period for e-mandate that will have to be provided at the time of registration of the e-mandate. The RBI has also called for certain *audit trail related requirements* that the merchant service provider and banks will have to meet. *During the registration process, the cardholder shall be given an option to provide e-mandate for either a pre-specified fixed value of recurring transaction or for a variable value of the recurring transaction. In case of the latter, the cardholder will provide a maximum value of the recurring transaction and it has been capped at ₹2,000 per transaction by the RBI.* A cardholder who wants to opt for e-mandate facility on card shall undertake a one-time registration process, with AFA validation by the issuer. Among others, *the issuer will have to provide the cardholder an online facility to withdraw any e-mandate at any point of time following which no further recurring transactions shall be allowed for the withdrawn e-mandate.* So, till such time that card issuers and merchants adhere to these norms, e-mandates can't be given by the customers for payment to service providers.

Does it impact standing instructions from bank account given through net banking?

The RBI guidelines are only for e-mandate on cards for recurring transactions and it does not impact the standing instruction given on net banking for utility bill payments etc. So, all standing instructions given through net banking will continue as they have been.

Does the RBI guideline provide a safeguard?

The fresh guidelines do provide safeguard to the customer on various aspects. *Offering more transparency, customers will now receive an intimation from the issuer on a recurring transaction debit 24 hours ahead of the debit. It also empowers the customer with the facility to cancel the e-mandate before the debit to the card. It also offers customers with an option from the issuer to withdraw any e-mandate at any point of time. Also, the customers will now provide a validity period for the e-mandate and it can't be for perpetuity.* Bankers too feel that while it may cause some inconvenience in the near term, these are steps that will be beneficial for customers.

PRUDENCE PREVAILS

That inflation is a concern for policymakers is reassuring for consumers and savers

The Finance Ministry has put to rest all speculation about the inflation targeting framework that will guide the interest rate decisions of the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee over the five-year period starting on April 1. *In a terse notification, the Department of Economic Affairs announced that the inflation target for the quinquennium ending on March 31, 2026, will be 4%, with an upper tolerance level of 6% and a lower tolerance level of 2%.* Economic Affairs Secretary Tarun Bajaj said that the *framework's parameters would remain unchanged from what had prevailed in the five years that ended on March 31.*



The RBI's officials have in recent months maintained an unwavering focus on emphasising the need to retain the flexible inflation targeting framework. In a December working paper titled 'Measuring Trend Inflation in India', the Deputy Governor overseeing monetary policy, Michael Debabrata Patra, and a colleague underscored the importance of ensuring the appropriateness of the inflation target. Observing that there had been a steady decline in trend inflation to a 4.1%-4.3% band since 2014, they said a target far lower than the trend ran the risk of imparting a 'deflationary bias' that would dampen economic momentum, while a goal much above the trend could engender expansionary monetary conditions that would likely lead to inflation shocks. And in February, the RBI's researchers authoring its Report on Currency and Finance — themed 'Reviewing the Monetary Policy Framework' — made clear that the framework had served the economy well, attested by a decline in inflation volatility and more credible anchoring of inflation expectations. That the government's economic officials have heeded these calls will certainly reassure investors and savers that inflation remains a central concern for all policymakers.

DOMESTIC MANUFACTURING: WHY ARE CELLPHONE MAKERS SEEKING LOCKDOWN-HIT FY21 AS ZERO YEAR FOR PLI

The Indian Cellular and Electronics Association (ICEA) has written letters to the NITI Aayog, the Secretary of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, as well as officials from other ministries to consider declaring 2020-21 as zero year for production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for manufacturing of mobile phones.

What does zero year mean in PLI scheme for mobile phone manufacturing?

Unlike other incentives for establishing manufacturing units in India, PLI schemes for all sectors that have been announced since April last year envisage incentives on achievement of a minimum threshold of cumulative incremental investment and incremental sales of manufactured goods net of taxes. While the rates of incentives vary sector-wise, the achievement of a minimum threshold of cumulative incremental investment means that all companies will have to invest a certain amount of money in addition to the investments they have already made before the PLI scheme is notified. Only the additional funds invested by the company in setting up of a new plant or expansion of an existing plant would qualify for getting the incentive. Apart from the incremental capital expenditure, the PLI scheme also seeks that the companies achieve incremental sales of products manufactured either from a new plant or the expanded unit of the same plant. Like all schemes, even in the case of PLI for mobile handset manufacturing, both these parameters are applicable for companies to be eligible to get the incentives. Since the government notified the PLI for mobile manufacturing on April 1 last year, FY21 was considered as the base year for the calculation of incremental investments and sales, and therefore the incentives to be given to companies.

How does 2020-21 being considered as zero-year help cellphone makers?

For the purposes of calculation of incremental investment, incremental sales of manufactured goods net of taxes and therefore the incentives, cellphone companies have urged the government that the current financial year be considered as zero year. In essence, they say that for the purposes of calculation of the incentives to be given to under the PLI scheme, the government should consider the incremental investments they will make and sales of products that they achieve from next financial year. While the companies have attributed several reasons for it, the most common claim is that



the lockdown in the first three months of this fiscal left them with very little time to get started with the building of or expansion of old units. Apart from this, the companies have cited lack of skilled labour and other resources as hindrances in meeting the targets for the first year. These companies also pointed out the paucity of time due to delayed approvals for requisite land clearances for expanding and setting up new units.

TATA-MISTRY JUDGMENT: WHAT SC HAS SAID ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF MINORITY SHAREHOLDERS

In its judgment that upheld Tata Group's decision to remove Cyrus Pallonji Mistry as the Executive Chairman of Tata Sons, the Supreme Court has also held that minority shareholders do not automatically get a right to a seat on the board. Private companies, which have minority shareholders, are free to make an enabling provision to do so if they wish to, but are under no statutory obligation to do so.

Why did the Supreme Court discuss minority shareholders right in the judgment?

The issue of minority shareholders and their rights came into the question on allegations raised by the Mistry family and the Shapoorji Pallonji (SP) Group that removal of Cyrus Mistry meant oppression of minority shareholders. *In its plea following the removal of Mistry as the Executive Chairman and subsequently the director from the board of Tata Group companies, the Mistry family and the SP Group had alleged that Tata Sons was being run and operated in a manner which was "oppressive" and "prejudicial" to the rights of minority shareholders.* Another major bone of contention in the spat between Tatas and Mistry was the existence of *Article 75 of the Articles of Association of the Tata Group. Article 75 gives the company the right to purchase shares from a minority or a small shareholder at a fair market value. Fearing that the Tata Group may use it to try and buyout the SP Group, the latter urged the company law tribunals and the Supreme Court to not allow the same to be used.* Apart from this, the Mistry camp had also alleged that the Tata Group had taken several commercial decisions which did not yield the desired result and thus resulted in more loss for the minority shareholders than the majority shareholders.

What does the judgment say about the rights of minority shareholders?

Discussing the rights of minority and small shareholders and their importance in the board of a company, the Supreme Court held that minority shareholders or their representatives are not automatically entitled to a seat on the private company's board like a small shareholder's representative. In its judgment, the top court noted that the provisions contained in the 2013 Companies Act only protects the rights of small shareholders of listed companies by asking such companies to have on their board at least one director elected by such small shareholders. Small shareholders, according to the Companies Act, is a shareholder or group of shareholders who hold shares of nominal value of not more than ₹20,000. Since the Mistry family and the SP Group were not "small" shareholders, but "minority shareholders", there was no statutory provision which gave them the "right to claim proportionate representation," on the board of Tata Sons.

Though the judgment does not directly impact the right of minority shareholders, it does mean that going ahead, such shareholders will have to ensure that they have a contract with the majority



shareholders or the promoters of the company to ensure they have adequate representation on the board.

LIFE & SCIENCE

WHY ASTEROID APOPHIS WILL NOT HIT EARTH FOR AT LEAST 100 YEARS

The USA's NASA space agency has ruled out the possibility of the dreaded asteroid Apophis causing any damage to the Earth for the next 100 years. Named after the ancient Egyptian god of chaos and darkness, it was discovered in 2004, after which NASA had said that it was one of the asteroids that posed the greatest threat to Earth. Apophis measures 340 metres across.

Apophis was predicted to come threateningly close to us in the years 2029 and 2036, but NASA later ruled these events out. There were still fears about a possible collision in 2068, however. This year, the asteroid flew past Earth on March 5, coming within 17 million km of our planet.

What are asteroids?

Asteroids are rocky objects that orbit the Sun, much smaller than planets. They are also called minor planets. According to NASA, 994,383 is the count of known asteroids, the remnants from the formation of the solar system over 4.6 billion years ago. Asteroids are divided into three classes. First, those found in the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, which is estimated to contain somewhere between 1.1-1.9 million asteroids. The second group is that of trojans, which are asteroids that share an orbit with a larger planet. NASA reports the presence of Jupiter, Neptune and Mars trojans. In 2011, they reported an Earth trojan as well. The third classification is Near-Earth Asteroids (NEA), which have orbits that pass close by the Earth. Those that cross the Earth's orbit are called Earth-crossers. More than 10,000 such asteroids are known, out of which over 1,400 are classified as potentially hazardous asteroids (PHAs). Apophis is categorised as a PHA.

INGENIOUS SQUIDS

How do squids tune colour and brightness of iridescence of their skin?

Squids adeptly change the colour and patterns on their skin for camouflage and communication. Earlier, researchers have found that proteins called reflectins are responsible for their iridescence. Now, researchers from the University of California, Santa Barbara, have found (Applied Physics Letters) what allows squids to tune the reflected light. Daniel Morse's team from the University had already found that structures (subwavelength-wide grooves) and mechanisms by which light-reflecting cells (iridocytes) in the skin can take on virtually every colour of the rainbow. The grooves are formed by a cell membrane that folds into nanoscale accordion-like structures called lamellae. The width of the grooves can be changed – widened or narrowed – at will by the action of “osmotic motor” driven by reflectin proteins. The researchers then found that the reflectin proteins can not only tune the colour but can also tune the brightness using the same mechanism. Aggregations of the reflectins exert osmotic pressure on the lamellae causing water release from the cells. The release of water in turn collapses the accordion so the thickness in spacing between the folds gets reduced. This causes the light that is reflected to shift progressively



from red to green to blue, says a release. At the same time, the membrane's collapse also concentrates the reflectins, causing an increase in their refractive index, amplifying brightness.

RESEARCHERS FIND NEW BUTTERFLY SPECIES

A group of lepidopterists have added a species to the expanding list of butterflies in India. The discovery of the species *Nacaduba sinhala ramaswamii* Sadasivan, 2021 in the Agasthyamalais in the Western Ghats a decade ago has now found place in the Journal of Threatened Taxa. The new taxon of Lycaenid butterflies belonging to the *Nacaduba* genus had been first sighted by a team comprising Kalesh Sadasivan and Baiju K. representing the Travancore Nature History Society, Rahul Khot of the Bombay Natural History Society, and Ramasamy Naicker from Theni. Line Blues are small butterflies belonging to the subfamily Lycaenidae and their distribution ranges from India and Sri Lanka to the whole of southeastern Asia, Australia and Samoa. It is the first time that a butterfly species was discovered by an all-Indian research team from the Western Ghats.

NEW SPECIES OF RED ALGAE SEEN IN WEST, SOUTH EAST INDIAN COAST

Two new species of seaweed have been discovered by a group of marine biologists from Central University of Punjab, Bathinda. Named *Hypnea indica* (after India) and *Hypnea bullata* (because of the blisterlike marks on its body – bullate), the seaweeds are part of the genus *Hypnea* or red seaweeds. They grow in the intertidal regions of the coast, namely the area that is submerged during the high tide and exposed during low tides. The discovery was recorded in the journal *Botanica Marina*.

Adding to the number

The genus *Hypnea* consists of calcareous, erect, branched red seaweeds. “There are 61 species of which 10 were reported in India. With our two new species, the total number of species now would be 63,” says Felix Bast, from the Department of Botany, in the University, who led the research. While *Hypnea indica* was discovered Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, and Somnath Pathan and Sivrajpur in Gujarat, *Hypnea bullata* was discovered from Kanyakumari and Diu island of Daman and Diu. To rule out the possibility that the species had been around earlier, but that now had been documented, the researchers compared characteristics of these specimens with all the 61 currently accepted species of *Hypnea* one by one. “Comparison not only included morphology, but also DNA sequences. Such a polyphasic approach combining morphology (traditional) with DNA sequencing (modern) is the gold standard in species discoveries in taxonomy these days,” says Dr. Bast.

Chance discovery

The researchers were on a routine survey and collected a large number of species. “Our heuristics involve making a checklist of obviously known species (by carefully examining the morphology) and shortlisting unique specimens that do not conform to existing species descriptions. Such unique specimens would be subjected to DNA barcoding to check homology with other sequences worldwide (to reduce the costs).” Dr. Bast explains.

Food industry



Species of Hypnea contain the biomolecule carrageenan, which is widely used in the food industry. As the two species have been found on the west and south east coasts of India, it suggests good prospects for their cultivation which can be put to good use economically. The study also reports one other species of Hypnea for the first time in Indian coasts, Hypnea nidifica. The extensive calcareous deposits on the body that has been observed also provides room for thought. Several recent studies have shown that algae with calcareous mineral deposits are prone for the damage from ocean acidification – an aftermath of climate change. As carbon dioxide in the atmosphere gets dissolved in ocean waters, the seawater becomes more acidic. Algae like Hypnea cannot survive in acidic seawater, hence, the only way to help these species is to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide levels by adopting sustainable lifestyle choices.

WHAT ARE CULEX OR COMMON HOUSE MOSQUITOES THAT HAVE RESURFACED IN DELHI, HOW ARE THEY HARMFUL?

Several resident welfare associations have complained that they are noticing an increase in the number of mosquitoes in their surrounding, leading to the municipal corporations calling high-level meetings and intensifying drive to check their growth.

With the change in season and rise in temperature, culex or common house mosquitoes have made a reappearance across the capital. Several resident welfare associations have complained that they are noticing an increase in the number of mosquitoes in their surrounding, leading to the municipal corporations calling high-level meetings and intensifying drive to check their growth.

What are Culex mosquitoes and why is there a need to worry?

Warmer temperatures are the main reason for the appearance of these mosquitoes. Their presence is especially felt more in areas around floodplains in East and South Delhi as it is an ideal condition of breeding. Culex mosquitoes are known carriers of some serious diseases. They can fly up to a distance of 1-1.5 km.

What are the most vulnerable areas?

In the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) area, the main hotspots for breeding of such mosquitoes are at the Kushak drain and at its border areas at Bapa Nagar and Bharti Nagar. East Delhi is most affected by Yamuna flood plain, South by Barapullah drain and North by Najafgarh drain. Unlike Aedes aegypti mosquitoes, which spread dengue and chikungunya and breed in clean water, culex mosquitoes breed in unclean stagnant water. The number of mosquitoes in areas along these drains is more.

How are they harmful?

Culex mosquitoes are known carriers of Japanese encephalitis, a potentially life-threatening but rare viral disease that causes “acute inflammation” of the brain. They breed in dirty, stagnant water.

How is the weather contributing to the increase in culex mosquitoes?



Medical health officer with East MCD Dr Som Shekhar said that as the water recedes in the summers, there are depressions in the flood plains where water still remains and doesn't dry even in hot weather as the water table is high. Such areas are ideal breeding grounds for culex. Dr Arun Yadav, a senior doctor at Hindu Rao Hospital, said temperature for mosquito breeding is ideal at present: "The ideal condition for mosquitoes to breed is when the temperature is between 10 degrees Celsius and 40 degrees Celsius. This is the time to intensify the anti-mosquito drive."

What are the civic bodies doing?

A senior official from the public health department of the EDMC said, "We have been putting mosquito larvicidal oil-coated blocks in major drains, which create a layer on the surface. Long-acting insecticides are also being put, which paralyzes mosquitoes. South and North corporations are also planning similar exercises. "Culex mosquitoes tend to breed in dirty water, especially in storm water and other drains, during March-April each year. To combat this, this year, we came up with a new method — we put barrels containing anti-larval medicines inside the drains and did underground fogging. This does not affect people. Sprays and medicines are also being put inside the drains for the last three days as a preventive measure," said Dr R N Singh, senior chief medical officer of NDMC, who is heading the drive.

Then why are they still rising, what is hitting the MCDs anti-mosquito operations?

With the workforce for controlling the spread of mosquitoes engaged in tasks such as tax collection and house surveys, inspecting open defecation and weather conditions being favourable, a sudden rise in the number of mosquitoes has been observed in the city over the past few weeks. Debanad Sharma, president, Anti-Malaria Ekta Karamchari Union and a Domestic Breeding Checker (DBC) in South MCD, said that for past two months they have been engaged to monitor open defecation in the area, a house tax survey, and DDA's door-to-door exercise in unauthorised colonies to encourage people to register their houses. Sources in the corporation said over 1,000 workers have been diverted for other duties. Data also shows that the number of house visits by DBCs has declined — from 44 lakh in 2018, 45 lakh in 2019, 19 lakh in 2020 and 21 lakh this year (all figures from January 1 till the second week of March). The figures in 2020 dipped massively because of the pandemic. Most of the workforce was diverted to disinfect areas and perform other Covid-related duties last year. There are around 3,500 DBCs employed in the three MCDs— North, South and East— whose efforts have contributed to the control of vector-borne diseases in the capital over the past few years. On a usual day, around 3,500 DBCs employed in the three MCDs visit 60-70 houses to check if coolers, overhead tanks and flower pots have stagnant water that could be breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

HOW GOOGLE MAPS PLANS TO NUDGE YOU TOWARDS THE GREENEST ROUTE TO YOUR DESTINATION

Google Maps plans to start highlighting journeys and directing drivers to routes that it calibrates to be the most "eco-friendly" based on a range of factors. The calculation of the default route that potentially generates the lowest carbon footprint would be done by assessing factors such as traffic data, congestion history, and even road inclines.

Launch plans

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The Alphabet-owned search engine said in a blogpost that the feature would be launched first in the United States sometime later this year, “with a global expansion on the way”. Once launched, the default route that would show up on the Google Maps app will be the “eco-friendly” one. Users will have to opt out of this if they wish to take an alternative route. Google said that when alternative routes “are significantly faster”, the mapping app will offer options, and let users compare estimated emissions on the default and alternative routes. The new feature, Google said, is part of its commitment to fight climate change. While the tech major did mention plans for a “global expansion”, it did not offer specifics with respect to the launch timelines in specific geographies such as India. *Google is also reported to be making “new map layers for weather and air quality” that are set to roll out in the coming months on both Android and iOS. Google plans to launch the weather layer globally and release the air quality layer first in Australia, India, and the US, according to a report in The Verge.*

The trade-off

For its new route plan, Google said it used emissions data based on testing across different types of vehicles and roads in the US, and subsequently concluded that for about 50 per cent of the analysed routes, it was able to offer a ‘greener’ alternative without any significant trade-offs. The search major said it used emissions data based on testing across different types of cars and road types, extrapolating insights from the US Government’s National Renewable Energy Lab. *Its data incorporates details such as slopes and inclines from its own Street View cars feature alongside aerial and satellite imagery.*

Other features

Also, from June 2021, Google will start warning drivers about travelling through low emissions zones where some vehicles are restricted, as is the case in countries such as Germany, France and the Netherlands. In another new feature slated for launch later this year, Google Maps users will be able to compare travel options — car, cycling, public transport etc — in one place instead of having to switch back and forth between different modes with evaluating travel options. The scope of these features could be progressively widened to include Asian cities such as Jakarta, it indicated.

CHINA PUSHES TO EXPAND VIRUS ORIGIN SEARCH BEYOND ITS BORDER

Chinese health officials pushed on Wednesday to expand the search for the origins of the novel coronavirus beyond China, one day after the release of a closely watched World Health Organization report on the issue. They also rejected criticism that China did not give enough data to a WHO team of international experts that visited Wuhan, the Chinese city where the first cases were detected, earlier this year. “If we limit the study of origin within China, I think this is a scientific misunderstanding, because the source is still unclear,” said Liang Wannian, the head of the Chinese team that worked with the WHO group of experts. He said the experts agreed that the place where the first case was identified is not necessarily where the virus emerged. “Based on this scientific consensus, we should have a broader viewpoint in terms of sourcing,” he said. Experts agree that the virus could have come from elsewhere, with neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia a prime possibility, but *China’s insistence on broadening the research seems partly politically motivated in the face of Western criticism. The WHO report concluded that the virus or a progenitor of it was most likely carried by a bat, which infected another animal that infected a*



human. Researchers have not been able to trace the bat or the intermediate animal yet, but suspicion has fallen on bat habitats in southwest China or nearby Southeast Asia.

WHICH ARE THE COVID-19 VARIANTS IN INDIA, AND DO THEY EXPLAIN THE RECENT SURGE?

More than 320 coronavirus samples from Punjab have been found to have the “UK lineage”, a reference to a new strain of the virus that had emerged in the UK in December, with genetic mutations that have enabled it to spread faster. This is the most widespread occurrence of the UK variant in the Indian population found till date, and could possibly explain the rapid surge in cases in Punjab in the last few weeks. A government statement on Wednesday said 736 samples from across the country had so far been found to have UK lineage. Apart from these, 34 samples were found to have the “South African lineage”, and one had the “Brazilian lineage”. The South African and Brazilian variants are two other dominant strains of coronavirus circulating around the world. The genetic mutations in these two variants make them more likely to escape the human immune system. The apprehension, therefore, is that current vaccines might be comparatively less effective against them, although this is still being investigated.

Genome sequencing...

India has the second highest number of people infected with the coronavirus during the epidemic. But it has done very few genome sequences of the different variants in circulation. *So far, it has carried out gene analysis of 19,092 samples from across the country, according to a statement made by the government in Parliament last week. This includes the sequencing of 10,787 samples since the government set up INSACOG (Indian SARS-CoV2 Consortium on Genomics) in December specifically for this purpose.* Many other countries, including the United States and China, have analysed more than 100,000 gene sequences. Studying genetic changes in the organism is important clues to understand the origin, transmission and impact of the virus on patients. *The stated objective of INSACOG is to sequence the samples from at least 5% of all the infected cases through a network of ten laboratories. That looks like a very tall order right now. India has so far recorded over 1.17 crore positive cases. The 19,092 samples that have sequenced till now form just 0.16% of that number.*

One of the major reasons for the slow pace of genome sequencing has been a lack of funds. So far, no money has been allocated for INSACOG, although officials said approval for funds was now expected any day. The laboratories have been using money from their own annual budgets to do the sequencing work. *It takes between ₹3,000 and ₹5,000 to extract the gene sequence of one sample.* The cost is mainly of the chemical reagents that are required in the process. Also, *states have not been proactively sending their samples to the laboratories for sequencing.* Maharashtra, which has recorded more than 25 lakh infections till now, has sent only about 2,800 samples for sequencing, according to government data presented in Parliament. That’s just about 0.11% of all the cases. Kerala has sent the highest number of samples for sequencing, about 5,200, but Karnataka, which has a comparable number of cases, has sent only 137 samples. *Such a low rate of genome sequencing might not be statistically significant to draw conclusions about the changing nature and behaviour of the virus, or in designing appropriate interventions to contain the spread of the epidemic.*



'DOUBLE MUTANT' VIRUS VARIANT FOUND

A unique “double mutant” coronavirus variant — with a combination of mutations not seen anywhere else in the world — has been found in India, the Union Health Ministry said on Wednesday. However, it is still to be established if this has any role to play in increased infectivity or in making COVID-19 more severe. Genome sequencing of a section of virus samples by a consortium of 10 laboratories across the country, called the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics (INSACOG), revealed the presence of two mutations, E484Q and L452R together, in at least 200 virus samples from Maharashtra, as well as a handful from Delhi, Punjab and Gujarat. Mutations in the virus per se are not surprising but specific mutations that help the virus evolve to thwart vaccines or the immune system or are linked to a spike in cases or in disease severity are causes of concern. While the two mutations have been individually identified in other variants of SARS-CoV-2 globally and have been associated with a reduction in vaccine efficacy, their combined effect and biological implications have not yet been understood. In the days ahead, the INSACOG will submit details of this variant to a global repository called GISAID and, if it merits, classify it as a “variant of concern” (VOC). India has not yet conducted studies on how vaccine efficacy is influenced by variants, except for limited laboratory trials. However, international studies have shown reduced efficacy of vaccines — particularly those by Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax — to certain variants. However, the vaccines continue to be significantly protective in spite of this. So far, only three global VOCs have been identified: the U.K. variant (B.1.1.7), the South African (B.1.351) and the Brazilian (P.1) lineage. So far, of 10,787 samples from international passengers, 771 instances of these VOCs have been identified in 18 States of the country. After the new double variant has been submitted to GISAID, it will be categorised under a formal lineage, and will have its own name. The identification of a new variant does not yet imply new public health measures, the Health Ministry said: “It would require the same epidemiological and public health response of increased testing, comprehensive tracking of close contacts, prompt isolation of positive cases & contacts as well as treatment as per National Treatment Protocol” by the States/Union Territories. Separately, genome variation studies from Kerala have revealed the presence of other mutations associated with the ability to help the coronavirus evade neutralising antibodies.

WILL INTRANASAL VACCINE GIVE STERILISING IMMUNITY?

While all COVID-19 vaccines administered through the intramuscular route have been found to reduce the chances of symptomatic disease and death, attempts are being made to develop vaccines that can potentially prevent or at least greatly reduce the chances of being infected and also stop the spread of the virus. Such vaccines are typically administered at the site of infection, and the most efforts are at developing vaccines that can be administered intranasally either as drops or as a spray. Developed by Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, the vaccine has been licensed to Bharat Biotech to carry out human clinical trials, manufacture the vaccine and distribute them in all countries except the U.S., Japan and Europe. Bharat Biotech has already begun the phase-1 clinical trials at four sites in India – Hyderabad, Nagpur, Patna and Chennai.

COVOVAX VACCINE, AND SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA'S BRIDGING STUDY



Serum Institute of India (SII) CEO Adar Poonawalla said this week that the company planned to start its bridging study of the Covovax vaccine “soon”. It will also be stockpiling doses of the vaccine starting April.

What is Covovax?

This is SII's version of NVX-CoV2373, the protein-based Covid-19 vaccine developed by Novavax, headquartered in USA. In August 2020, the two companies announced an agreement under which Novavax had given SII the licence to manufacture and supply the vaccine in low- and middle-income countries as well as India. The agreement is expected to support the supply of a minimum of 1 billion doses of this vaccine in these regions.

How does Covovax work?

Like several other Covid-19 vaccines, Covovax targets the spike protein on the surface of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus — the protein that allows the virus to penetrate the human cell. *Novavax has achieved this is by engineering copies of the spike protein in the lab using the cells of a moth. Modified spike genes are placed in a baculovirus, which is known to infect insects. This virus is then used to infect the moth cells, carrying the spike gene into the cell. The cells then create the spike proteins, which are harvested. After they are purified, a certain dosage of these spike proteins are used as the vaccine. Once a person is given a shot of this vaccine, their body is expected to recognise these copies of the spike proteins as a foreign substance and build immunity against them.* When the real virus tries to infect the cell, the body is expected to be able to fight it off.

What is the efficacy of Covovax?

The vaccine recently showed an efficacy of 96.4% against mild to severe disease caused by the original strain of SARS-CoV-2 from ongoing late-stage global trials. It has also managed an efficacy of around 83.4% two weeks after the first dose — potentially promising finding at a time when vaccine makers might face hurdles in scaling up supplies. Against mutant variants of the virus, it showed an efficacy of around 86.3% (UK variant) and only 55.4% among HIV-negative participants in its trial in South Africa. Compared with this, Covishield (SII's other Covid-19 vaccine) has an efficacy around 53% when the second dose is given less than six weeks after the first dose, which is the regimen followed in India. The efficacy of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine, which Covishield is based on, varies based on the duration between the first and second shots and can go to nearly 79% if the gap is 12 weeks or longer.

What will the bridging study entail?

SII is expected to test the safety of Covovax using 1,600 participants in 19 sites across Delhi, UP, Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Puducherry, Odisha, Karnataka and West Bengal. These participants will be between the ages of 18-99 years are supposed to be medically declared as healthy volunteers without acute illnesses, past history of Covid-19 and severe allergic reactions, among other factors. The participants will be divided randomly in a way that some receive, 22 days apart, two doses of either Covovax, the original NVX-CoV2373 vaccine made by Novavax, or a saline solution placebo. The company and investigators will not know who has received the vaccines and the placebos. These participants will be tested to see if they develop any serious adverse events



(SAEs) as a result of the vaccine. The test is also expected to check whether Covovax has the same ability to prompt an immune response as NVX-CoV2373.

Are there constraints in making Covovax?

According to Poonawalla, the ability of vaccine makers to scale up production is expected to be impacted by the decision of countries like the US to indulge in “*raw material nationalism*” during this pandemic. “You’ve got a ban on plastic bags, filters and certain other critical items that we’re all dependent on, so that may also slow down vaccine manufacturing capacity in other parts of the world, including India,” he said in an interview to Bloomberg this week. SII relies on the US for these products, Poonawalla had earlier explained during a World Bank event this month. SII plans to stockpile Covovax starting April and was reportedly targeting upwards of 40-50 mn doses a month. It is unclear whether this capacity will be impacted because of this issue.

WHY THE INTERVAL BETWEEN COVISHIELD DOSES HAS BEEN RAISED TO 8 WEEKS

The government has decided to increase the interval between the first and second doses of Covishield to up to eight weeks in its ongoing vaccination drive against Covid-19. Covishield is Serum Institute of India’s version of AZD1222, the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca in collaboration with the University of Oxford. Some data from global trials of AZD122 suggests that extending the duration between doses to 12 weeks increased its efficacy much more. On the other hand, interim findings reported on Monday from trials in the US, Peru and Chile showed that the vaccine had an efficacy of around 79% even when the second dose was given four weeks after the first dose.

Why did the government decide to increase the dosing interval of Covishield?

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare took the decision on the recommendation of two expert groups – *the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI) and National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for Covid-19 (NEGVAC)*. The groups, after looking into available scientific evidence from clinical trials of the vaccine, concluded that the protection that it provides against Covid-19 is “enhanced” if the second dose is administered between 6-8 weeks.

What do other studies say about this vaccine’s dosing interval?

According to data from trials of AZD1222 in other countries, the efficacy of the vaccine increased when the second dose was given more than six weeks after the first. Efficacy in this case is the vaccine’s ability to bring down cases of symptomatic Covid-19 in those inoculated, compared with those who are not. AZD1222’s efficacy was around 54.9% when the second dose was given less than six weeks after the first dose, as per a February study analysing Covid-19 cases in phase 3 clinical trial participants across the UK, Brazil and South Africa. The efficacy increased to 59.9% when the second dose was given 6-8 weeks after the first dose, 63.7% when the second dose was at 9-11 weeks, and 82.4% when the dosing interval stretched to 12 weeks or more. This study, which was submitted to The Lancet in February, has not yet been peer-reviewed.

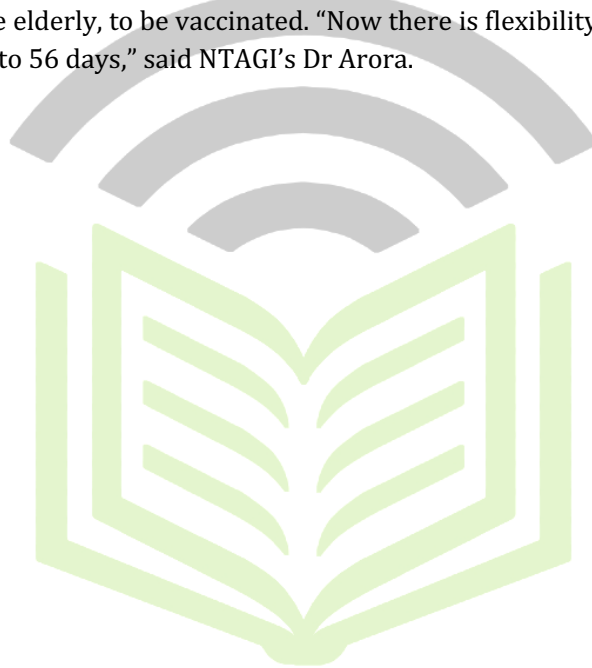
There are also potential risks of “*breakthrough infections*” without any “significant benefit” in terms of efficacy that the groups identified with extending the dosing interval, especially at a time when cases are rising in the country. “Increasing the dosage interval (too much) is fraught with the potential of dreadful infection between the two doses. So, if I give the first dose and wait until



12 weeks, there is a possibility that some people might get Covid infection in between. (We) don't want that," said Dr Arora. Even if extending the dosing interval would lead to an increase in antibodies, Dr Arora said that this does not necessarily mean that it would provide more protection. "There is no direct relationship between increased antibodies and better protection," he said.

What does this mean for India's ongoing vaccination campaign against Covid-19?

Delaying the second dose could potentially mean that more doses are freed up for a larger number of people to get their first dose of the vaccine sooner. However, the government also feels that *allowing this increase in interval would make it easier for the priority group population*, which mostly consists of the elderly, to be vaccinated. "Now there is flexibility... you can get the vaccine anytime between 28 to 56 days," said NTAGI's Dr Arora.



DreamIAS



DreamIAS